

RYS – Walking the Path of a Peacemaker Part 1 of 2

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Tall, lean, blue-eyed and English, David was not afraid of hard work or creative approaches to dealing with problems. He invested himself to earn his Ph.D. but never let that achievement put a distance between himself and those he met. David possessed a gift for being able to recognize value in each person regardless of race, religion or color. He used his gifts as a way to better his life and the lives of those around him.

From Birmingham to India on an Interfaith Adventure

Living in the multicultural city of Birmingham, David and his wife Patricia attended a variety of interreligious programs where their concern for religious cooperation was reciprocated. The programs he attended often attracted a wide assortment of religious devotees, many of which had roots in India. David and Patricia enjoyed the meetings, especially because they provided an opportunity to develop new friendships and connect to representatives of various organizations. As a couple, they began to think more seriously about ways that their expanding circles of friends could serve the local community.

It was during this time that the national director of RYS, Marshal D'Souza, heard of David's interest in interreligious service work. Marshal called David and suggested he join a Religious Youth Service (RYS) project in Kerala, India to get a sense of how a multicultural service project is run. The RYS is a program that promotes interreligious cooperation throughout the world by means of work service, cultural exchange and experiential learning.

For David, the upcoming RYS project with its venue in India was especially appealing. After discussing the opportunity with his family, he called Marshall to confirm his participation. David was going to India to have what is affectionately called "An RYS experience."

History is about Relationships

Well aware of the British colonial legacy and the impact it had made in India, he approached his trip with a strong desire to serve its people. Often in the past, British adventurers, traders, merchants and soldiers went to India for purposes other than benevolent giving. David was driven by a motivation to contribute to building a different type of legacy.

David made the journey from England to Kerala in southwest India. Upon arriving in Kochin, an ancient city by the sea, he traveled by bus and a motorized, three-wheel cab to the rural village of Karukutty. In the village, 100 RYS volunteers representing seven religions and nine nations had gathered and were using the time to get to know each other.

During the initial period in Karukutty, the RYS program set aside time for an orientation involving everyone in a variety of planned activities as well as numerous spontaneous conversations. This sharing provided us with an entrée into the unique personalities within the group as well as offered us insights into the cultures that helped shape them.

Widening Roads and Sharing Loads

The village of Karukutty's narrow dirt roads in recent years were being strained by a heavy increase in multiple forms of vehicle transportation. The central focus of our work was dedicated to widening the local roads to allow larger vehicles greater access.

Work days began early in order to catch the cooler morning air. With picks, shovels and buckets in hand, we formed long lines down the street and begin our digging. Before long, villagers from neighboring houses would step up with some tool and join in the shoveling and the transport of large roadside stones.

Partnering with Gandhi's Disciples

This RYS project was very fortunate to have as a partner, Gramswaraj, a rural development organization

run in cooperation with Mahatma Gandhi University. The school's rural development program sent students to villages where they lived and worked.

Gramswaraj's efforts were designed to apply Gandhian principles in sustainability and development to practical village life. Our RYS team members worked side by side with the student practitioners and gained insights into the local culture as well as practical insights into the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi.

Cultural sharing is one of the highlights of RYS programs. In the evenings, both the international participants and those from different parts of India took time to share song and dance. David, with guitar in hand, was among the performers who offered a universal form of communication to a room filled with light-hearted laughter and conversation. When the news of our multicultural entertainment traveled, we found ourselves receiving numerous invitations to bring the group to neighboring villages.

Following a day of work on several evenings, we were welcomed by large audiences in various villages. During our time together we shared our songs and, in return, enjoyed the local children's offerings of traditional song and dance. The village staging areas for these events was very simple. Often the curtain and backdrop were tattered with holes. Yet, it was in this modest setting that we found ourselves immersed in the rich cultural heritage of rural India.

The British Have Returned to Serve!

Despite being older than most of the volunteers, when David reached the worksite in the mornings he wasted no time jumping into the construction line beginning to form down the road. Some of the older villagers looked at David with a special curiosity. David acted friendly and obviously he worked hard, but historic memories of other English in India managed to stir up a certain skepticism. It is not difficult to imagine one villager whispering to another, "You can never really know what those English are up to, can you?"

Despite skeptical resistance, a simple singular action can open our eyes, allowing us to see in a new light. One action can melt away resentment and mark the start of a new and more cooperative relationship. This transformation was about to happen at our worksite.

After laboring for several hours on the second work day, we were ready to take our scheduled break. Snacks brought by neighbors were set aside in an area where some were waiting to serve us. David looked up at the gathering crowd, grabbed his shovel and approached. He called out in a strong voice to gain the attention of those gathered. With dirt on his hands and sweat dripping down his face, he raised his shovel high and proclaimed, "My friends, today the British have returned to India, but this time with shovel in hand to help you in building your roads."

David beamed a disarming smile as he looked at those gathered from the neighborhood. A note of genuine surprise could be read on their faces. David's zeal, along with his spirit of humility, was being well received. Soon, community members drew near to David and, with smiles, offered him snacks, drinks and friendly conversation. There was now room in everyone's heart as David took to eating his snack, sharing and listening as if in the company of lifelong family and friends.

In the days and weeks ahead, we continued to share our food, conversations and laughter with those living in the village. It was clear to many of us that invisible barriers that had divided us no longer did. Replacing the divide was a new sense of warmth and friendship.

In an almost mystical way, some observers commented that barriers seemed to come down when a hard-working Englishman proclaimed, "My friends, the English have returned to India, but this time with shovel in hand to help you in building your roads."

Removing Resentment as part of our Healing

Resentment is an invisible force that can accumulate, layer upon layer, throughout the course of time. The history of people mistreating, abusing and taking advantage of each other adds to the weight of resentment. Resentment is often an unwanted legacy, one that is passed on from generation to generation until something is done to reverse it.

Overcoming resentment is indispensable for our personal health and happiness, and remains an essential ingredient for peace. While we can't go back into history and heal past injustices, we can offer acts of human kindness that serve as an invitation to replace anger and resentment with a more powerful force—the force of love. Unselfish service touches people's hearts and in the process moves the very heart of God.