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At secondary school, I read a text by Herodotus, one of the great Greek writers. In his work The Histories, he tells the story of Croesus and Solon. Croesus, King of Lydia, received Solon, an Athenian statesman, as his guest at the palace where he showed him all his treasures. Once Solon had admired everything, Croesus summoned him to his quarters and said ‘You have brought us great fame, through your wisdom, and the many journeys you have made to enrich your knowledge. All of this makes me want to ask you a question, namely that of whether you have ever seen someone you might call the happiest person on earth.’ Through Croesus and Solon, Herodotus was trying to find the definition of happiness. After all, what is happiness? What does it mean to you?

One of my happiest memories is of a cool evening in the Andes in Peru. I was a young girl of fifteen and my greatest dream had come true: I had the chance to discover the world and do some volunteer work at the same time. Through the Global Exploration organisation, I and a group of approximately 35 volunteers went to Peru. On the evening in question, our group of Dutch volunteers were together with a group of Peruvian youngsters. We had not been able to shower for days, toilets were mostly a hole in the ground and we slept on too-small, ramshackle mattresses, next to the guinea pigs that would later be cooked for dinner. That moment was unlike any other, and that evening in Peru was unlike any other in the Netherlands. But it was wonderful; without a common language, without a common history and without a common culture. We had very little in common, but we felt connected. They taught us to dance salsa, and we taught them Dutch moves. We danced the Macarena. Talk about happiness! I saw it with my very own eyes that evening.

A couple of days later though, my evening looked very different. I was walking through the streets of Ayacucho with a group of volunteers in search of the tough street life. We entered a sewer and having walked for just 10 minutes we found more than we could ever have bargained for. First of all, we saw the vermin; hundreds of rats.

A bit later it was empty glue tubes, and finally we found the worst of all: two young boys, about eight years of age, street kids; there are dozens of them in Ayacucho. They were huddled asleep together, hoping they wouldn’t freeze to death. I don’t know their names,
and I never did, but that image will stay with me forever.
There is a fine line between suffering and happiness. One evening you’re dancing under
the stars, the next you’re in the sewer, literally.

These days you only have to open a newspaper to see suffering on every page. From
wars to attacks to political debates about suicide and research into depression. All that suf-
fering leaves little room for happiness, but suffering is not limited to the Western world or
the Netherlands. Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan, Peru, the Philippines; people suffer
there too. Suffering is universal, and yet we often close our eyes to everything that is far
away or that affects someone else. We see life through our very own glasses. They show
us our own suffering, but not the suffering of others. We fight for our own happiness, but
not for the happiness of others, and in doing so, we create distance. Distance between us
and them. We forget the things we have in common, and only see the differences. Our
‘glasses’ make us blind to each other. And that’s why I - just like this university – am call-
ing for a change of perspective.

Last year, as a volunteer at Heumensoord, I helped refugees to get new clothes through
the Red Cross clothes bank. One typically Dutch, cold wintry morning, I was helping a Syr-
ian woman. She was probably in her late twenties, accompanied by two young children
and her husband. She was wearing flip-flops. After a while spent looking and trying on
shoes, she finally found a decent pair, and that in itself was quite an achievement given
the small number of shoes that we had. They weren’t the prettiest, but at least they weren’t
flip-flops. When her husband saw her wearing the shoes, he ordered her to take them off.
They were not the kind of shoes a woman should be seen wearing. I calmly tried to explain
to the man that it would get increasingly colder and that his wife really needed something
other than flip-flops. But he stood his ground, and his wife walked away disappointed, and
cold. I thought a lot about that man that day. Changing perspective is something I believe
in wholeheartedly, but putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, taking off those glasses,
is not always easy. How dare he make his wife wear flip-flops, how dare he order his wife
around. It almost made me angry. Later, I realised that he and I had a different outlook on
life. As a Western woman, I thought he behaved terribly towards his wife. But he had
grown up in a very different country, with very different norms and values. We simply see
life through different glasses, and that makes finding common ground complicated, but not
impossible. There is no point in clinging to what divides us, to our differences, because the
only things that cause those differences are frustration on my side and incomprehension
on his. So, I focussed on what we had in common. I tried to put myself in his shoes. And in
doing so, I was certain: he thought he was doing the right thing. Both of us wanted the
best for his wife. But we had different opinions about what ‘the best’ involved. There is
nothing wrong, however, with differences of opinion.

Taking off our glasses is not easy, but it is essential that we do so. We have to broaden
our perspective. We are all human. We try to avoid suffering and to find happiness. We
are, in the first place, neither man nor woman, neither young nor old, neither Muslim or
Christian, and neither natives nor immigrants. At the end of the day, we are all human. And
that’s something we all too often forget.

You may well ask yourself what that change in perspective has to do with happiness. Everything. And the next part of Herodotus’ story explains this. When Croesus asked Solon who the happiest man in the world was, he very much wanted to hear his own name. But Solon gave a different answer. Solon immediately acknowledged that Croesus was blessed with all his power and all his wealth. But Solon also told Croesus that this did not necessarily make him happy. The person described by Solon as the happiest on earth was one surrounded by family and friends. Someone who is not alone. Happiness is achieved by being together, because life is more beautiful when experienced together. But in order to be together, you have to support each other and learn to understand and accept each other. Just take our own Nijmegen Vierdaagse, the Four Day Marches. Thousands of totally different people come together for four whole days, and help each other – sometimes physically – to cross the finish line. Without all that togetherness, the Vierdaagse would just be a series of long walks, but together it becomes an event, an experience. Not only for walkers, but for everyone who catch even a glimpse of it.

Being together also holds great importance for our own university. We all seem to be living in the bubble of our own faculty, our own discipline or our own circle of acquaintances. And why is that a bad thing? Because loneliness stands in the way of happiness. Research carried out at Radboud University has shown that one in five students miss having other people around them; that’s an alarmingly high number.

To help those eight-year-old boys, the Syrian refugees, and our own students, we have to come together. It is time that we stepped out of our bubble, to see beyond over borders, faculties and backgrounds. It’s time to change perspective, embrace differences and emphasise common ground. Life is so beautiful together and happiness shared, is happiness squared!