

Why is happiness so elusive?

(Spahic Omer)

According to a song in Disney's 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast*, "life is so unnerving for a servant who's not serving."

When I heard this, my reaction was: "What a cute way to recap the whole truth about life - and happiness. How right it is that elements of the truth can be found anywhere and anytime, often when least expected."

It all boils down not to what we actually want, but who actually we are. Our being and status dictate our needs and aspirations. It is not the other way round.

What is happiness?

We have been created with an exalted purpose and for a noble mission. We have been honoured by Almighty Allah who made us His vicegerents on earth.

We are expected to perform at all times accordingly and to achieve things along the lines of our standing and reputation. This leads to self-realization, which is the fulfilment of the potentials latent in one's character or personality.

That inevitably leads to a state of satisfaction and contentment. It provides a deep sense of meaning and gratification. It makes one feel that his most important needs in life are fulfilled. It makes him feel that his life is just what it should be, and that he live it exactly as life should be lived. It makes him "him".

This furthermore creates a state of a total wellbeing, which is synonymous with a good, productive and enjoyable life.

And that is happiness, connoting being truly happy and living a happy life.

In other words, happiness is when man and life, both as Allah's creations, find each other and coexist in a harmonious and reciprocal relationship.

Happiness is when one's being, purpose, thoughts, plans and actions are all consistent, unwavering and in harmony. Happiness is when one is completely in the know and acts - when one knows himself, his life and the Creator.

Similarly, happiness is as much an objective as it is a means. It is as much personal as mutual an experience. It is primarily spiritual in nature, but its power and intensity extend into the intellectual and even physical dimensions of man as well. It encompasses his entire existence.

Thus, it is rightly said that success is not the key to happiness. Rather, it is happiness that is the key to ultimate success.

It goes without saying, therefore, that happiness is a state of the soul, and to a lesser extent, of the mind. It is identifiable with the truth.

Man is created to be happy. Happiness is a heavenly gift. It should be pursued and cherished at all costs.

Happiness is the only genuinely valuable thing in life. Everything else is subjected to it, leading to or serving it.

At the same time, the causes and instruments of happiness are countless and everywhere. They are accessible to everyone. A person

only needs eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind as well as heart to perceive and will. Spiritual blindness, deafness and dumbness are not conducive to happiness. Happiness is the privilege of nobody.

Without happiness, life will be meaningless and worthless. It will be empty and unworthy of its tag. It will be all about gloom and virtual lifelessness.

For example, he who spends his life accumulating material wealth does so believing that material riches will make him happy. Only fools amass wealth for its own sake.

Likewise, he who spends his entire life chasing positions of authority does so reckoning that having authority and occupying high positions will make him happy. Only fools will run after positions regarding them as ends in themselves.

As a Bosnian song goes: "Happiness is not a sack full of money; those who have it, know it."

Loss of happiness

However, despite all this, happiness is the most elusive thing, especially today in the modern age. It is perhaps the most compromised thing, so much so that at times one gets a feeling that in particular as an experiential phenomenon, happiness is in danger of extinction.

The condition is not surprising, though. The modern man lives a life full of paradoxes. Whatever he does denotes essentially the antithesis of what true happiness stands for.

In effect, the modern man's life is artificial and shallow, and so is his happiness. His life is based on ideologies that champion the notions of agnosticism, nihilism and hedonism, all of which are incompatible grounds for authentic happiness.

Happiness only thrives in the company of authentic knowledge, wisdom, truth and ontological meaning and purpose, none of which the modern man can offer in an adequate measure.

Indeed, man is created innocent, pure and in a state inclined to the absolute truth as well as happiness. Man's task is but to stay the course and to constantly work on optimizing his inborn abilities and penchants. That also involves the optimizing of the necessary means and milieus, which is indispensable for achieving the former.

But if he strays from the given path, man's entire life will revolve around fearing the worst and worrying about "what ifs". That will be the case because such man betrayed his primordial self and so, set himself on a collision course with the natural and preordained nature of things and events.

As such, man tries to be what he was not meant to be. He tries to live a life which was not meant for him. In vain he wants to live life according to his own selfish and vested interests, and not according to the will and plan of his Creator and the Creator of life as a whole.

Man spends his entire life fighting a losing battle. The matter in the end takes a toll on his overall wellbeing and contentment. Life in turn becomes a source of unbearable pain and misery, under whatever circumstances. Both man and his life become unreal. They become untrue to themselves. They become fake.

