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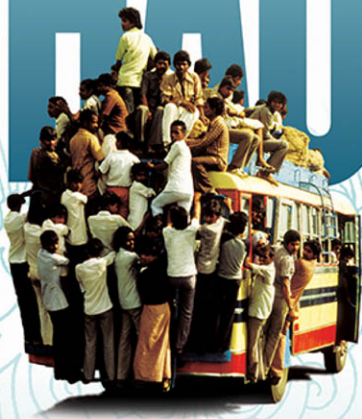
***Embrace the Chaos***  
***How India Taught Me to Stop Overthinking and Start Living***

by Bob Miglani

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

EMBRACE THE

# CHAOS



*How India Taught Me to  
Stop Overthinking and Start Living*

**BOB MIGLANI**

Foreword by RICHARD LEIDER, bestselling author of *The Power of Purpose*

## More Praise for *Embrace the Chaos*

“In this noisy, fast-paced world, it is hard not to get swept away by the demands, anxieties, and challenges that daily come down upon us. *Embrace the Chaos* shows us that only by opening our minds and our hearts to life’s wonderful unpredictability can we truly live. It is a wise and welcome book.”

—**Marcus Buckingham, author of *First, Break all the Rules* and *Now, Discover Your Strengths***

“Bob has offered an insightful and thought-provoking guide to navigating times of profound change.”

—**Ian Read, Chairman and CEO, Pfizer Inc.**

“In a world where change, uncertainty, and continual reinvention have become the new norm, Bob Miglani takes us on a powerful and optimistic journey of quite literally embracing the chaos and organically transforming the future from threat into opportunity and optimism. Read *Embrace the Chaos* and believe it.”

—**Henry S. Lodge, coauthor of the *New York Times* bestselling *Younger Next Year* and *Younger Next Year for Women***

“Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha taught his followers about the impermanent nature of existence...explaining how everything is constantly changing, ever flowing, eternally in flux. But our Western minds crave stability, certainty, predictability, and control. ‘Give it up,’ Bob Miglani tells us in his new book. ‘Your longing for control is futile. The truth of reality is chaos. Learn to go with the flow. Relax—and dance with the chaos.’ The Buddha would agree. Therein lies freedom and happiness.”

—**BJ Gallagher, coauthor of *Being Buddha at Work***

“If we are going to continue to thrive in these times of profound change, we must learn how to embrace the chaos. This is a most compelling book that offers men and women everywhere hope, inspiration, and courage.”

—**Ambassador Paula J. Dobriansky, former Under Secretary of State**

“We all can benefit from Bob’s experience in learning to embrace the chaos of our modern life. This book is enormously helpful to me in navigating the everyday challenges of being a husband, father, and NFL official.”

—**Carl Johnson, the NFL’s first full-time on-field game official**

“Whether we’re trying to transform education or change our own lives, it’s about embracing chaos. Bob’s wonderful book helps show us how to move purposefully and happily through the complex nature of work and life.”

—**John Katzman, founder of The Princeton Review, 2U, and Noodle**

“Embrace this book! Bob articulates so perfectly the feelings we all have of uncertainty in life. His fascinating stories and unique observations offer a positive-thinking picture of what we need to get unstuck and move forward successfully.”

—**Lynda Bekore, Managing Editor, SmallBizClub.com, and Huffington Post blogger**

“‘Embrace the chaos’ is not just a mantra for management—it’s a mantra for life. We can all learn from and enjoy this simple but beautifully written book. It is, without question, worth the read.”

—**John J. Connolly, EdD, President and CEO, Castle Connolly Medical Ltd., and former President, New York Medical College**

“With a jolt, Bob’s writing forces us to rethink our lives and transform ourselves—to step back from the daily roller coaster of life, savor every passing minute with a free spirit, and discover unlimited potential in ourselves! An easy-to-read manual of life!”

—**Deepak Ahuja, CFO, Tesla Motors**

**EMBRACE THE CHAOS**

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**CHAOS**

*How India Taught Me to Stop  
Overthinking and Start Living*

**BOB MIGLANI**



**BK**<sup>®</sup>

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San Francisco  
*a BK Life book*

## Embrace the Chaos

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*This book is dedicated to all who feel stuck and who overthink about an uncertain future. I believe in the power of our minds and bodies to take positive steps to make a lasting contribution to the work we do, to the people we love, and the lives we lead. I hope the stories in this book serve as a reminder to keep moving forward because our voices, our words, our work, our love, and our actions are needed right here and right now.*

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# FOREWORD

Our lives are more chaotic than we'd like. And that's not going to change.

Finding meaning in the busy routines of work and life is never easy. Our daily lives often lack a sense of purpose—a reason to get up in the morning—and appear to serve no apparent end. That can change. This book helps us make that change.

To change, we need to push the Pause button, to see beneath the surface to the place where we know not just with the mind but also with the heart. There are steps we can take to enhance our ability to pause and reflect on our lives.

Bob Miglani offers us simple, practical steps that will help us overcome our hurry sickness—being stressed out, burned out, or just plain stuck.

But first, let's look at the cost of hurry sickness.

When I reflect upon the necessity for introspection in my coaching work, my clients respond, "Who has the time?" or "I'm too busy." That is precisely the problem. Hurry sickness—always going somewhere, never being anywhere—is numbing our conscious awareness of what's really going on in our lives. Our very sense of humanity—our full presence in our own lives—is being hijacked by busyness.

The first step to recovering from hurry sickness is to read this book. It helps us unmask our illusions. It helps us confront those parts of our busyness that are expressions of our real purpose in life. When we lose touch with our purpose, we lose our perspective on what truly matters. And mattering matters, to all of us.

When things are going smoothly, we may not sense the need at all, but when chaos grips our lives, we're forced to reflect. This book awakens us to the reality of the new normal: pause now or pay later.

Bob teaches us that we're never alone on our journey. In order to know people, we must listen to their stories. But we live in an age when we rarely have the time to listen or to hear each other's stories. When we're hurrying, we rarely really know anyone. Instead, we live on the *assumption* that we know each other.

This book is filled with funny, surprising, even moving stories. Bob's own stories of his experiences in India alone are worth the read. And those stories will help you recall your own story and listen to the stories of others.

Bob advises us that remembering the impermanence of life each day helps us to bring greater purpose to our step. He counsels trying to meditate amid the chaos.

