

How to Keep Leper Patients Happy.

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Some time ago I received a communication which caused me to think. It commenced in this way: "Dear Mr. Ross, Are the lepers in your Home happy?" Now that is surely what lawyers would call a leading question. Apart from the old argument as to whether happiness is a normal experience of life or not, under the special circumstances can it be expected at all? After due consideration I replied with commendable caution, "I think some of them are happier than they were." It is certainly a point which, in the pursuit of other things, can easily be overlooked, and we may too readily persuade ourselves that things are better than they really are. I have no doubt in what glowing terms Mr. Squeers would have replied to a similar enquiry regarding Dotheboys Hall.

Heartache, resentment or dull despair are things that might naturally be expected in a community of lepers, and shall we too glibly assure ourselves that the people under our care are happy? Let us not be too certain that by providing food and clothing and shelter that we have removed every shadow from their lives. Since the modern treatment is noticeably assisted or hindered by the state of mind of the patient, anything which makes for cheerfulness should be sought after. I have come to the conclusion that happiness should have a definite place in our plans, and in so far as self-respect, interest in life, usefulness and unselfish service constitute it, we ought to aim at it. The efficiency of a home may largely be measured by the spirit of the inmates. Are they keen, are they interested, are they hopeful and unselfish? In a word, are they happy? If they are not, then the treatment is not getting a fair chance. When I took over at Raniganj I was struck by the calm of the place. It quite fascinated me. The people were obviously contented, but I soon suspected that their contentment was closely allied to stagnation. What seemed to be indicated was more work and more play. To accomplish that, one had to fall back on the most essential thing of all, namely, to establish a right relationship with the lepers. Enthusiasm is excellent, but unless it is regulated by a knowledge of how to handle people it may simply engender opposition, especially in a community which has been taking life very easily for some time past. One must get to know the people. In this instance, I used up many spools in my camera taking photos of them and jotting down notes of their characteristics on the back of the prints. The procedure was to look over these during

the day, and to stroll round the houses of an evening chatting with the people and acquiring more information. Nothing can take the place of this friendly contact.

A leper home is not a prison, and what mere discipline accomplishes in the latter place will only be obtained by tact and consideration in the former. If the superintendent imagines that he has been commissioned to write a book with the title "My leper friends," and that he is out to get all the material he can, he will then have the point of view I have been suggesting. Everything depends on the amount of interest that is taken in them *as individuals*. When that atmosphere has been created, it is not hard to initiate some project. In our part of India at that time famine conditions were existing. The suggestion of a daily contribution of rice from their ration was gladly taken up and was continued until the new crop was gathered and relieved the situation. Those amounts sent in monthly to the District Board got us some appreciative notice from people who had forgotten that the home existed.

In this connection I may remark that a good many inmates show no interest in outside news, but some do, and it is only fair to cater for them. The cost of a vernacular paper is only a small item, and if some reliable person be found to read it aloud in the evenings he will certainly get an audience. But I cautioned our reader that what was wanted was *news*, and not the rather scurrilous political ebullitions to be found in the editorial columns.

Magic lantern shows and evenings with the gramophone using Indian records were very popular, and I have often found some itinerant juggler or musician in the bazaar only too delighted to display his accomplishments to such an appreciative crowd for a rupee or so. I cannot say that to make a name as a showman is one of my ambitions, but the evening I "produced" a performer on the bagpipes was one to remember. The leper home shop which was occupying far too good a room for that purpose was transferred elsewhere, and a commodious recreation room thus provided. Draughts and ludo and ping-pong and snakes-and-ladders soon became very popular, and a petrol lamp was provided to brighten the proceedings in the evening. Here, again, it is a case of providing for those who want it. As regards these frivolities we have sober-minded people who might say in the words of a famous queen: "We are not amused."

This, by way of play, and the play was well deserved. A project of reclaiming a piece of waste ground adjoining the men's compound had been taken in hand, and an almost incredible amount of work was got through. The idea is to level it and plant it as a fruit-garden, and the final result a few years hence should be decidedly attractive.

Also when the cultivation season started, other ground very suitable for growing rice, but for years lying unused, was cleared, and made productive to the extent of 25 sacks of grain. As practically all our lepers are cultivators by caste, there was no difficulty in getting the work done, once interest was aroused.

One or two of our people knew something about a mason's work, and there was plenty waiting for them to do. The person I'm always on the look-out for is a gardener, and one day I really thought I'd got one. A Madrassi named Daniel presented himself for admission and gave his occupation the arresting title of "Agricultural Supervisor." This sounded promising, and for a week or two he showed himself intelligent and promising, but alas, I'm afraid he was but a rolling stone, and he left quietly one night, probably to lessen the pang of parting! Occupational interest is very important, but so much attention is given to cultivation in our case, that apart from weaving and a little carpentry, we have made no serious attempt in that way. Outside sale of the product where work done by lepers is concerned is generally an obstacle, but one which has been overcome in some places I believe.

A well-known book has the title "Reading Without Tears," and it is not too obvious that the introduction of education is going to provide much ground for cheerfulness. In our case, since a school was not practicable, a scheme was started whereby those who could read taught those who could not. This very simple method was quite successful, the arrangement being that when the test was passed, both teacher and pupil should receive a prize. In this way, several of our people became literate, and to that extent increased their self-respect. The system continues, and I often hear the sound of lessons being memorised as I go round the houses. Prizes are also given for the houses with the best display of flowers in front, and though all of them do not show equal keenness in that respect, an all-round improvement is quite obvious.

Food is a matter which should receive a lot of attention, and it must be confessed that my investigations in that department have not been received with unmixed approval. I regret to say that some of our people confuse happiness with a sense of distension at least once a day, and an explanation of food values leaves them unconvinced. In other cases there is a tendency to underfeed and the conclusion I have come to is that it is not very satisfactory to leave this matter in the hands of the patients themselves. Improved physical fitness must tell in the long run, and will outweigh a merely temporary dissatisfaction.

One innovation which was rather appreciated by those who benefited thereby was the issue of grey vest and khaki shorts to our hopeful cases. About 24 of our men were selected as really co-operating for a

“cure” and they were very pleased to be able to turn out so attired on any special occasion, as when a distinguished visitor comes. Any suggestion to inculcate pride in themselves and in the Home should be given consideration.

These projects and occupations and recreations, in view of the previous easy routine, might have made a sort of local “Amanullah” out of me. But such was not the case at all. If these things are done merely as ends in themselves, the lepers will surely know it and will fail to respond properly. Where they are the natural outcome of a spirit of real friendship and a desire to do one’s best, that will be known too. Every medical officer knows that apathy and listlessness have to be contended with just as much as the more characteristic symptoms of the disease, but mere dragooning won’t dispel them. The leper patient’s tendency to become lethargic and careless is well-known, but it can largely be overcome by right handling.

Unregulated pity is not required, but the ability to put ourselves in the place of these people, is. Good humour, cheerfulness and tact, allied with average common-sense and resourcefulness will go far to create the atmosphere in which happiness has at least a chance.

Such occupations and interests as I have mentioned may be taken for granted in the larger and better staffed homes, but there are other places where their introduction will require a little determination and patience. In one respect, the smaller homes have the advantage of making it easier for friendly contact with the patients to be maintained. Some of them have natural toughness and are not unduly influenced by their circumstances. There’s no need to worry about them but others are more sensitive and suffer from what is called nowadays an inferiority complex as a result of the disease, and if they have moods of depression can we wonder at it? So in answer to that inquisitive person I still prefer to reply “I think some of them are happier than they were,” and to hope that is not an exaggeration.