Reflecting on India, it is impossible to attain the vocabulary that would fully express my experience there. How can I form mere sentences to give justice to the sights, senses, and emotions, which now have jolted my entire life perspective? For me, India was simultaneously everything I had imagined and nothing I could have ever anticipated. India is amazing, crazy, dirty, lively, and just so real. I've scanned my brain to pinpoint the single term that would capture it entirely. I've decided that the absolute truest way to express India is through the word raw.

India is so shamelessly raw. It has nothing to hide and no one to impress. There are scattered stacks of garbage overflowing sidewalk crossings, flooding into the streets and creating absolutely dreadful odors. The corroding buildings are dingy by American standards, and the rickety pathways are overwhelmed by people, rickshaws, and waste. The streets and sidewalks collapse into one, as cows and dogs clutter them like the squirrels of our Iowa terrain. India understands the busy hustle and bustle of city life, but in a completely different was than the typical metropolitan grind of New York City. While excessive honking in both places is enough to drive you half insane, it’s the people in India that really make the difference. They are completely consumed by their activities. Even if it is just sitting and staring, they are absolutely sitting and staring. It is not unusual to see a 50-year-old man crouched on the side of the road barefoot and observing the events passing in front of him. The elaborate color-splashed saris of the women blur together to form a collective mental image as beautiful as a painting. Every other corner exposes a new adventure; hidden authentic market places, elephants blessing devout temple worshipers, filthy stands full of wonderful smelling cuisine.
The life of India is a collective chaos, but looking into the faces of individual Indians you can soak in their relaxed ambiance. The intrigue of everyday life in India will instantly captivate you whether you are ready or not. To me this rawness is utterly beautiful and allowed me to feel intimately connected with India instantaneously.

The Indian location that was the most impactful to me was a small community outside the city of Puducherry. Upon my arrival at the Narikuravar village my awe-inspiring Indian experience had come to a cacophonous halt. The flies were buzzing so loudly they created an impenetrable shield from my thoughts as my senses were overrun with disbelief. When I finally gathered myself my head imploded with the nightmares of malaria, parasites, and typhoid fever. If I were to encounter these within my lifetime, this would be the place.

The land of the Narikuravar village was gifted to these indigenous outcasts displaced by their loving government, consisted of nothing more than a shortage of decaying huts accompanied by the stinging odors of lost treasures in the city landfill, which crowded the backside of their houses. As we were welcomed to the village I could not even force myself to blink. Every inch of space was a Travel Channel special waiting to be unfolded. Being a native of small town Iowa my eyes had never seen such heart wrenching poverty, my heart had never felt such exposure, and my life had never known such rawness.

Though I was introduced to over thirty people, I only met three pairs of tattered shoes, dirty toes peeking through their shabby cloth coverings. The naked children cohabitated their playground with livestock feces and salvaged jewels from their backyard recreational park. It made my heart cry to discover that the small
structures constructed with frames of twigs and covered by spare dingy cloths, backpacks, newspaper (whatever could attempt to enclose the space inside) were the homes of these very children who so gleefully tugged at my crisp, white sleeves. They would motion to my thousand dollar Canon camera to “please ma’am” take a picture of me. The air alone that day covered me with a film I knew I could not be expunged with the fresh soap and clean water at my five star hotel. I came to know a secret that day, a secret that I could never scrape from my brain, and I don’t dare to try.

A single experience can shape your entire life. It can keep you awake at nights questioning, taunting the very soul you claim understands companionate, love, patience, gratitude... An isolated flicker in time, no matter it’s brevity, can shatter the understandings you’ve built in your twenty-one years of life. I received a gift that day from the Narikuravar people that they will never in their lifetime image. I found my one authentic passion in life. I understood myself there more than I ever had before. Away from my high-speed Internet, away from my family and friends, away from all that was familiar to me up to this point of my life. I spent thousands of dollars traveling to India and in the most poverty stricken area of the world I discovered the most important thing. I saw it in the dirty brown faces of the village children, in the unwavering pride of the Narikuravar elders, in my headstrong mentor Risha, and in my bewildered classmates and professor; I saw what I had unknowingly come to India to discover: hope. In this intimate glimpse into the scarcity of life I had found the significance of raw hope, and how that makes all the difference.