Many Americans need to redefine idea of happiness

On the surface these kids seemed to have nothing, and their dirt streets looked like something from the dust bowl days of the Great Depression. They wore ragged pants, sometimes a torn shirt, were barefoot and walked among scavenger chickens and loud roosters.

My wife and I were a village of Boca da Valeria in the Amazon jungle of Brazil. The people obviously were used to visitors. They had prepared crafts for sale and had dressed some of their children up in native costumes for photographs.

But this was more than a typical tourist stop. The village has 75 full-time residents, a few two- or three-room houses on stilts (the river routinely floods its shores), a sort of community house, a half-finished church and a one-room school. While they were happy to get a dollar or two in exchange for a photo, they were happier still to receive an article of clothing, some make-up or pencils.

After all, the nearest bank or store is hundreds of miles away, and this village is accessible only by small boat or canoe.

After we left and were back on the river, I watched the village through my binoculars. Children were playing soccer in its main road, a young woman was washing her hair in the river, and a man brought two cows back from a day at pasture.

The next boat might visit them in a couple of weeks. Other than that, their lives would go on like this.

Again, on the surface they seemed to have nothing; they live simple and seemingly “impoverished” lives. Their school teaches basic reading and writing skills to the children, but a quick glance at the very young mothers we saw tells us that the future for most of them lies right in this village, hundreds of miles and days away from the nearest population center we might call “civilization.”

But just beneath the surface, in and so many ways these people have everything. Their eyes sparkled when we tried to engage them with our basic Portuguese. Children showed off their spelling and art papers tacked on the wall of their one-room school. A woman proudly showed us her three-room home, complete with hammocks for sleeping and a wood stove where she baked a cake. Men showed us calabash (the gourds are used for bowls and buckets) and rubber trees, and their vegetable gardens planted in a sort of raised trough to survive the river’s flooding.

The Amazon is their supermarket, teeming with thousands of species of fish. Their cows provide fresh milk. All around the village are fields filled with medicinal plants that are processed into a meal that provides the traditional food staple for these people. They have family and friends, both in their village and in nearby villages. And they get pencils, make-up, clothing, shampoo and lotions from people like my wife and me.

So, as we all feel squeezed by this “Great Recession,” I think of the people of Boca da Valeria. They do in fact have everything they need. Our U.S. definition of “need” may be vastly different from life in this small village, but there are so many lessons for us all to be found there.

When we think about what we might need for “happiness,” it has to be related to a home, a good meal with family and good friends, an education for our children, peace in our lives, productive work to do, and hope for the future.

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