

"It Just Fit"

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Students from Ohio University's Global Leadership Center have been embracing the cultural experience by researching Hare Krishna, a subset of Hinduism. This 10-week research project introduced students to Hare Krishna devotees who have devoted their lives to one God, Krishna. Those devotees currently live in New Vrindaban, located in Moundsville, West Virginia. The class traveled to the community for a weekend visit where they immersed themselves in a devotee's day-to-day activities.

Within the GLC, individual groups consisting of three to four members worked together to tell the conversion story of one devotee. In order to complete this task teams spoke with one assigned devotee over the course of eight weeks. They also conducted individual research of Hare Krishna beliefs, symbols, and history to develop context for the stories.

The following attachment is the result of one team's research with a devotee. The story is of a woman, Meghan Daum, who willingly participated in this project. This group, consisting of members Anthony Chambers, Olga Kooi and Jen Monroe, hopes the work results in educating others about the faith. It is for this purpose they are working in conjunction with the Harvard Pluralism Project, which studies the numerous religions in the United States.

At the start of the project we were in the eager, inquisitive stage children have where they end every sentence with a question: “Why?” Within the first phone conversation, however, we grew up.

Meghan, hesitant and skeptical, wasn't eager to share with us. The first impression we had of conversion stories were ones where people hit rock bottom, thus giving them a reason to search for new beliefs. Meghan was different.

She told us, citing scripture from the Bhagavad Gita— an ancient text from which Hare Krishna bases its teachings and beliefs, four types of people seek Krishna: “the distressed, the financially distressed, the inquisitive and he who is searching for knowledge of the absolute. Which reason or combination of reasons led Meghan to convert?

We, expecting an “ah-ha moment” or a page-turner life story from Meghan, continued to question her.

We learned she was 33, single, and had been living in New Vrindaban for five years. She first moved into the women's ashram, the residential area in the temple; however, she now has her own apartment—which is normally only reserved for married couples.

“Most women my age are married and they have husbands and children. Almost all of them. It's kind of the culture that women stay home and take care of the kids and men do the preaching.”

Before joining the movement, Meghan had been practicing Buddhism, but “became disenchanted by the idea that the supreme being- either didn't exist or was just a big energy mass with out any real discernible qualities.”

Meghan's path as a devotee hasn't followed the norms of Hare Krishna culture. A single woman living in an apartment reserved for married couples is just one example of the fine line she walks attempting to maintain her core values while still devoting her life to Krishna.

We only met Meghan once and it wasn't until after a few conversations over the phone, but we identify this line because she's not like the majority of Hare Krishna women: she's a white American who grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. She struggles to maintain independence while practicing Hare Krishna because the majority of her life was spent striving for equality.

"Growing up we're taught we have free rights," she said. "Our mothers and grandmothers fought for equal rights. When I first started going to the temple I was taken aback."

We witnessed first-hand the confusion Meghan felt. When trying to experience a devotee's routine in New Vrindaban, we went to temple. In one part of the service, devotees chant and dance their praise to Krishna. Not knowing the etiquette, we began to practice with them. Quickly, however, we realized there was a divide in the room: men and women danced separately.

We didn't understand it. We recognized, however, our inability to comprehend comes from our American background. We were fighting a similar obstacle as Meghan had; only she learned to balance her upbringing and her faith.

This wasn't always easy. Trading in her jeans for a sari, a typical Hindu dress, for instance, was an idea that almost turned Meghan away from the faith. When she was in the first phase of converting, she was approached by a woman in temple for not wearing a sari. "If you're not going to wear a sari you might as well not come to temple," the woman said. She even suggested Meghan borrow one if she didn't come prepared.

Meghan wasn't even sure how to wear a sari. She was sure, though, it wouldn't matter. This was the first religion Meghan connected with and the incident with the sari wasn't going to turn her away.

Meghan's exposure to religion wasn't the same as most children who are funneled into one belief. Her grandmother, a devout Presbyterian, was her source for religion, she said, because her immediate family was nonobservant. She experienced other faiths vicariously through extended relatives and families in the neighborhood. The Orthodox Rabbi's wife, for instance, was a babysitter and she often ate dinner with the Irish Catholic children.

This outside exposure to religion coincided with an intrinsic interest for higher faith. She continued this religious quest in college where she studied Western religions. Her interest later switched to Eastern philosophies, blaming the boredom she felt when studying Christianity as her reason for losing interest.

It was also in college when she developed a relationship with Hare Krishna devotees. This relationship came as part of Meghan's interest in religion and religious studies. Yet at first, Meghan had a hard time accepting Krishna's teachings. "I didn't like the way the devotees or the scriptural terminology referred to women."

She received the opportunity to visit New Vrindaban because of a class she was taking. At first she was reluctant to go, but later accepted the invitation.

"I was happy that I did because I was able to discuss and debate my personal views with theirs. The visit had such a profound impact on me that I began seriously considering converting to Hare Krishna."

Meghan compares her visit to New Vrindaban with a successful trip to a thrift store. It's like a shoe you pick up at a second-hand store, she said. When you need to try it on, the shoe is perfect and comfortable. "It just fit."

She openly discussed her appreciation for the faith with friends and found that some didn't share her opinions.

“Todd, my best friend at the time who was a Buddhist, was very skeptical as to what I was doing,” Meghan said. “But I didn't care; I liked what Hare Krishna entailed.”

She considered converting in college, but her friendship with Todd and other influences caused her to wait. She graduated from college and moved around the country meeting devotees who invited her to temples, but she still didn't feel ready.

Eventually, Meghan came around to it. A year into her devotion, she met a devotee named Malati, who became her mentor and educator. Malati is the first and only woman who holds a full time Hare Krishna's Governing Body commission position. She was one of the first Hare Krishna Devotees in the Western World.

“After meeting Malati I began my total devotion to Hare Krishna by moving to New Vrindaban.”

A major reason why Meghan is a Hare Krishna today is because of her guru, Hridayananda das Goswami. He is a Sanskrit scholar and holds a PhD from Harvard University. Meghan took to his perspective on the subject of women's rights and equality in ISKCON.

“His teachings are different from what the majority of the Hare Krishna society says about women, dress, and our Hare Krishna culture.”

Currently she is content with her situation in the community. She has accepted the sacrifices necessary to devote her life to Krishna because the sacrifices have yet to outweigh the benefits.

“No matter what thoughts about my future are going through my head, there is one thing that is for certain: Hare Krishna will always be a part of my life. I’ve devoted myself to Hare Krishna and no matter what I do, that will never change.”

*Since this research, Meghan received initiation and took formal vows. By doing this she was given a spiritual name by her guru. Her name today is Mahalakshmi devi dasi.