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Bhutan's model of Gross National Happiness a glorious goal for modern society

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From *Where I Stand*

The first road sign I saw in Bhutan read: Start early/Drive slowly/Arrive safely. I knew instantly this place and this trip was going to be different.

Bhutan is a country so small -- fewer than 1 million people live there -- that, tucked between China to the north and India to the south, it is very easy to miss. But this little country is having more and more impact on the rest of the world every day.

There's something about being confronted by the obvious in the midst of the unquestionable, however, that makes a person rethink all of life in the process. I know that's true because it just happened to me. In Bhutan I saw what obviously could be start to eclipse what is now unquestionable in society as we know it.

What has become obvious and unquestionable in a world of superpowers and global systems is that small nations have little weight to add to the scales of more modern and powerful nations. And yet what is astounding is the fact that one of the smallest countries on the planet -- the tiny monarchical democracy of Bhutan -- may very well be developing a great deal of international influence.

In June, the Global Peace Initiative of Women convened a body of religious leaders and professional scholars to study a recent declaration of the king and government of Bhutan. In Bhutan, the Parliament has declared, the GNP -- the Gross National Product by which the wealth of a nation is measured -- has been abandoned. In its place, the government has defined the achievement of Gross National Happiness as their new standard of success. They have, in other words, chosen a spiritual rather an economic metric of achievement.

Our task was to consider the practicality of such an ideal as well as its message to the rest of society.

As one social absolute after another -- money, power, social status and productivity -- came under scrutiny, I asked myself what I was seeing. To be truthful, it was a bit of the old story of Shangri-La, from James Hilton's 1933 novel about a hidden kingdom of peace and happiness, mixed with a touch of the 1959 film "The Mouse that Roared," the story of a small kingdom that, by accident, manages to upset the entire geopolitical order.

Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu, has a population of barely 100,000. The country is nestled in forests and rice paddies at the bottom of the Himalayas. Scattered villages run up and down the mountainsides of 14 districts and the last village in the country, their newspaper reported the week we came, will finally be electrified by the end of the month.

And yet in so many ways, Bhutan, a country once isolated from the outside world by the Himalayan Mountains that encircle it and insulated from the more progressive or "developed" world around it, is far beyond anything that world has to offer.

The concept of Gross National Happiness in a people formed in Buddhist values rests on four major principles:

- sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development;
- conservation of a fragile ecology;
- the promotion of culture and the purpose of a human civilization; and
- good governance that looks beyond greed to human development. A Romantic model, I know, but impossible. Except that here, it isn't.

The little kingdoms that are now Bhutan, though loosely associated in the 17th century, were not united into a single country under a hereditary monarchy until 1906. A little more than a century later, they are still emphasizing national unity. So they wear traditional dress for work and all formal occasions, the *gho*, or short tunic, for men and the *kira*, or box jacket, for women. They build their houses on a single model and use only traditional triple-arched windows and icons on them as decoration to define their common culture, as well. They take days to celebrate communal festivals and national historic events.

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This newest declaration, then, of the search for Gross National Happiness under what is only its fifth hereditary king is like watching a country be born under your very eyes. They are deciding together in the midst of a world built on money, military might and unlimited consumption to simply reject all of those things. In Bhutan, the national emphasis is on sustainable development, the preservation of cultural values, the conservation of the natural environment and the establishment of good governance -- governance that puts human well-being and happiness before business, productivity or rugged

individualism. And it's not mere sloganeering.

In Bhutan, national success is about development that does not destroy, ecological protection that does not drain resources, government that seeks human development before money and a proper balance between the production of goods and the happiness of the people.

For instance, in Bhutan, fishing and hunting -- except under the rarest of situations -- is forbidden because care for nature, including the animals, is paramount.

At this time, 72 percent of the country is forested, and the constitution requires that that figure never be less than 60 percent. Buying this land to sell off its wood on the open market is, then, illegal.

Bhutan makes its money on tourism and by selling hydropower to India, not on mass production or cash crops.

The main industry of 60 percent of the population is still farming. One young farmer told us he wants to be a farmer because he "wants to feed his people." How many people, I thought, ever think of farming anymore as more than just one more global corporation like any other? Now that agribusiness has managed to gobble up truck farms and sell genetically modified seeds that cannot reproduce themselves, the whole notion of a country's being able to "feed itself" is, at best, quaint, if not obsolete.

Another young leader we met makes shoes to sustain himself and, on the side, operates a "shoe laundry" to clean and give shoes away to those who need them.

A third, born with three kidneys when many people, he says, barely have one good one, decided what he needed to do for his fellow citizens was to begin a kidney foundation.

A woman whose child became severely handicapped got a degree in London then returned to Bhutan to open a center to train other parents in a similar situation.

The theme is constant: Life is for human service, not financial profit. The citizen does what the country needs, not what globalism demands.

Do they have problems with all of this? Yes, they do, and they know it. They have refugee problems that arise out of citizenship responsibilities. They have technology problems that create age gaps in the family. They have issues of balance in a society that is balancing one world against another. So they are fashioning an educational system to integrate the principles of GNH into everything they teach. In order to ensure these ideals will shape their future as well as their present, they must all be faced, all be resolved.

They know they cannot keep the world out of Bhutan anymore, and they don't want to. They lifted the restrictions on the Internet in 1999, for instance, because they see its value to their development. But they are concerned about its use and its influence. And they do want balance. They do not want an economy based on money, greed and ruthless individualism to take over a culture based on family, nature and human compassion. Or as Bhutan's Education Minister, Thakur S. Powdyel, puts it, "A Bhutan of Gross National Happiness will be a moral giant 'where everyone cares enough and everyone shares enough so that everyone has enough.' "

They make a person think.

Imagine what our own country would look like if we refused to do anything that would compromise our national resources, the care of the people, the preservation of the environment rather than its exploitation

and the protection of our animal species, as well as the purity of the human environment. Just the way we once did.

The temptation, of course, is to call such a thing impossible in a modern world. But it's only impossible if we choose short-term profits over human community.

Perhaps before we get any spiritually weaker than we are right now, we ought to find some politicians who are not in the pockets of Washington lobbyists and willing to listen to what these young people in this young nation are calling the whole world to consider.

From where I stand, the problem does not lie in making something like this the basis of human and national happiness. Obviously, there are those who want it.

No, the problem lies in the fact that the United States as it functions now -- in gridlock, under destructive partisanship, as an oligarchy, and, like Pilate, pronouncing things like freedom, natural resources, education and mutual support good then washing our hands of any responsibility for them -- has chosen to be Sparta rather than Athens.

We don't even pretend to aspire to values like these anymore. It's more money for the rich that we're about and more power for the powerful that we seek rather than more opportunities for the middle class, more support for the poor and more compassion for the weak.

Maybe we could use a few conversations on Gross National Happiness ourselves before the next election, before Gross National Greed strikes the final blow and destroys us all.

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