Try this: Tomorrow morning, get up a little earlier. Mind over mattress! Before you start your day, sit quietly for five minutes and take three deep breaths. Breath one—just be present. Breath two—be grateful. Breath three—read a paragraph of this book. Picture your day. Picture the possible purpose moments—times when you can serve a cause, a project you care about, or a person you love. You cannot control the chaos. You can control you. One day at a time. One breath at a time.

*Embracing the Chaos* helps us slow down to the speed of story. It teaches us how to find fulfillment and meaning in a stressed-out world. It teaches us to live with chaos, cope with it, deal with it, accept it, and move forward.

Richard Leider

Author of *Repacking Your Bags*, *The Power of Purpose*,  
and *Life Reimagined*

# PREFACE

Stress had become my new norm and anxiety was my new best friend. I was stuck in limbo, paralyzed by what I perceived to be an insurmountable problem: a complex, increasingly uncertain, highly unpredictable, interconnected, fast life full of shocks and surprises. The more I thought about trying to plan my future, the more stressed and anxious I became. Each path that lay in front of me looked worse than the other.

Every two weeks, it seemed, my boss (who is actually a good guy) walked into my office and, seated comfortably, asked if I had “found anything yet,” because he wasn’t sure how long he had before he might have to lay me off. He wasn’t being mean; he wasn’t sure how long he had himself, and he was trying to be genuinely helpful in the increasingly uncertain world of corporate America.

It’s not supposed to be this way, I thought as I walked into my house in the suburbs of New Jersey one evening, after a two-hour commute from the city. Something just doesn’t feel right. I mean, I did all that I was supposed to do.

When my family moved to the United States in 1979 with only \$75, we embraced the American dream. My parents had two jobs, working seven days a week for years. As I got older, I helped as well as I could by delivering newspapers, mowing lawns, and eventually helping to run our family’s Dairy Queen store, which we bought using some family loans and money we saved after coming to America. I put myself through college and got a decent education—even an MBA—by going to school at night. After college, I went to

work for a big company, surviving and at times even thriving, for twenty years. I was a number one sales rep, an innovator who started new initiatives and produced solid returns for the company. I worked hard, getting up early and going to bed late. I stuck to my to-do lists, read all the great books, eagerly sought advice from smart mentors, and just kept delivering results as well as I could. I thought I was doing well.

I believed in the idea that if I simply worked hard and smart, I would be successful and happy. I followed all the rules and did all the right things—even got a thirty-year fixed mortgage for a house I knew we could afford. So why did I now feel I was not keeping up? Why was I always worried? A constant chatter of overthinking was keeping me up at night. I felt constantly tense, anxious, and pessimistic about an uncertain future.

It may seem strange, but as I walked into work in New York City each morning, my greatest triumph came from seeing the green light appear on the turnstile as I swiped my corporate ID, signaling that I was still employed. But that little triumph quickly wore off when I got into my office, where I was supposed to be creating, innovating, and driving new opportunities and ideas for our business. How could I move forward when I felt so uncertain about my own job, about the economy, about world events? Even the new ideas I was considering proposing to my boss felt as though they wouldn't pass the huge hurdle that my own overthinking mind threw up against them, leaving me to shrug and stop trying.

I always used to be enthusiastic and positive. How did I start overthinking and, as a result, feeling so worried?



As I lay awake in bed for most of the night, my mind couldn't deal with how to cope with the uncertainty I noticed everywhere I looked: I'm paying more for my two kids' day care than I did for one year of college not too long ago. How am I going to be able to afford \$200,000 for each of them when they're ready for college? I know college is years away, but where am I going to get all that money? I'd love to save on the day care and send them to the public school, but like so many local governments in America, my town is broke and doesn't have a full-day kindergarten. How am I supposed to look after my aging parents with both my wife and I working? They don't have a 401(k); they're just a hard-working older couple who run a tiny Dairy Queen ice cream store.

But it wasn't only economics making me feel this way; it was everything. I had lots of friends on Facebook but I somehow felt as though I didn't really know them anymore. I couldn't remember the last time I had gotten together with friends solely for the purpose of shooting the breeze. And although my kids are fairly good at playing Angry Birds on the iPhone, will they be able to have a decent conversation with someone during a job interview? Will they have the hustle and the hunger to compete for jobs against the kids from Shanghai or New Delhi?

Of course, turning on the TV or reading a newspaper didn't help one bit. From the chaos in the Middle East to the debt crises here at home and in Europe, I continued to get more anxious and pessimistic.

*Did someone change the formula for life?*

Everything I thought was certain was no longer so. There was uncertainty at my job (if I continued to have a job);

stress in trying to balance home, kids, and work; unpredictability in starting a new business with my wife; and the challenge of helping my parents figure out their retirement. I felt overwhelmed, underprepared, and always worried about an increasingly uncertain future.

I was stuck. Paralyzed. Frozen. I stopped making any decisions or choices. At work, I stopped coming up with new ideas and I felt disengaged. Everything was so uncertain and moving so fast that I just didn't know what to do. I thought about moving to another job or another company, but I held back because I thought about all the negatives of an uncertain new career path. I overanalyzed everything and felt in control of nothing. As a result, my career stagnated and I felt like I was slipping down a spiral of anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt.

The root cause of my inability to move forward was that I felt as if my life—at home and at work—no longer had any order to it. I used to know the formula for life and work, but now everything was different. I was trying to identify the new rules in a changing world. I was trying to define the right path to success. But I was having trouble planning for next week; how was I going to plan a five-year career track? I couldn't figure out the direction to take in my life so became stuck. I felt as if I no longer had control over my own destiny.

Then something unexpected happened that changed my life forever. My friend Ben asked me to accompany him on his first business trip to India, and I said yes.

I was born in India and lived there for a part of my youth. More recently, I had been there for family weddings, to visit relatives with my wife, to introduce my kids to their distant cousins, and occasionally for work. I was delighted to take a

week of vacation from my job to help Ben figure out how to do business in one of the world's most populous and rapidly growing economies.

Ben's face became more perplexed as the week wore on and he experienced all that is India—cows on the road; confusing business meetings; the way people pray, shop, or stand in line (what line?); the way life keeps moving, fast.

