

Chris and Gilly Wiscarson

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Dear Seva Mandir

*If they ask me, I could write a book
About the way you walk and whisper and look
I could write a preface on how we met so the world would never forget*
Lorenz Hart

I don't do essays. I do reports, certainly. I do emails, abundantly. I do letters, regularly, and with enthusiasm. So, Seva Mandir, no essay from me but a letter. Indeed, a love letter.

Bewitched, bothered and bewildered, am I
Lorenz Hart

Fifteen years ago, on the shores of Lake Como, my wife Gilly and I looked forward to how our lives might look like in retirement. Teaching maths and English to needy children somewhere far away was our dream.

We had recently visited friends in India and had been bewitched by its wonder, its beauty, and its people.

An easy conversation with KV Kamath of ICICI: *do you know of a children's charity in Rajasthan?* He suggested Seva Mandir. A call to then Chief Executive Neelima Khetan led to a meeting on our next visit. I call it a meeting, but actually it was an interview.

In a cool office free of direct sunlight, Gilly and I sat on hard chairs opposite four or five Seva Mandir leaders. We'd love to teach said we enthusiastically. *Seva Mandir: Chris and Gilly, we are sure you would make very good teachers, but the fact that you do not speak Hindi let alone the home language of many of the village people we help is quite a disadvantage. We are sure though that there might be other ways you can help but no-one could articulate quite how that might look.*

Seva Mandir again: in India and in Seva Mandir, we put great store on continuity and developing mutual trust over a long period. Long term interest and commitment is something we greatly prize.

There then was the challenge. How to commit to Seva Mandir without any role to play.

No longer bewitched, but bothered and bewildered, were we.

***And I, I took the road less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference***

Robert Frost

Gilly and I contemplated turning our backs on India and renewing our attachment with South Africa where we had spent an extraordinary seven years in the 1980s. Africa was the headline go-to continent for charity work whereas India was becoming, not quite a pariah but the country, that fabulously rich country, that could not only help itself but whose leaders had become scathing about overseas aid. India, with its tech billionaires, its space programme, its nuclear capability, should make its own way said critics. Easy points to score but at best superficial and at worst sophistry.

I was travelling to India on business four or five times a year and it was an easy and uplifting rhythm to make detours to Udaipur, even just to spend 24 hours with you. What a contrast compared to the locomotion of Mumbai and Delhi, and the palpable innovation of Bangalore and Chennai.

Fifteen minutes outside Udaipur, famous for its lakes and palaces, is a very difficult world. Mountainous, sun-bleached, unpopulated. You told me that we would visit villages and we imagined quaint clusters of houses. How limited our imagination! Two hundred dwellings scattered across an area the size of Manchester was a village. Outside a dwelling, a scrap of land, maybe a goat or two, barefoot children tending to them. The women of the house were somewhere away, day in and day out, walking back and forth. A life.

So Gilly and I took the road less travelled by, to rural Rajasthan.

***Angel came down from heaven yesterday
And then she spread her wings high over me***

Jimi Hendrix

Village people were not any type of community that Gilly or I recognised. Born independent, not interdependent. No discernable synergies let alone any sense of communal representation. Good politics, that effective and beneficial use of power, was as remote a concept as a life for Gilly and me without electricity or running water.

How can these people find a community, find a voice, find a way to determine their future.

Oh for a vision. You have provided a vision Seva Mandir. Give the kids a school near to their home, with teachers who attend, who teach by encouragement and not by fear, where parents contribute, modestly contribute, so they feel themselves committed. Seva Mandir, you bring human beings together, their children cherished and tended. So dear parents, now together, let us hear your collective voice. Tell us about your lives, about your needs, and let us see if we can help you.

And what lives. Disputed land rights. Encroachers, poachers wrecking the land. Forestry does not mean forests but land, bare. Trees ripped down for firewood or fodder, villagers not believing they have more rights to their land than those who plunder. No work thereabouts, so men and women alike venture far, to marble quarries, to road building, to danger and exhaustion.

