

Gross National Happiness Conference Wrap-Up

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: All right, so the next session is entitled Dear Bhutan by Dear World.

ROBERT FOGARTY: What's up, everybody.

[APPLAUSE]

ROBERT FOGARTY: Well, Kinga, I appreciate the opportunity. In my life, like many of you, I've felt extreme happiness. Typically for me, it comes when I'm around people that I love, respect, and admire. An example of this in my life is when my former partner and I hosted a New Year's Eve party in New Orleans, and our friends and family were there. And a brass band played music that only can be played in New Orleans, sounds that make you feel alive.

I remember looking at my father and his wife who were there, and they were visiting. And my dad is from Nebraska, and although Nebraska and New Orleans are in the same country, they are pretty much light-years away culturally. But that night, he beamed. And as I prepared for today, I realized that we speak about memories in the past. But it's here with me right now, that feeling I had that night, burned into my brain. It's not in the past.

Alternatively, I've felt extreme sadness and pain too. When my mom died, she left us via suicide. I was 18, a freshman in college. She stuffed rocks in her pocket and drowned herself in a family lake. In her career as a visual artist, she created both light and dark art. Some of her work used sweeping yellows and blues of the Nebraska landscape, and she also created monsters lathered in blacks and reds.

When we planned her funeral, I suggested to my brothers that we buy a stark white casket, and asked the people she loved and the people who loved her to write goodbye messages directly on the casket. I haven't told many people this, but the reason and the spark of buying the stark white casket was really because it was the cheapest one in the catalog.

[HUSHED LAUGHTER]

But, by the time the priest cloaked that casket in a Christian cross, the messages and drawings of love and goodbye filled every inch of the casket. So, it's not lost on me now, 18 years later, that my life's work is sharing meaningful stories, asking people to share with me about their lives, and to write short messages on their bodies. Over 100,000 people have participated. Our bodies are just vessels that carry us. And like the goodbye messages of my mother's casket, these meaningful moments we share together endure. They are not in the past. They are here and they are now.

So when Kinga and members of the Harvard and MIT track that went to Bhutan over the new year asked us to join, my producing partner and I just went with the intention to be present and to make memories. I didn't have a

phone. I left it in Thailand on purpose. And I only had, for eight days, a notebook, a pen, and a camera.

And when Ben and I talked about what we wanted to create with Kinga and the rest of the folks on the trip, we talked about that a lot and we decided just to simply ask the Bhutanese people, strangers on the street, teen hip-hop dancers, the chef, a GNH policy expert, about their views on happiness. And I'm excited to share with you the piece that we made.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- You know, there's going to be days where you feel sad and empty, and there are certain days where you feel full and light.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Be it weak, be it strong. Be it fraught, be it perfect. And it's all happening simultaneously, right? In every day, we have probably five moments of success and five moments of failure.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- It's been a lot of empty days.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Tell us the secret to happiness.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- For us, happiness is our sister, because [INAUDIBLE] they take us everywhere where they go.

- I feel free because we can express our feeling through dances.

- I actually felt alive with my crew members. It was a big event.

- That moment, I felt like, actually, really happy internally.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Being in the kitchen, I love cooking, so that will be the best moment.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- The joy I get is through my meditation practice, through my prayers. It brings me happiness that I am alive.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- There was a [INAUDIBLE] study from this teacher and friend. And I woke up then, and there was almost a tear in my eyes. So, [INAUDIBLE]. My grandfather, he was [INAUDIBLE], and in front of my eye, he had died.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- 1996, [INAUDIBLE] my father [INAUDIBLE] He passed away early ages, and I miss it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Even though you are the [INAUDIBLE], even though if you are not really as same like group as us, but you have a good competitive heart, we accept. So you can always help others. Always have a limited desire. Desire is the main cause of all suffering.

- You tend to just pretend that everything is OK. Everything is fine, I am strong, but at that same time, I think we can all accept here that all of us are flawed, right?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And there's so much beauty in that, I think. And if we can accept, embrace that thought, then every human being can interact with one another, saying I am complete right now. I think that gives us the space to move forward.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Every day you wake up is a gift.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And the acceptance of emptiness and suffering's a part of the pursuit of the self--

[MUSIC PLAYING]

--being OK with both the high and the low of existing on this beautiful planet.

[END PLAYBACK]

[APPLAUSE]

ROBERT FOGARTY: Many people to thank. Kinga, thank you for inviting us on the trip. Sange was the GNH policy expert who gave us a real tour into the experience in Bhutan. Ben Reece on my team and [? Jen Tutak, ?] who invited us with the group. I have something really special for you all here.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- Are you getting this?

- Yeah.
- Here we are, and this is where Anthony Bourdain should have had come.
- Yeah. But you got that.
- Rest in peace, rest in peace. Kombucha, kombucha in Bhutan.
- Where are we at, bro?
- We are at Caf' Incomplete
- [INAUDIBLE]
- Run by my very good friend, Michelle.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[END PLAYBACK]

AUDIENCE: Wow.

[APPLAUSE]

ROBERT FOGARTY: So what did I learn on my trip to Bhutan with no phone for eight days, clinging and clacking in my pocket? First of all, I would encourage all of you to try that. Disconnecting from a phone is important. And I learned the importance of one word and I respect it deeply, and the word is "now." So when I feel sad or happy, I feel it now. And I feel my mom right now. And so, yeah, now is beautiful and it's happy. Thank you all.