As we prepared to leave India and we reflected on his busy week of meeting people and trying to understand the culture, Ben asked, in an exhausted voice, "How does anything get done in a country that is filled with so much craziness and confusion—on the roads, in meetings, in daily life—whether it's going to the market to buy food, competing against so many others to find a job, getting a postage stamp at the post office, or trying to do a business deal? There is so much chaos here. How does it work with a billion people? I just don't get it. How do people figure out what to do when they have no idea what's going to happen next?"

I answered, "Well, that's India for you. It's a chaotic place. But let me ask you this: Have you ever been to an Indian wedding in the U.S.?"

"No," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because an Indian wedding will teach you how to deal with uncertainty," I answered. "Here's what I mean. You go to an Indian wedding and you experience an all-out attack on all your senses. There's confusion everywhere. People are running late; you don't know what's going on. So many colors, smells, music, dancing, and new outfits you've never seen before. Some people arguing, others laughing, some drinking, some praying. Marigold flowers everywhere—in a vase and all over the floor!

“There’s a horse or an elephant (yes, even at Indian weddings in the U.S.), and you’re not quite sure, but it’s not for the kids. Nothing ever goes according to plan or according to what is written on the invitation. You feel like you have no control and no idea what’s going to happen next. Instead of a celebration, it feels more like a riot. It’s total chaos. But five or eight hours later, two people get married! They do get married!

“What you have to remember is that, while you may not be able to know what happens next and you feel as though there’s no order to anything, two people *will* get married, and everything will seem perfect when it’s all over. It all works out in the end. Just accept it. You just have to let go and go with the flow that leads you up to the end. Enjoy the ride! If you focus too much on trying to figure out or control what comes next, you’ll miss the best time of your life and it will all be over before you know it.

“You have to change your mind-set and embrace the chaos,” I exclaimed.

And so *Embrace the Chaos* was born!

As I returned home to the suburbs of New Jersey, to my own life and career uncertainty, I reflected on my talk with Ben. And suddenly I realized that what I was trying to tell my friend to do in India was exactly what I needed to do to help reduce my stress and move forward in my own life, in my own career, right here at home in America. I was spending too much time worrying about the noise of the wedding rather than enjoying the spectacle.

To be honest, I didn’t feel as frustrated or anxious in India, even though things are so much harder there. India is a country of more than 1.2 billion people living in a country

about one-third the size of the United States. Add to this the complexity of many languages and customs as well as a highly fragmented and complex economy with lots of chaos. Frankly, the place just shouldn't work at all. Yet, according to one international rating (the Happy Planet Index), India far outstrips the United States in happiness. What was the secret sauce they had that I didn't?

In order to learn how to embrace the chaos of my life in the United States, I realized, I would have to reclaim my past. I would learn how to move forward in chaos from the most chaotic place I knew: India.

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## INTRODUCTION

# **YOU HAVE LESS CONTROL THAN YOU THINK. GET OVER IT!**

**A**t the heart of so much of our stress and anxiety about feeling stuck in uncertainty lies a feeling that we have no control. Whether we are thinking about our jobs, our kids, our relationships, our colleagues and the people around us, the economy, or our politics, we have a deep desire to have some level of control over our lives. *We need* to be in control. We worry and get caught up in overthinking and overanalyzing what lies ahead because we so badly want our future to turn out the way we want, within our realm of control.

Somewhere along our journey in life, however, things don't work out as we expect them to, no matter how hard we try to control things. This is especially true in our new global, hyperconnected, superfast world, where things are so complicated and random events and changes occur seemingly out of nowhere. As a result, we get overwhelmed and consumed by the chaos, unable to move forward.

We attempt to control but we cannot. We may control the neighborhood where we choose to live but we can't control our neighbors. We may choose the place where we work but we can't control our bosses, colleagues, or customers. We have some control over the seat we want on the plane but we can't control who's seated next to us or whether the flight will be late. We choose our friends but we cannot control what they say or think. We can barely control our own children, so how can we possibly control the essence of life itself?

We think we have control but we don't. And this scares us. This loss of control is the root of much of our stress and overthinking.

In the beginning, it was difficult for me to accept that we may never have had control over life in the first place, because it's contrary to everything I was taught while growing up. We plan our education, map out our career, decide on our relationships, and make important life decisions or choices based on this very notion that we have some kind of order, some control, a plan.

For a long time I fought this idea of letting go of control—as any reasonable person would when trying to let go of something that is so attached to the very fiber of his or her being. But the stress and overthinking was hurting me from the inside out. Luckily, through some unexpected, fun, and interesting experiences in the country, which destroyed any notions of order and control, I was forced to let go, and I realized that we can never really conquer the chaos. We can only embrace it.

And after we embrace it, we can start reveling in it.

Letting go of control is a wonderfully freeing experience that opens us up to new, fresh possibilities. It leads us down paths we never would have walked, introducing us to new



people, new opportunities, and some of the best experiences in our lives. It brings out strengths we never knew existed inside of us. It brings forward ideas hidden inside, which helps us to create, develop, and flourish. It allows us to live freely because we're no longer feeling as though we're carrying the burden of the world on our shoulders.

"Do you want me to just give up and wait for things to happen?" you might ask.

Not exactly. What I'm suggesting is not that we sit back and give up on life but that we in fact work harder on the things that we can control: our own words, thoughts, and actions. By making a choice to redirect our frequently wasted effort to control others or the conditions around us, by refocusing that intense passion on our own actions, living in each precious moment, we can begin to move forward into a life we want. This is really the only certainty we have: ourselves.

It isn't easy to redirect that control to ourselves, but there are three principles I developed while learning to embrace the chaos in a confusing place like India. I've organized the main parts of this book around these three principles.

First, accept. By accepting the unpredictable, uncertain, imperfect, and complicated nature of life, we can begin to let go of the past, let go of plans gone wrong, let go of our narrative of the way life ought to be and begin focusing on the way it is. We must accept that the only control we have is over ourselves.

Second, don't overthink. Let's stop overanalyzing, overplanning, or trying to predict what will happen tomorrow. We spend so much time thinking about the future, which we cannot control anyway, that we miss some of the best times of our lives, happening around us right now.

Third, move forward. Take action. Taking charge of ourselves, our goals, our purpose, our thoughts, our words, our actions, and the way we navigate the chaos—these are the things that are completely within our control. When we are armed with knowledge of our own resilience, taking action can create more certainty than waiting around for perfection.



