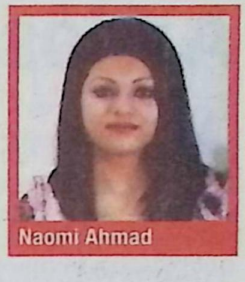
Two Hugs are Better than One


Naomi Ahmad

SHE looked up at me from where she was sitting; her eyes searching for something in my face. She mumbled something, still looking hard at my face. I couldn't understand her, so I just stooped down and following my group mates cue, gave her a big hug. She hugged me back, surprisingly tight for someone so frail and old and then held onto my hands. She was still mumbling something as I looked back despairingly and saw that my group mates had by then walked away. Now I was starting to panic. I wasn't that good dealing with old people, having lost both sets of grandparents before I had reached my teens. And wandering around alone and lost in an unknown village was not exactly my idea of a pleasant afternoon. So I figured, if two brains are better than one, then maybe..... I hugged her again. It worked! She looked away dreamily and I managed to make a graceful exit.

Exactly thirty days ago, when I was bundled off together with eighty students for a twelve day long course in Manikganj, I was afraid something like this will happen. My University, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) defined the course Live in Field Experience (LFE 201) as " The Live in Field program (is) an opportunity to sensitize our students about the socio-economic realities of rural Bangladesh. All students at IUB have to participate in this four-credit course.... Students gain once in a lifetime experience of working with people living in their traditional and yet rapidly changing environment."

Now this sounds all pretty and comfy when you read about it on the Internet. But in my pre-LFE days, I used to see it as just another evil devil way of snatching us youngsters away from the comforts of our warm home and sticking us into a "TV-less, internet-less and KFC-less" world. And it felt like one big conspiracy by IUB and all our parents - to dump us out in the middle of nowhere, in a ploy to make us appreciate all that we have and all the little stuff our parents are constantly doing for us.

And so here we are, I thought as I hurried to catch up on my group mates. By then, the group had moved on to the fifth house (our sample size was twenty-five), where once again we were all warmly greeted. Now I was basically trying to stay close to my group leader on our first day since all this was very new to me. And our group leader was amazing when it came to rapport building! Having previous experience and being a very caring and motherly person, she had taken us all under her wings from the very first day. Our challenge was to build rapport with people from a completely different socio-economic background and religion (we were assigned a Hindu area for our group's study) and to find out all sorts of information on rural health, income and lifestyle in only a few days! So after a crash-course on rapport building from our group leader, I was trying to get as much information as possible within time. For ease of data collection, I was basically operating under three broad rules.

1. Greet anyone and everyone in our area with a Namaste.

2. Hug any woman who showed a willingness to be hugged.

3. Smile if anyone co-operates, smile if anyone doesn't want to co-operate, smile if anyone is suspicious and smile if confused.

So when the frail old woman was holding on to my hands and muttering to herself, I did a quick mental calculation and figured a combination of rule two and three should work just fine for this situation. And when it did, without giving it another thought I walked away and joined my group.

SEE PAGE 26

True Love

MOSES Mendelssohn, the grandfather of the well-known German composer, was far from being handsome. Along with a rather short stature, he had a grotesque hunchback.

One day he visited a merchant in Hamburg who had a lovely daughter named Frumtje. Moses fell hopelessly in love with her. But Frumtje was repulsed by his misshapen appearance.

When it came time for him to leave, Moses gathered his courage and climbed the stairs to her room to take one last opportunity to speak with her. She was a vision of heavenly beauty, but caused him deep sadness by her refusal to look at him. After several attempts at conversation, Moses shyly asked, "Do you believe marriages are made in heaven?"

"Yes," she answered, still looking at the floor." And do you?"

"Yes I do," he replied. "You see, in heaven at the birth of each boy, the Lord announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. then the Lord added, 'But your wife will be humpbacked.'

"Right then and there I called out, 'Oh Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please, Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful.'" Then Frumtje looked up into his eyes and was stirred by some deep memory. She reached out and gave Mendelssohn her hand and later became his devoted wife.

--Barry and Joyce Vissell

(Source: Chicken Soup for the Soul)