Happiness then becomes an ever-elusive goal. It becomes an anomaly, for there is no happiness for such as have lost orientation and purpose in life. Happiness is so candid and real that it is not in accord with falsehood, uncertainty and pretence.

The situation is exactly as suggested in the mentioned song from the film *Beauty and the Beast*, according to which life is so unnerving (unfortunate and upsetting, that is, unhappy) for a servant (man has

been created only to worship and serve) who's not serving (his Creator and Master, Almighty Allah).

As a simple analogy, an aquatic animal which is supposed to live entirely in the water can never be made happy outside it, regardless of how exceptionally it might be treated; nor can a terrestrial animal which is supposed to live entirely on land be made happy elsewhere, irrespective of how exceptionally it might be treated. "Exceptional treatments" will be the cause of their demise. They all just need to be themselves. They need to be natural.

Happiness as mere flashes and momentary experiences

Happiness then becomes reduced to the mere flashes and momentary experiences of a mental and spiritual ecstasy, thereby exacerbating in the modern man the feelings of existential incompetence, insolvency and failure. The loss of happiness proves thus more calamitous, and the yearnings for it intensify.

That turns the notion of true and permanent happiness into a myth, and the actual life into a series of tragedies. Consequently, life is portrayed as an endless, albeit futile, quest for perfection and ideal happiness.

Those endeavours are featured in some of the major constituents of modern civilization. That is true specifically with reference to the field of the arts, including visual arts, literature and performing arts, on account of art being "the daughter of religion", and because art in many ways represents the truth, and *vice versa*.

In passing, it is noted in the Encyclopaedia Britannica about tragedy that it is used loosely to describe any sort of disaster or misfortune. However, it more precisely refers to "a work of art that probes with high seriousness questions concerning the role of man in the universe."

Hence, for the modern man, the ideas of tragedy, delusion, uncertainty, non-conformity, defiance and "false hopes" are the rule of the day. They are his morals. Having divested himself and his life of all transcendent import and worth, that is the only thing that gives the modern man any sense of existence. That keeps him going, expecting that the truth and with it happiness are out there, somewhere.

The more impregnated with this spirit a component of modern culture and civilization is, the more meaningful and valuable it becomes. Because doubts, untruths, fantasies and fabrications know no bounds, and their authors will stop at nothing in order to express themselves and their cluttered feelings and thoughts, things often appear as beyond the comprehension of most people, including their creators themselves.

As a result, the attainment of happiness, as the most sought-after and the most valuable commodity, suffers most of all. As man becomes more and more unhuman, unsociable, faithless, corrupt and false to himself and the rest of life's realities, happiness in equal measure becomes more and more far-flung and unreachable. It becomes ever-discordant with man's personality and character. It becomes confined to the realm of dreams and fantasies. It becomes an object of art (*objet d'art*) and a plaything in the hands - and minds - of artists, writers, poets, composers, film and television producers.

Instead of being lived to the fullest, happiness becomes only approximated and talked about. Instead of being real, it becomes unreal and theorized about. And instead of being a predominantly objective and absolute, it is transformed into a subjective and relative concept and experience.

Certainly, happiness is more than sheer fleeting moments of elation and rapture, and little flashes of bliss and exultation. It is more than living in the moment, for moments are finite and relative.

Happiness should be a way of life. Indeed, it should be life itself. Those little flashes and short-lived moments of happiness only remind a person of what is out there to be accomplished and harnessed, and what he is actually missing. His happiness is no more than a hint of the real thing.

Industry 1.0, Industry 2.0 and Industry 3.0 - as the three main phases of the industrial and technological revolution, which coincided with the declaring and waging of all sorts of wars against the Heaven and the religious beliefs and values - affected man and his natural environment to such an extent that they in terms of their intrinsic ontological significance and value were placed on life support.

Industry 4.0 - the fourth industrial and technological revolution rooted in digitalization as a new technological phenomenon - is presently unfolding in front of our own eyes. As it stands, despite the prevailing euphoria, it is set to rob man of every remaining spiritual meaning and substance that his shattered being and life may still contain. The new phase might completely destroy the humanness and dignity of man.

In the name of progress and civilization, Industry 4.0 might spell the end of man, earth and the order of nature. It may turn out to be the necropolis of the modern man's last remaining actual senses and consequences. In such a case, happiness will be long gone. It will become the stuff of legend.