This book covers a series of trips I took to India over the past twenty years that helped me rediscover the joy of living by letting go of my illusions of control, order, and perfection. I realize that telling stressed-out readers to let go and stop trying to control everything is about as helpful as telling someone in a rainstorm to not get wet. So my approach in this book is less to share advice and principles—although I can't help doing that from time to time—than to invite you to join me on these trips and see these Embrace the Chaos moments in action.

Even the details of the trips are secondary to the people, the ordinary Indians, described in these chapters. In this remarkable country of confusion, chaos, and celebration, more than a billion people are trying, working, loving, exploring, living, and moving forward, often with a quiet joy that cannot be stopped. They are my teachers and my inspiration, and not a day goes by when I don't use something that I learned from them.

I don't expect many readers will ever travel to India, but I find stories from India can be useful in anyone's daily life because India is a country bursting with what I believe to be the four forces of chaos that cause so many of us stress and

worry: uncertainty, unpredictability, complexity, and speed. Go on a journey anywhere—to a tourist destination or to a business meeting—and things have a way of going wrong. You get lost, find yourself stuck in the middle of complicated situations, and always run into some sort of roadblock. There are rituals being performed in numerous places of worship; constant power outages; dilapidated infrastructure; and frequent political infighting, strikes, and rallies, from the villages to the modern steel metropolises.

The inequalities also are stark. A child no older than three, wearing a torn, dirty, oversized shirt and no underpants, sits by the side of the road, barely paying attention to the horns of the little white cars buzzing by. Meanwhile, a stone's throw away, the Burberry boutique beckons New Delhi's elite.

In addition, Indians face the complexity of dozens of languages, endless regulations, and the unpredictability of companies being shut down or shifting business models.

In India, one doesn't know what's going to happen next or when it's going to happen, and when it does happen, it seems scary and comes out of nowhere, fast! The place has a way of completely destroying any notions of control that we think we have. As a visitor, you get frustrated, exhausted, sick in the stomach (not always from the food), overwhelmed, anxious, stressed, and plain old angry, finding yourself with no control over anything. You don't know what's going to happen next and you don't know which way to go.

It's when things seem the most hopeless and tense, however, that you find yourself letting go and going with the flow. Something happens out of nowhere and things change, and suddenly you realize that it's starting to turn around.

Somehow, through a great deal of churning, things work out in the end—not as you expected, but sometimes even better.

And you realize it wasn't so bad after all. In fact, you're a transformed person, finding joy and fulfillment in the smallest things. Liberated from the shackles of an orderly framework that your mind no longer needs to control, you begin to stop analyzing life and start living it.

India is a place of extremes, contradictions, and inequities, but there's something about it that wakes you up to the realities of life. For me, India's allure was not in the perspective it provided me, the understanding that they have so little while we have so much more back home and I ought to be grateful for that. It wasn't about "Eat your broccoli, kid, because kids in India are starving." Instead, the allure of India as a training ground was that, despite crumbling infrastructure, a complex society of many different castes, cultures, and languages, and extreme poverty and awful conditions, people continue to be happy. They forge ahead in their lives and their work, sometimes with joy in their eyes, kindness in their hearts, and passionate effort. Despite the unpredictability, Indians continue to move forward.

As I looked back over twenty years of experience in India, I started to learn and grow. Observations led to insight. Insight led me to a better understanding of how people in India move forward in life and work without having grandiose plans, expectations, or forecasts.

Once I began to notice the invisible fabric that helps tie Indians together in their day-to-day lives, I began to feel less stressed and anxious about my own life. I started to catch myself overanalyzing and overthinking, and I began reminding myself to let go of my past notions and to keep moving forward.

After reflecting on what I had learned and putting these valuable lessons into practice, I became less worried about the future and started to become more engaged in life. At work, I began creating again, developing new ideas and solutions and, with the support of my boss, implementing those ideas to good effect. At home, I became more relaxed, reveling in the daily adventures with the kids, in helping them with their homework, in teaching them to play sports, and taking advantage of every moment. I also started trying new things and explored writing again, sharing my thoughts and learning to help others as well as I could. Little by little, my writing gained momentum, eventually leading me to write this book.

Although the uncertainties and unpredictable nature of life didn't go away, I learned to cope with it better. Ultimately, I realized that learning to embrace the chaos was not about fixing my career or quitting my job to live on some faraway island devoid of any chaos (although that does sound appealing). For me, it is more about learning to take action and to participate in life, accepting that the chaos of modern life will continue to exist—with or without my approval—and choosing to move forward anyway.

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## PART 1

# Accept

Accept and let go of trying to control the chaos out there. Let's control the chaos in our own minds and the actions we take each day.

Accept that life is uncertain, unpredictable, complicated, and fast. Accept the impermanence and imperfections. Accept both the ups and the downs. By learning to stop trying to bring our narrative of order and perfection to life, which actually has no order, we can start the process of living again.

Accept that there is no perfect job, no perfect person, no perfect relationship, and no perfect life. There are only jobs, people, relationships, and life. Accept it all as it is—good, bad, great, short, up-and-down, awful, crazy, and every way in between.

Life has always been chaotic, and it gets more complicated as the world progresses forward with ever more people. Let's get used to it.

Accept that we cannot control life. We can only control ourselves—our thoughts, our words, and our actions.

Accept that we have always had a choice to think differently, to take action, to move forward, to use our own hands, to create, to innovate, to do, to live.

Let go of all the old baggage. Let go of the ego. Let go of the way things used to be or the way you think they ought to be.

Let go of past relationships, past ways of working, and the need to hang on to something that isn't there anymore. Let go of trying to bring your order and your expectations to the outside world.

Stop trying to control what crosses your path. Just control yourself.

I know this kind of acceptance is a tall order—few can practice it consistently or perfectly. For some, it may take a lifetime to master. Many will even criticize this kind of acceptance as passiveness, weakness, or defeatism. Shouldn't we always pull out the stops to fight something that's bothering us?

However, the practice of acceptance is a “don't knock it until you try it” kind of principle, as the following stories will attempt to show.



## DRIVING ON INDIAN ROADS

*You cannot control the chaos.*

*You can control you.*

**E**very day we hear about and see uncertainty in everything. We think about all the things we could be doing differently in our lives but we hold back because there are so many paths in front of us and they have no predictable and appealing outcomes. We consider going in one direction but then our minds start overanalyzing and overthinking all the possible problems we may encounter. “Yes, but . . .” starts coming out of our mouths almost immediately, restraining our hearts, which want to go forward. Our minds accentuate the negatives without any effort. We get so overwhelmed with all the chaos that lies in front of us that we find ourselves standing still, unable to move forward.

