

## Independence and Freedom

Tell the starving population of Zimbabwe that it is free and you might provide a moment of mirth even to people whose minds and bodies are destroyed with hunger in a country which until recent history had a comparative abundance of food in the African continent.

Tell the peasants of Russia and the Perestroika spawned countries of the old Soviet Union that they are free to embrace and live life anyway they want, and the scarf-ed ladies trying to make a living by selling potatoes from their little kitchen patches, would probably wag their fingers at you and run you out of town.

Tell the ringer, the guy who walks the railway tracks in heat or cold, rain or shine, checking the ties that run to infinity, with a bang of his stick, the bottom level employee of the biggest employer in the world, the Indian Rail Service, that he is free, and his lean emaciated body would halt in consternation, his bloodshot eyes looking at you in perplexity, until he sees the next reassuring tie once again and bangs it with his stick.

Tell it to the woman hunched on top of rock piles in blistering heat, her baby crying amidst the sharp stones at the bottom somewhere out of sight, as she sits there day after day splitting the rocks at her feet with a little hammer.

Tell it to the teenage mothers of the world. To the ladies hidden behind veils and tall walls. To the children locked inside abusive households. To the forced prostitutes- in our own country and elsewhere. To the poor, scavenging from the trash cans of the richest country in the world. To a public school system, which holds fund raisers and asks its children to sell wrapping papers to fund math programs and field trips. Which cuts arts and music and language programs because its strapped of cash in a country whose leaders advertise star-wars styled shock and awe programs on TV causing a budget deficit that runs in twelve digits. Tell it to the remaining people of Iraq who have apparently been freed.

Free: A simple four letter word that holds an entire world full of languages and letters and races and religions and political systems inside of itself. Free. A word used interchangeably with independence. With freedom; With diversity and secularism; With civil rights; With license; With responsibility as well as irresponsibility; With a free economy; With abundance of money and of poverty. With a layering of society- Into haves and have-nots; Into political parties; Into entrepreneurships and freedoms of thoughts and expressions.

Every free country in the world holds an independence day. A day marked by proud acceptance and jubilation and displays of that nation's achievements. Of looking ahead to the future and remembering the courage of the past that made this day possible. Of eulogizing its leaders: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and many others. Yes, we all remember those names. But do any of us remember and recognize the qualities that these leaders possessed that made this independence, this freedom possible? Do we know what oppression felt like? Do we understand the level of courage and responsibility, of capable diplomacy backed by fiery courage that would have made today possible? Do we understand the vision of a free country? Of a *sovereign* nation? Of liberty and justice *for all*? Do we, who sue each other, for running into an electric pole, for spilling coffee into our own lap, for getting into an accident because we run into the middle of road, our ears plugged up against the world, have any sense of responsibility ourselves?

Freedom: for which many generations in many countries gave their blood. Freedom, which is still craved in more than half the world. Freedom, which to different people is different: From want, from disease, from political and social oppression. Let's deepen our vision of it, so that we may understand and keep it, and so that we may not run amok brandishing our one-colored paintbrush on a landscape where it doesn't fit. So that we who take our freedom for granted, may realize just how precious it is.