

COVID-19: The Importance of Home

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While COVID-19 rages unabated, many countries are adopting total lockdowns as an emergency protocol aimed to combat the spread of the virus. In Malaysia, the government opted for the Movement Control Order (MCO), which is sometimes referred to as the "Malaysian partial lockdown".

Either way, people are instructed but to stay home. Especially medical frontliners, who battle the virus on the ground and head-on, are used to convey the message to the slow-responding public. Their plea is: "We stay here (in hospitals, clinics and other medical establishments, i.e., at work) for you, you stay home for us." Breaching stay-home notices is viewed as an offence and the offenders may be charged in court.

All of a sudden, staying home and away from others became everything. Such became the key to staying healthy - and probably alive. Nobody saw it coming that our future - yet the future of humanity - will depend one day exclusively on the home and on people's staying within its ambit.

Without warning, the future of essentially everything started depending either on staying away from everything, or on modifying everything at once extensively and dramatically. People's chasing of everything suddenly came to a grinding halt, and started hinging upon isolation and doing virtually nothing.

Many people are still in shock. Life may never be the same again. As though not knowing what has really hit them, people are crossing swords with this new reality and are trying to absorb the impact of its many repercussions for their personal lives and life in general.

What is home?

On the face of it, staying only at home for a couple of weeks and being fulltime with family members, should not be such a bad idea - overlooking for a moment the unfortunate economic consequences of the global lockdown. The latter

nevertheless is mitigated somewhat by the fact that many people still can work from home. By the way, at the moment there are about three billion people under lockdown worldwide.

There should be nothing wrong with staying round-the-clock at home and optimizing it as one of the best heavenly gifts to man. A home is not a physical place *per se*. Rather, it is a metaphysical dimension where human feelings, hopes, memories and dreams are created and kept. Home is where the heart is, where mutual love and appreciation thrive, where the most loved ones are, and where our true life stories and identities reside.

It is only then that this blissful dimension is defined and bounded by the considerations of the physical world - as will be seen later when the subject of the relationship between houses and homes is addressed. No wonder that a home is often described as a heaven on earth, for what is applicable to a home, such as love, blessings, happiness, joy, warmth, kindness, safety and security, is also applicable to the Heaven of the Hereafter. Home is where magic happens. It is a private universe.

Indeed, both home and Heaven are places where people want to be and long to stay. The latter is the ultimate goal, the former is its gateway. A journey of tons of goodness towards Heaven starts with a single step and a single deed undertaken at home.

People are suffering

It is an undeniable truth that today most people are stressed out, overworked and tired. They live like machines and behave like robots. They are workaholics, exerting themselves compulsively. In the process, they compromise their friends, families, and mental as well as physical wellbeing. As a result, depression and other emotional and even spiritual disorders are rampant. People are ever more emotionless and icy.

People are lost and confused. They are victims of the many scourges of dismal liberal capitalism. In a heartless world and under soulless conditions, people are turned into insatiable materialists and hedonists. Worshipping material prosperity, living in various cults of money and material goods, performing regular major and minor pilgrimages to shopping havens, malls, supermarkets, and other

shops and stores, idolizing careers and etherealizing workplaces, perceiving work as a "holy" struggle for a "holier" cause - all these factors made man and his life miserable. Chasing the unchasable and dreaming about the undreamable became a norm.

Man thus became alienated from Heaven, nature, people and himself. He has a lot but in reality has nothing. Everything he possesses is a mirage. His status is an inflated and well-marketed illusion. He became stripped of the true meaning of life, family, love, joy, happiness and beauty. Most painfully, man became untrue to himself. He fails to understand that happiness - as the only goal of each and every one of us - is not about things and matter, but about spirit, truth and transcendent value. It is not about having and consuming much, but about needing and enjoying little. It is not about tomorrow and there, but about today and right now, right here.

Differentiating between houses and homes

In this manner, the home, both as a concept and sensory reality, has been seriously undermined and distorted. So much so that the authentic delight and pleasure of home have been consigned to the orbs of fantasy and myth. They have become the leading themes of fairy tales. They are virtually unknown in the contemporary (modern and postmodern) context.

This is so because the ideals and core values of the modern man are not compatible with the ideals and core values traditionally epitomized by homes. Currently, even though on paper signifying what they are supposed to be, homes are mere transits on people's obsessive materialism journeys. Their roles are rendered ancillary and inferior. They play second fiddle to what the modern man actually lives and strives for.

Nowadays hardly anyone speaks about homes as family development centres, or institutions, when the very concept of family has been seriously dented (for example, so perverted are the notions of marriage and gender that people still cannot agree on their respective definitions and scopes). Moreover, hardly anyone speaks about homes as places of intrinsic and sublime values, as well as experiences, when the phenomenon of liberal capitalism, since its inception, declared a war against every genuine value, beauty and purpose. It invaded the spiritual and moral domains, leaving nothing but destruction in its wake.

Standing at the centre of the universe - and the centre of the universe of liberal capitalism - man is perceived as no more than an existential accident and a soulless intelligent animal. His life is meaningless and purposeless. His life struggle is all about self-indulgence and gluttony - like the rest of animals.