In a word, everything seems to be out of control.

But is that such a bad thing? We can’t control other people or how they think or what they’ll do. We can’t predict what’s going to happen with the economy or our jobs. Why create stress for ourselves by worrying about something that

might or might not happen? Stop trying to control it. This incessant need to be in control is just a way to stand in the middle of the road while life passes us by.

In a very real sense, this book began during a taxi ride on an Indian road, where I realized how little control we have—and how little that should concern us. Participating in life, despite the chaos that lies ahead in all paths, is our choice and ours alone, and it can be as simple as driving forward in any direction, whatever may come. Because eventually, despite a cow or two blocking the road (as is commonplace throughout India), we will get there just fine.



During my friend Ben's first visit to India, he joined a small delegation of U.S. businesspeople who were interested in learning about the country and doing business there. An entrepreneur at heart, Ben was excited to learn about how this booming emerging economy of a billion people worked. Because I'm the only Indian American guy he knows, and because I also serve on the board of the United States–India trade group that was taking him on this trip, Ben asked me to join him as his quasilocal guide for a few days. He wanted a friend to guide him so that he wouldn't look like a typical foreigner.

I could sense his trepidation as he and a couple of others gathered around our car, ready to confront a road full of chaos that lay ahead of us in Ahmedabad, a city of roughly six million people. Navigating the city's roads with a local driver was Ben's first experience with uncertainty and shock since he had landed in India. There were no markings on the street and not many traffic lights—and no one paid any attention to the traffic signals anyway. The road was brimming

with bicycles, carefree pedestrians, motorcycles, scooters, small trucks, rickshaws, three-wheelers (scooters that serve as small taxicabs), and the occasional cow or buffalo. These were our road companions as our driver weaved through the mess to our destination.

I was worried about making the meetings on time and was anxious because I wasn't sure who was going to show up. I didn't want our trade group to look bad and I felt like I had a lot riding on my shoulders. After all, this was "my" country, which I was trying to show off to Ben and others.

Just then, our car encountered a cow that wouldn't move out of the way, so our driver backed up on a one-way street and found another road. Because, well, that's what you do in India. Relieved that we were progressing toward our destination, I looked back to see the puzzled and amusing reaction of the passengers in the backseat.

The driver was a local, and although he wasn't too knowledgeable about all the roads, he sure knew how to handle moving the car in and out of traffic. I was in front, next to the taxi driver, who sits on the right, and at one point I noticed in the side mirror a motorcycle approaching fast, trying to pass us on our left. Up ahead, also on the left, was a huge tree, and because the Indian custom is to not tear down sacred trees and/or any possible signs of God and so on, the road just sort of went around the right side of the tree.

Our driver started speeding up. This meant that the motorcycle behind and to the left of us was surely going to head right into the tree.

Now, I have built up some immunity over the years of travel in India, but seeing this motorcycle trying to speed up to pass on our left scared me. I thought surely the motorcycle guy was doomed.

I held on tight as we approached the tree. Our car veered slightly to the right and we passed the tree with no problem. I quickly looked behind, expecting the motorcycle to have crashed into the tree. Nothing doing. The motorcycle had simply slowed down and also passed the tree on the right—right behind us.

I looked back at the audience in the rear seat. They had been white before, but they were even whiter now, having lost some color in their faces.

Relieved and somewhat impressed with my new best friend—the driver—I asked in my broken Hindi, “Wasn’t that a little close?”

“Not really. What do you mean, sir?” he answered.

I was surprised. “I mean, come on. Didn’t you think that guy was going to hit the tree? Weren’t you concerned that by speeding up you were risking his chance of getting hurt?”

His answer resonated and has stayed with me. He said, “Sir, in this crazy road, which is my daily life, I have learned that I cannot count on anyone else or anything else to be predictable. Because each road has a surprise. Either a cow comes out of nowhere, another car races to pass, a child’s ball enters the road, a scooter or a rickshaw comes out of nowhere, with a total surprise. The only thing I can do is be prepared and think of only my car and the passengers in my car. So the person driving next to me has to take precaution as he needs to, and I should do the same for myself and my passengers only. I can only control my own driving.”

Being a passenger in that car made me realize that he was absolutely right. We don’t control what we encounter on the road. We only control how we steer our way forward.

## SEARCHING FOR GOD AT FIVE THOUSAND FEET

*Let go of plans gone wrong. Things have a way of working out in the end.*

No matter how hard we try to control our plans, things can go wrong. As a result, we may find ourselves in a state of confusion, worrying about everything. We look around for something to blame, and sometimes we blame ourselves for not planning better, as if we have perfect foresight. Other times we focus on the imperfections of everything around us. We blame the chaos itself, feeling as though we are the only one it touches. We may wonder, Why me?

This tension ultimately gives way to anxiety, crippling any action, which we feel would be futile. We find seemingly endless logical reasons not to try anything because, in that mind-set, it feels like it will all end so badly. "What's the point?" we ask, giving up all hope.

But life has a way of constantly shuffling things around, shaking our understanding of what's possible and what's not. And somehow, in some cosmically unpredictable way,

life unfolds and things work out—never as expected, but sometimes even better.



Many years ago, when I was about to graduate college, my parents took my sisters and me to visit Vaishno Devi, a mountaintop holy site where the god Mata Rani is known to reside. Eight million Hindu pilgrims visit the deity each year, walking about 7.5 miles from the main city of Katra, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and climbing to an altitude of 5,300 feet.

My two sisters and I were not too keen on going on this journey, but we felt obligated because we had made a commitment to support our mom in her strong religious beliefs. In Hindu culture, it is said that if the thought of going to visit Mata on this mountaintop comes into your head just once, then you must do it to ease the mind. And my mom's mind was zoned in on making the journey. Plus, we wanted to see what the fuss was all about. Was God really up there on this mountain? What really is up there? Deep inside all of us was a hidden spiritual curiosity, and we couldn't give up this chance to satisfy it.