[APPLAUSE]

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: Thank you, Robert. I think I want to go there to their place. Ha ha. Thank you so much for capturing all those beautiful moments, and for all of the friends that Robert has not only made in Bhutan, but have been able to actually connect even within Bhutan itself. And I think that is very special, as you have shared with us.

Next, before I invite the next guest to give you the final concluding remark, I want to indulge on two, three minutes of acknowledging all my friends who have really been working hard behind the scenes. So if I can please ask everyone to stand up, I would like to have mentioned every name, but being mindful of all the programs we have after this, so can you please stand up, all our friends? There you go.

[APPLAUSE]

Yeah, yeah. They're all over. At the back.

[APPLAUSE]

Stop.

[APPLAUSE]

[INAUDIBLE] Had to give-- [INAUDIBLE] Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. So you see how easy it was, because I had this wonderful thing where I've been-- oh, so I believe-- is that for me?

AUDIENCE: Yeah, that's for you.

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: Well, there you go. So I get too. All right.

[APPLAUSE]

AUDIENCE: This is for you, for all your hospitality, and the great time, and the ability to go to such a beautiful place and make so many friends. Happiness is like friendship. And it is to have good friends, you must be a good friend.

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

AUDIENCE: This is for you. Thank you so much. [INAUDIBLE]

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: Thank you. Thank you, [INAUDIBLE]. They have been working very tirelessly with all you can see, their creative energy and creative vision flow into these paintings. And so with this, professor, if you can please come up to the podium and kindly deliver the concluding remarks. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

SPEAKER: Thank you so much for those comments. And I would love to have my cats with me, but cats actually don't travel so they're home, a couple of miles from here. They are outside cats, but they don't come to school with me.

Anyway, thank you so much. First of all, welcome and good afternoon to everyone. It's great to see you all here. Thanks so much for asking me to give these final comments. I will say these were just spur of the moment, because I wasn't sure whether I was going to be able to make it here today, because I just got back from a short trip. But I'm really happy to be able to address you. And I'm also so happy about the topic of the conference and the way it went. And this whole project is extremely impressive.

I'll just say, a great deal of appreciation and admiration to the Bhutanese government and all the other people who are involved in this Gross Happiness Project, that is just a phenomenal idea for even having the idea, and especially for branding it, you know, coming up with terms and ways to express something that's just so important right now, and that we hear so little about. All we hear about is negative, negative, negative. And to be able to create this positive vision and have ways of

talking about it is a really huge contribution. And I would say that the country Bhutan is really showing leadership in the world.

So I'm a scholar of primarily Buddhism, and primarily Tibetan Buddhism and Himalayan Buddhism. And I understand that in the way that the Gross National Happiness Project is being articulated, primarily religion has not so much been thematized. And I understand that it's intentionally secular, but as a cultural historian, I will say that a lot of the ideas are very much grounded and coming out of both the very strong Buddhist history in Bhutan and also the great contribution of the Hindu citizens, who are also in Bhutan now.

You know, one of the interesting things for myself as a scholar of Buddhist studies, we appreciate these ideas coming from the past, but we also are really interested in how these ideas and practices coming, that are very really religious and really from another time, can have applicability in real concrete terms in the modern period. And this is something that's difficult to do well. As we all know, there's kinds of ways where you dilute the whole message and make it very modern and attractive.

I think in this case, it has been this sort of translation of really important and foundational ideas. The one concept I would mention is that of interdependence, which is an extremely important Buddhist idea. It has to do with the way that the world is from the way that we think, the way that the physical, material world is. It's being now applied in really, really effective ways and plausible ways for the future. And watching, in fact, the development of other Buddhist countries around the world today, it's not necessarily an entirely positive picture actually.

As everyone knows in the room that how difficult our situation more generally is in this world today, and Buddhist and Hindu countries have not necessarily been always the best leaders either, in issues around morality and development, in these kind of very well-thought-out ways. And Bhutan is really standing out now as a way of really providing a model for translating these old insights into ways that are really going to be effective in the modern world, in development, and technology, and especially the environment. I can't thank you enough for really pointing our attention to this extremely important idea.

It's such a disappointment and concern for all of us that in this country, the United States, our politicians are barely even mentioning the term. You know, in the last 2016 election, amazingly it didn't come up. It's starting to come up now, but tiny country, way up high in the mountain, Bhutan, is telling us in the entire world how to do it better. And you know, god bless you. Thank you, and please keep doing this, and keep spreading the word.

And you're in a really perfect position, using some of the symbolic capital that Buddhism and Hinduism have the world but, using it in a really, really positive way. So I can't applaud you enough. I really, really admire you and anything that I or anybody else who studies Buddhism and Asian religions more generally in the academy, whatever we can do for you, please let us know. We're really behind you. So again, my thanks and

admiration and appreciation to you for leading us. And you're doing a good job. May this only expand and increase.

And thank you all for your interest in this and willing to have this kind of dialogue. Fantastic thing to have at Harvard Divinity School. We're honored to have you here. This is just the kind of thing that we really, really appreciate. So thanks, all of you. And I hope you have a good afternoon. Go outside. It's gotten very warm and pretty outside. So, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

KINGA M. BUJAKOWSKA: OK, so thank you, professor, for those apt concluding remarks. And so I can take it from there. There will be a meeting here next year, same time, same place, for the next conference. So let's give a round of applause--

[APPLAUSE]

And please, and please be outside for the cultural program, where you can participate in the dance. Thank you so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]