

This is a Personal Response written to a text (a poem called "Swing Valley") that discussed what makes a person happy. The form is a Reflection. It refers to the text directly.

Text Chosen: "Swing Valley"

What does the text(s) suggest to you regarding the ways in which we compromise or pursue our happiness?

Form: Reflection, with a direct reference to the text and the topic:

Everything is about perspective. And happiness is no exception. If we want to be happy, if it is a state that we can imagine, then we can and should pursue it. Of course, the pursuit is often determined by the circumstances in which we live. Sometimes, when we allow memories of earlier times to bubble to the surface, it is abundantly clear that there were moments of joy, of exhilaration that arose from the simplest of acts. "Swing Valley" by Frank Gaspar encapsulates that moment of thrilling release engendered by the precursor to the bungee jump -- the rope with the knot-- that many, many of us used to leave the bonds of the earth and for a brief, heart stopping moment experience the euphoria of flying.

That simple act has faded from the annals of teenage activities, to be replaced by the highly structured, extreme sport of bungee jumping. This, like most sports and entertainments in the western world, has lost its simplicity in favour of the **accelerated, the high risk, the extreme**. It's not done in the back yard, for only specialized sites will do. It's not done with a bunch of friends, for only a professional organizer can ensure your safety. No activity worth its salt exists unless it is beyond the pale. **Sadly**, this permeates every aspect of our lives as we try to over-achieve in the hopes of snaring that elusive state -- happiness. It is not enough to be, it is not enough to compete -- we must excel, we must be on the best team, not any team, have the best mark, not a good mark. And we continue to seek the fame and fortune of "bestness" in the hopes that with it comes happiness. **Unfortunately**, it appears as though this drive to excel comes not with happiness and is, instead, a way in which we compromise our happiness.

Last month I traveled to Botswana, a small country in south-central Africa. We have an image, often circulated in the media, of Africa -- miserable, sad, sorrowful. Of children lacking the most basic care, their families devastated by the scourge of AIDS. Of a place left behind the rest of the world, without the accoutrements of modern living. **A desolate place**. But the reality is quite, quite different. In central Botswana lies a city of 50,000, Mahalapye. It is not a modern place, it is not a place of wealth, of extreme competition, of gold medal performances, but it is a place of happiness. Such verve, such energy! There is action, but it is a simple action. A group arrives in town, sets up in the market, and sells their CD's. No high class marketing company for them! They dance, they sing, they draw a crowd. They sell their CD's. Success. Where else might you see someone jump up and join a cultural dance, uninvited, but welcomed and enjoyed? Children certainly appear to be happy, even without the best of everything, without the extreme teams to compete for, without the brand name regalia common to our land. School lets out at 2:00. On the slow dusty walk home the children, still in their neat and tidy uniforms, find a game -- of soccer, of

Frisbee and enter into it wholeheartedly. People are not in a rush...they put us to shame with our insistence upon promptness. The church choir next door, sings with an exuberance that would put to shame most Western choirs, too concerned with perfection to feel the joy. People appear to have time to enjoy the company of friends, to be curious of strangers. They seem to pursue happiness through human interaction rather than through competition and acquisition.

Why is it that happiness is an ephemeral thing for us...achieved but for a moment, a fleeting moment... easily compromised by the next high that beckons?

As far as I could see, there was no high that beckoned the people of Mahalapye. There was simply a state of being that served to provide a happiness that sadly, seems to elude us.