Being the type A person that I am, I took charge of all the preparations—and boy, was I prepared. I had booked the flight from New Delhi into Jammu's only airport. Ascertained the temperature to ensure we all had proper clothing. Figured out how many mountain guides we were going to hire and the prevailing wages so that I could negotiate properly. The backpack was all set with extra scarves, extra socks in case ours got wet, a towel, and a Swiss Army knife—in case, as my sisters joked, we were stranded up there and I had to go hunt for food.

As we were about to leave for the airport in New Delhi, my aunt mentioned that we shouldn't take any belts or wallets made of leather because, being made of animal hide, they wouldn't be allowed inside the holy site. As we rushed out the door, we dropped our wallets and purses with my aunt.

When we got to the airport to check in, it seemed as if every other person cut in front of me at the counter.

"How come there are no lines?" I screamed in frustration at the clerk. "How come there's no order in this place?"

"Sir, please give me your ticket now and I'll check you in," the clerk said, without apologizing for taking the four people who had cut right in front of me.

Landing at Jammu's airport, in the mountains of Kashmir, was truly breathtaking. From the perspective of the metropolitan cities, you tend to forget the true beauty of India. After negotiating with a local taxi driver to take us to the base of the mountain to begin our trek, we felt great—confident, enthusiastic, and happy to begin the journey, prepared to meet God herself.

The narrow, slightly paved path up the mountain was filled with other worshippers, some making the journey up and others on their way down. Many were barefoot. My mom was ahead of the pack and, along with other worshippers, started chanting, "Jai Mata di," which means "in praise of Mata." This chant is often used to bring forth *shakti*, a force or spirit by which one can better shape one's destiny.

The chanting was a little odd to my sisters and me in the beginning, but we started getting into it as the hours passed and we needed some encouragement to keep us moving up the mountain. My dad was not as comfortable. His bad knee prevented him from walking up with us and, as a lot of older

worshippers do, he was taking a horse up the mountain, led by the horse's owner.

We made it up the mountain in eight hours, stopping for a bit here and there to go to the bathroom and to drink tea purchased from some of the many makeshift tea, food, and souvenir stands that dotted the mountain path.

It was about 2 a.m. when we arrived at our destination. We stood in front of a tiny passageway carved through the mountain by eons of fresh mountain water from the melting snow. Cold, tired, and a bit hungry, we made our way to the point where we were supposed to deposit all shoes and baggage. After ensuring that we were carrying no leather or other animal materials, the pandits (holy men) showed us toward the washing area, where we used the freezing mountain water to wash our hands, faces, and feet. The idea is to purify yourself before visiting Mata. This is as close to God as you're going to get and you can't be dirty.

My mom rushed to the front of the line, an eager, sincere devotee of Mata. I could sense the humility in her slow, precise washing with the freezing water.

"There's a line here but not in the airports," I remarked snidely.

"I didn't know we were supposed to be going through this tiny little space in a cave," my scared younger sister said to me. She was fearful of small spaces and terrified of going through a cave, worried that it might collapse on her. "I'm not going in there."

My mom went first, followed by my middle sister and then me, holding my younger sister's hand. My dad went last. It was a vertical crevice, only fit for slim people, with little light except for the moonlight on the other side of the cave. Freezing mountain water running down one side



was a constant reminder that we were actually inside a real mountain.

I shifted my shoulders toward the side of the cave that had been smoothed by years of running water. Barefoot, I made my way through the cave toward what appeared to be an opening. I could see candles in front of a small shrine representing the semi-exact point where God herself resides. I say “semi-exact” because nothing is ever exact in India.

In an area large enough to hold only two or three people, including the pandits, I stopped and prayed. I looked around to find something that gave some indication of a supernatural force. I’m more spiritual than religious, but I wanted so much to believe. I was genuinely trying to pray, hard, to feel the divine presence. What did I have to lose? Even so, it was dark and I couldn’t really make out anything remarkable. All I could think of was how cold the water was beneath my feet.

“Keep moving,” said one of the pandits as I started to get into deep thoughts about the existence of God.

Like my sister, I’m not a fan of closed spaces, so I was relieved to get out of the cave. I gave a little smile to my mom, who seemed to be experiencing her own moment of bliss as she took in the *darshan* (visit of God). She was in heaven.

After gathering our belongings, we took in the dark mountain scenery as well as we could at 3 a.m. and then began our journey down the mountain. With sore muscles, hurting backs, and empty bellies, my sisters and I were a little cranky. I gathered everyone around and suggested that we join my dad in taking horses the rest of the way down the mountain. In order to make our flight back to New Delhi and then our flight to the United States the next day, we would need to hurry, and walking wasn’t going to cut it.

My sisters leaped at the suggestion but my mom wouldn't have any of it. She preferred to sacrifice in the name of God and to finish the way she had started, on foot. Something about suffering as a way to reach God.

I took charge and negotiated with a couple of horse guys, and the rest of us went galloping down the mountain. OK, it was more like a slow pony ride.

When we reached the base of the mountain, we felt exhausted and really sleepy. "We can all have a nice rest on the plane back to Delhi," I said as I rushed us into the taxi for the airport, trying to keep us all on schedule.

As I gave the woman at the check-in counter our U.S. passports and tickets back to New Delhi, she said casually, "The flight is not operating today, sir."

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch that."

"No flights to Delhi today."

"Sorry, I don't understand. Today is Tuesday and it says here on our ticket that there is a flight to Delhi today."

"Fog today."

"So, you mean it's canceled?"

"No flight today, sir. Fog. Maybe later. Maybe tomorrow."

"I don't understand. Is the flight canceled or is it not?" I asked in a loud and definitive way, signaling the need for certainty on the subject.

I wasn't going to get any certainty. Only later did I learn that, for most Indians, there is no certainty. They'll never tell you a flight is canceled. They'll say that it's not operating today—I guess because "canceled" is very definitive and nothing in India is ever definitive.

Angry, hungry, exhausted, and utterly confused at the lack of any civility, I threw up my hands and walked away,

joining my family standing nearby. They had already learned that our flight was “not operating today.”

“How are we going to get back to Delhi in time to make our flight home to New York?” My sister asked the obvious question and everyone else turned to me, looking for an answer.

I had no idea. No one else did either.

Being stranded in a small town with an outdated airport, waiting for a flight to resume the next day, is normally no big deal. What made it difficult this time was the hunger, the two days’ lack of sleep, the freezing weather, the blisters on my feet from going up and down a mountain, and simply not knowing when we would be going home. The lack of certainty was causing me a great deal of stress and anxiety.