At an individual level, man is set lose his self. Collectively, mankind is set to come to a dead end and environmental degradation to become unrepairable. The whole process may become a civilizational suicide.

It is no wonder that the modern materialistic and nihilistic civilization is increasingly seen as an experiment that went horribly wrong. The increasing and multiplying problems of mankind and the earth, many of which are of epic proportions, tell us emphatically why.

Happiness as a sign of success in life

In Islam, happiness is equivalent to the ultimate success in life, both in this world and in the Hereafter. Those who are truly happy definitely succeeded in life, and those who are truly wretched definitely failed in life. Happiness in this world guarantees happiness in the Hereafter, while unhappiness and wretchedness in this world guarantee the same in the Hereafter. Happiness and truth (faith) are twins. Man is created to worship (serve) and be happy.

That is why the Qur'an emphasizes that those who follow the right path will have no fear nor shall they grieve or fall into misery (Ta Ha, 123) - as the antitheses of happiness and contentment. Put another way, Almighty Allah will ensure that they live happy, blissful and consequential lives.

Whereas he who turns away from the heavenly message (from Allah's guidance and reminders), will be given a miserable and meagre (unhappy) life "and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment. He will say: "O my Lord! Why have you raised me up blind while I had sight (before)?" Allah will say: "Just as Our revelation came to you and you played blind; so are you blind today" (Ta Ha, 124-126).

In the same vein, the Qur'an calls those who will be Paradise-bound "the happy ones (that is, those who were happy in this world and thus attained happiness in the Hereafter)", and those who will be Hell-bound "the wretched and unhappy ones (that is, those who were unhappy and wretched in this world and thus attained the same state in the Hereafter)" (Hud 105-108).

Believers are often described as being victorious (and happy) in both worlds, and nonbelievers as being losers (wretched and miserable) in both worlds.

Based on this, Shari'ah or the revealed Islamic law - which is synonymous with Islam as a comprehensive way of life - literally means "the clear and well-trodden path to water". That implies that Shari'ah is the primary source of a Muslim believer's life and his cultural and civilizational consciousness. By extension, it is the source of his entire being and his happiness.

As the heavenly source, Shari'ah is such that a believer always wants more of it. The more he "drinks" from it the more he wants, and the better and more "nourished" he becomes. Shari'ah is the only source that cannot harm man in any way, no matter how much man wanted, "consumed" and used it. It is furthermore boundless and infinite. It is inexhaustible.

In contrast, all alternative sources of man, which he invented as his own substitutes for success and happiness - while anthropomorphizing and rejecting God, and while at the same time deifying man - sooner or later come to the fore as detrimental. They may initially, or partially, seem useful, but in the long run, man is ever-bound to modify his strategies, or to look for other options altogether. And the futile hunt goes on forever.

For example, the modern hedonistic man attempts to derive happiness and enjoyment from excessively engaging himself in physical pleasures only. However, the same courses of action, at the end of the day, prove disastrous for his wellbeing. Thus caught in a vicious circle, man is often killed by his indulgences.

Likewise, certain utopian philosophies and certain more practical socio-political and economic systems were during their times regarded as best models for man's self-realization and his march towards individual and collective happiness. But the same models soon proved defective. Most of them were later rejected and were relegated to a footnote in history. At best, some were assimilated into the newly emerged models, which in turn before long started experiencing the same fate.

As a sage remarked that there are more life models, "gods" and dogmas on earth than people.

The Qur'an alludes to this when it says: "And the parable of an evil word (system or ideology) is that of an evil tree, uprooted from the earth, having no stability" (Ibrahim, 26).

And about believers and their prolific life systems, Allah says: "Do you not see how Allah compares a good word (system or ideology) to a good tree? Its root is firm and its branches reach the sky; it yields its fruits in every season by Allah's leave. Allah cites these examples for men so that they may learn a lesson from them" (Ibrahim, 24-25).

Allah concludes: "Allah will establish in strength those who believe with the Word that stands firm in this world and in the Hereafter; but Allah will leave to stray those who do wrong. Allah does what He wills" (Ibrahim, 27).

Finally, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "Four things are part of happiness: a righteous wife, a spacious abode, a good neighbour and a comfortable mount. And four things are part of misery: a bad wife, a bad neighbour, a bad mount and a small abode" (Sahih Ibn Hibban).

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) either meant some of the important means that cause happiness and misery in both worlds; or he meant some vital aspects of this world's happiness and misery, which in turn can serve as a platform for accomplishing the same in the Hereafter.