And what of the children. Government schools far away, teacher absenteeism, and bullying slow learners. Babes carried on mothers' backs on those long walks for water, or looked after by older children who then cannot go to school, or horrifically, tied to the bedpost. The mothers' choice.

So, Seva Mandir along you came, to spread your wings high over these people.

What is life if it is not for those who have to live it

David Nobbs

The thing about life is that it's got so much bloody potential

Ol Parker

We have extraordinary memories...

Sat listening to a women's group, intimate and earthy, when unexpectedly a distraught mother enters late. Her husband has kicked her out of her house, and she has nowhere to go. The women enfolded her, protecting, holding her, feeling with her. We had no place and quietly left.

A new nursery school under the watchful care of a teacher, kids learning about themselves, about life. The extraordinary teacher had constructed a private loo for the kids, such simple dignity.

Mothers innocently asked what they do when their children go off to school, giggling at our naivety. We collect water, we collect firewood, we collect fodder, we walk miles to serve our family.

Shy children learning sums, not confident to show me their exercise book. One plucky boy takes the risk, sees my joy at his simple and correct arithmetic, and then all the children crowd in to me wanting to share their work.

A mountain of dust and rock won over by the community, digging trenches to capture the monsoon rain. Men at last have work in their village rather than afar. Families transform the mountain in to a living breathing oasis of vegetation.

Bittersweet, when two girls lament that their Government school science teacher does not much attend, and learning physics alone is all but impossible. Despair turns to purpose as you Seva Mandir make that your problem to solve.

The most needy children spending time at a residential school, learning not just to read and write but to play sport, to experience joy in running, in shoes you have provided.

A women's refuge, teenage mothers, protected, guarded. Alone yet not alone. A heart-breaking wail. My husband's family murdered my child.

A bamboo plantation, 10 years old, ready to harvest. Your vision to give the village a common purpose. Bamboo, truly here, the scaffolding of life.

Household toilets, built by the villagers, giving privacy for the women. And waste is not waste, but nourishment for the land.

A village head man asked Gilly for her views, and she says simply *listen to your women like you are listening to me*. He looked inwardly, outwardly, and nodded imperceptibly.

Far along a dried out river bed, then a kilometre walk uphill, a dozen men in loincloths stood by a dry stone wall. *We made that!* Within, tended village land, owned and protected by the village people.

Ten kilometres away, another village, forty folk gathered to meet me. *What do you need I asked. A wall like them* they said.

This is life. These are lives to be lived.

Keep your face always towards the sunshine – and shadows will fall behind you
Walt Whitman

We know exactly the moment when we fell in love with you.

A mat under a Banyan tree, a small dwelling nearby, and no others to be seen. A bedstead for Gilly and I to sit. What was polite, to squat as the people do, or to sit above them on the bed. Who is to know, not us. This was a clinic. This is where life truly starts, pregnant mothers, new-born children, and a nurse.

No mothers as we arrived, space, and silence, save for our quiet enquires of the nurse.

The sun beat down. Oh it was hot, the shadow of the Banyan tree a blessing.

After 10 minutes, maybe 15, we turned from our conversation to see a dozen beautiful mothers and mothers-to-be sitting on the edge of the mat. We had not heard their arrival, literally not heard a thing. The seven or eight babies made no sound, those wide awake silent. The mothers, tiny, modest, colourful, caring, and careful. They faced into the sun, veiled only by headscarves.

The nurse takes a baby and makes a life-enhancing jab. The baby cries. We recognise the cry from our own children. We all want the same for our children, and the baby crying touches us deeply. We watch, we feel, we admire. Seva Mandir, we admire.

We turn back to the mothers. They have disappeared into the sunshine, as silently as they arrived.

***What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison
to what lies inside of you***
Ralph Waldo Emerson

You do to people what does not make them feel done to.

You listen, you are humble, you are shy, you are serious. You are honest, you are kind, you are patient, you persist. You are human. You are numinous.

You have much to celebrate Seva Mandir. So, say these words out loud because it is your place.

***I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume,
for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you***
Walt Whitman

With love,

Chris & Gilly

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