After an hour or so of trying to understand the flight situation as explained by a helpful agent, my mom and dad came back and told us that we would have to wait at the airport until the fog cleared up in Delhi, because they might reopen the flight today. For the time being, the flight was not operating, but it might, eventually. There was still no certainty; it was a maybe. I hated maybes.

“Why can’t anyone in this country say something definitively?” I blurted out in frustration.

I couldn’t deal with a maybe. I suggested that we take a taxi into town and get something to eat. At least with some food in our stomachs we might be able to think straight.

As we were about to get out of the taxi after a fifteen-minute ride into town, I reached for my wallet. But there was nothing in the back pocket of my jeans.

I felt this “Oh, no” approach all of us in unison. We had left all our wallets and purses back in New Delhi, at

my aunt's place, after she reminded us that they don't like leather up at the holy site.

No one had brought a wallet. Each of us had thought someone else was going to, so no one had any money! Zip. Zero. Nada. No rupees. No dollars. Nothing. Whatever loose change we had started out with had been spent on tea on our way up the mountain.

It took me a nanosecond before I began to freak out.

"You have to be kidding me!" I exclaimed.

We were all exhausted and hungry and we had nowhere to stay. No food. No cell phones. And no certainty about our trip back home. All my perfectly laid plans were going out the window. I was freaking out, spinning into a spiral of anxiety.

With the aroma of hot, fried vegetables circling all around us, I stood in the middle of a crowded market, paralyzed. After apologizing to the taxi driver, we found a couple of empty spaces on the cold, exposed brick steps of a restaurant and just sat.

My sisters and I were miserable, thinking and thinking about what to do next, but I couldn't see any way forward. Nothing seemed to bother my dad, though. He sandwiched himself between two local men who were smoking a hookah on a small cot made of rope. At ease with the whole situation, he blended in, almost reveling in the chaos that we were experiencing.

Seeing him so relaxed made me more tense and anxious. How can he relax at a time like this? He's not coming up with any solutions, for crying out loud!

I could taste those savory *pakor*s (fried vegetables) being prepared at the stall next to us. Anxiety started seeping into

my mind, like oil from the *pakor*s, dripping into my body. I was debilitated by my stiff neck and arched back, and I felt there was no reasonable path in front of me.

Stressed, worried, and anxious, I sat there, still trying desperately to hold on to the plan that I had not foreseen going wrong. I blamed the airlines and the ticket agent and this crazy country, and I remained so focused on the past plan and what had gone wrong that I became closed to any new ideas.

But my mom was still standing, and she said, "All right, let's go and try to do something at the airport."

"What's the point, Mom?" we all asked.

"We're stuck," I said. "There's no way out of this crummy place. We'll have to suck it up and wait at the stupid airport until tomorrow." Clearly, this confusing country was the cause of our disrupted plans.

She grabbed us by our hands and, pulling us up, calmly said, "Let it go. Just let it go. It happens. Stop trying to figure out why. Let go. Now, come on. Let's go and see if the airline can do something for us. Let's try."

Not wanting to disappoint our mom, we reluctantly got up. We begged a taxi driver to take us back to the airport, promising him money after we secured a solution. He felt sorry for us and gave us a lift to the airport.

"Sorry. No flight today. You can talk to the airline office nearby the airport if you want," the ticket agent responded, after we pleaded with her to find a way to get us back to Delhi in time for our homeward flight.

"See, I told you. There's no point, Mom."

"Keep moving. Let's try the main office. We have nothing to lose," she said.

Thanks to the continued kindness of the taxi driver, we managed to get to the airline's main office, five minutes from the airport.

Feeling as though we were making some progress, and hopeful of finding a solution, we headed into the office. A young man in the customer service department sat us down and essentially gave us the same answer.

"Sorry, flight is canceled today and, weather willing, will fly to Delhi tomorrow. We can't do anything for you. You will have to wait at the airport."

"Is there any other way of getting back to Delhi?" I asked.

"Well, there's the train. You can check to see if the train will reach in time."

This seemed to be all he was going to give us, so I started to say thanks and walk away. But not my mom. She forged ahead, asking very specifically, "Sir, can you please call someone to ask if there is a train going to Delhi today? We are desperate to return and could really use your help."

The young man looked at us and made a call.

"The Rajdhani Express overnight sleeper train is leaving in two hours and there are probably some seats available. You can buy the tickets when you get to the station and it should put you in Delhi in the late morning. You should be able to make your flight back to the U.S. with no problem."

This was a start. But my mom persisted.

"We have no money to buy tickets for the train," she said. "Could you kindly find a way to refund us the money from the flights so that we can buy the train tickets?"

"I'm sorry, but I cannot do that until your flight is officially canceled. Right now, the status is officially delayed, due to fog in Delhi."

“Please. See if you can do something. Please, sir. We need to get home,” my mom insisted. She pressed on with sincerity, persuasive enough to warrant the man having a conversation with his manager.

After speaking to his manager, the young man came back and brought us something we never thought we’d see: money! He gave us a refund and said with a smile, “Good luck.”

With the money, we would be able to secure a sleeper car and arrive back in Delhi in twelve hours! We ate a little, paid the taxi driver, and headed to the train station. We were able to secure seats on the train to Delhi and even had a few rupees to spare. Plus, we were told that we had first-class tickets and could have access to the station lounge.

Unfortunately, it was more like a Turkish prison than a first-class lounge. I’ve seen *Midnight Express*!

Sitting on our backpacks, my sisters and I were miserable. But then we noticed our dad, again sitting between two locals. He seemed comfortable, like he belonged there. He had seen this movie before, too, and he was laughing at the punch line that was coming.

That punch line turned out to be the biggest rat I’d ever seen, coming toward us as if to indicate his right-of-way, unafraid of anyone. He was on his own turf, free to roam for food just like the rest of us on the platform, in broad daylight.

My sisters and I burst out laughing—at our exhaustion, at the whole experience of this miserably unorganized, unpredictable country. Lack of proper infrastructure. No one tells you the straight facts. Something always goes wrong.

But it was one of the most memorable and fun moments of my life.

Once on the train, we got into our sleeper compartments, which were decent, though my bed felt like a small wooden door laid flat and suspended by a rope tied to a nail or two.

First class? I thought. Whatever. It really doesn't matter, as long as it takes me home.

It's funny how the imperfections don't bother you so much as long as you feel like you're headed in the right direction.

Then a man came through the cabins, handing out the most savory bit of sustenance I've ever had in my life: two perfectly round *aloo parathas*, Indian bread with potatoes inside. Heavenly. It might have been the greatest meal of my life.

My sisters and I talked, joked, and reveled in the scene outside the window of the Rajdhani Express as it took us back to civilization. My mom was enjoying delicious hot tea with a generous helping of sugar. The air was cool and crisp and we didn't mind the blend of perspiration that floated about the compartment. We were headed home.

We were giddy on that train back to Delhi. We drank tea with a handful of local travelers who told us fascinating stories. Looking out the tiny windows of the Rajdhani Express, we were able to see India in a different way than we saw it while flying through the clouds above.

Feeling the steel of the rails underneath, I started to realize that what I was searching for on the top of that mountain actually already resides deep inside all of us. It is this force, an innate strength that has guided us through history. It is an unshakeable urge to give the body motion, an ability to keep



walking, to keep trying, and to continue moving forward despite not knowing what will happen.

What I had missed seeing and feeling five thousand feet above, in my search for the presence of God, I discovered only when I was forced to let go of the plans I had made, when I stopped trying to understand why things went wrong and simply accepted it. Instead, I found that presence hidden inside the generosity and kindness of those who notice our effort and help us on our journey, in the luck and randomness of things all around, and in the encouraging, action-oriented spirit that propelled my mom to let go of overthinking, to accept, to have faith, to believe, and to just keep moving forward.

Looking out the window, smiling at what I had learned, I drifted slowly off to sleep, passing by farmers in fields; huts made of dung, lit inside by kerosene lamps; men on carts pulled by buffalo; and the rolling of a black bicycle rim propelled forward on a dirt road by a stick in motion, carried by the sheer joy of a young boy trying to get home.

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## TWO GUYS HOLDING HANDS

*You are never alone.*

Sometimes we feel as though we are the only ones going through life's problems and challenges. Sitting in the isolated world of a desk, a computer, and a cell phone, among thousands of friends in the virtual world, we sometimes live, shop, drive, and work without speaking to a single human soul. We eat lunch in front of the computer at our desk. We purchase products online without talking to anyone. The birthday phone call has been replaced by a post on our Facebook timeline. We hold conference calls with colleagues in the office next door. An automatic e-mail is sent to a colleague celebrating twenty years of service in the same company, with no phone call or in-person visit with cupcakes.

All of this may leave us feeling isolated and lonely in the real world. Forget the gold watch; sometimes it's just nice to see a human face instead of an e-mail.

Some studies suggest that younger people choose texting over phone conversations because they fear the loss of

control a phone call represents. (Who hasn't been stuck on the phone with someone who won't stop talking?) I've seen for myself that colleagues under age thirty will do almost anything to avoid talking on the phone at work.

We have created walls around us that prevent us from bonding with others, even while we create online virtual timelines of our lives for the world to see. But we're so lonely. We're terrified of the uncertainty around and in front of us. Isolated in a hyperconnected virtual world, we lack the most important benefit of society: face-to-face social connections that help keep us going.

A big part of acceptance is accepting other people as they are. This is the joy of social connections: if we stop trying to fix one another, control one another, or judge one another, we can begin to lift each other up. We just have to accept the person we get, not the person we want.

India is full of people who can't escape into a fortress of solitude, even if they tried. From neighbors who stop by unannounced to the social gatherings for every odd occasion, Indians live in a culture of self-imposed socialization. Such social habits, demonstrated on so many levels, can help us face life's challenges, to feel less alone in this crazy world.

It's not perfect or ideal, but those human connections and deep relationships keep Indians going forward, despite living in an unpredictable environment where nothing is certain. The tribal fires around which comforting words of wisdom were dispensed by village elders years ago have become the societal norms of neighbors popping in from time to time, friends meeting friends at tiny celebrations, parents' dinner-table advice to the adult sons and daughters who live with them, and sometimes even through the simple gesture

of two guys holding hands, which I had the almost awkward pleasure of experiencing.



While I was on our family trip to the holy mountain, I went to meet one of my many distant cousins, who I hadn't seen for fifteen years. We had spent a lot of years together when we were kids, and because he was a little older than me, he found our reunion particularly special. Remembering our younger times together, he was extremely happy to see me and to meet my family.

As his wife prepared lunch, he suggested we go for a walk in the old neighborhood, to see what had changed and who was still around.

We took his motorcycle around and stopped near a tiny snack shop. After helping me off the motorcycle, he grabbed my hand and just held it. He held my hand while we crossed the busy street, showing me some of the people who were still around, pointing with his other hand to this, that, and the other. But I couldn't concentrate because I was freaking out inside. Why was this guy holding my hand, especially in public? What was the deal?

Feeling very uncomfortable, I tried to free my hand in a way that wouldn't hurt his feelings. After all, he was my cousin and I was supposed to be like his kid brother.

I found a way to gently let go, pretending to rub my nose, but he wouldn't let me get away. I started using my hand to point at different locations, pretending to ask him about what shop used to be in this or that location. Didn't work. In a casual way, he just held on tight to my hand, no matter what I tried to do. He continued giving the tour of the shops,

people, and places where we used to hang out and play, and the entire time I was getting weirded out by my cousin trying to hold my hand.

As we walked over to the snack shop, I noticed a handful of others hanging out. As is often the case in India, I didn't see many boys and girls holding hands in public, and it slowly became apparent that my cousin's gesture was a simple sign of affection. He had missed me over the past twenty years, which was evident in his smile, and he couldn't contain his emotion inside.

As we returned to his house, my discomfort completely subsided. I noticed many other men holding hands while crossing the street, walking into shops, or just hanging out and having tea. That day, I learned that it is a societal norm to demonstrate your love, care, and affection for another man, not through hugs or fist bumps but often by simply holding hands.

More importantly, I learned that people in India aren't afraid to share their affection, worries, fears, hopes, or dreams with one another. The social bonds that we build and cultivate, even through simple gestures, are crucial to helping us get through some of the most trying times of our lives. It gives us strength and motivates us to move forward. So it's OK to be pushed outside of your comfort zone and to accept someone else's unique way of showing caring and affection. Really, when you think about it, isn't it a little silly to be stressed out by someone who wants to hold your hand?

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