As such, homes are conceptualized and furnished only in order to supply man with provisions and resources needed for his narrow existential purpose. Homes are made as mere houses (shelters), whereas houses are not made as homes. The two are rendered synonymous, which is a grave mistake.

Both are primarily reduced to bricks, walls, reinforced concrete, beams, doors, windows, etc. That is, both of them denote that physical outline, or configuration (form), which however is expected to represent and contain something else and to be way more consequential. The form should be a means, not an end in itself. It should comprise a house, not a home. It should be the locus of a home. A home is a house's soul. It gives it a life and sustains it.

It follows that a house is a means; a home is an objective. Houses are built to generate homes. A home is not built; it is engendered, experienced and cherished. An architect designs a house and builds it together with engineers. Then a house owner breeds a home - albeit with much help of the ideas and work put into a house by an architect and structural engineers.

Housing - in the sense of constructing and assigning usages to houses - ought to be a comprehensive phenomenon and a total process of conceiving, designing, planning and building not only houses, but also homes. Needless to say that revising accordingly our architectural education and also warranting active public participation in those processes, are a must. Surely, the procedure of housing is more than it seems. It is more than just constructing houses. A house is a form, contour and function. A home is an experience, emotion and a state of mind.

In passing, this ethos should constitute the soul of every residential, or domestic, architectural narrative. It is the only way to bring architecture closer to the human heart, and to make it alive. It is the only way, furthermore, to help man develop an emotional - yet spiritual - rapport with his residential architecture. It is rightly said in this respect that when our spiritual and emotional bonds with our architecture end, the whole world of architecture ends too.

It is because of all this that homelessness is regarded as one of the greatest predicaments that both individuals and societies have got to face. It is a disease. To individuals it causes anxiety, apathy, indolence and emotional instability. To societies, on the other hand, it causes criminal behaviour, insecurity, decline in morality, and economic unproductivity. While homelessness is a bane, there is no, for obvious reasons, such thing as houseless-ness.

COVID-19 as a potential restorer of values

Although it was regularly the case, yet particularly today many people have houses but are homeless. Because of the misrepresentation of the notion of the home, many modern houses are empty, despite being occupied and brimming with life; they are cold and unfriendly, despite being sizeable, solidly built and fully furnished; they are lifeless and dull, despite being imbued with a lot of investment and life savings; they are unattractive and downright ugly, despite being built according to the approved standards of quality and aesthetics.

In short, today's homes (houses) are soulless, since they have been built, as well as inhabited, by soulless individuals. They contribute to their occupants' depression and stress.

As bad and devastating as COVID-19 is, there still may be some hidden benefits behind it. It may be a wake-up call for human consciousness. In the long run, it may be a restorer of endangered human values. How?

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 Heaven and religious beliefs and values - affected man to such an extent that those beliefs and values were placed on life support.

Industry 4.0 - the fourth industrial and technological revolution rooted in digitalization as a new technological phenomenon, and where the rift between the real and virtual will intensify - is presently unfolding in front of our own eyes. As it stands, the prevailing euphoria notwithstanding, it is set to rob man of every remaining spiritual 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, true happiness, joy, beauty and love will be long gone. They may become but the stuff of legend.

But before Industry 4.0 accomplishes its mission and alienates man from everything truly valuable, man is given another chance. Man still can embark on a mission of introspection and can think over his impending destiny. An ark of salvation can still be built.

All in all, COVID-19 seems to be that opportunity provider. It has shaken man globally and has unsettled his dubious civilizational evolution in a manner hitherto unknown. It is set to trigger a prolonged global recession, which in turn could become a global depression. The setback is not over yet, though. It may yet become an apocalypse of epic proportions.

Echoing his life's penchants and obsessions, the modern man's home is too artificialized and mechanized. One wonders what use such home will have if it is denied internet, TV, phone line, endless gadgets, manmade sources of energy, etc. The answer is: very little, or none. Even with those facilities and services at hand, people still feel trapped at home during the current COVID-19 lockdowns. They are bored and do not know what to do most of the time. Some even feel strangers at their very homes. They are not really the places to be.

Under the circumstances, enjoying the blessings and gift of the home is an extremely improbable and unreasonable a proposition. Perhaps the word "enjoying" should be substituted with the words "tolerating" and "putting up with". As challenging is to try to fully enjoy the permanent company of family members and to try to spend quality time with them, in particular with children, considering their "unique behavioural models and demands". Staying home may thus mean a form of mental torture and fighting for "survival".

Be that as it may, while living in isolation at home as the best way to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, today's man should revisit his life priorities. He should revisit his perceptions of home, family, joy and happiness. Most of all, he should assess his total worldview. He should preoccupy himself for a while with issues as pertain to the truth and values. He should realize that the things he regards as small and unimportant are actually most important in life. They are the pillars of his being. Whenever a crisis strikes, true qualities, values and "friends" step

forward and gain prominence. Scraps, deceit and pretence instantaneously fade away.

Hence, man should understand if his home was his life saviour in a crisis, it could likewise be a saviour of his humanness, self-worth and honour afterwards and at any other time. If it saved his present, if allowed and facilitated, it could also be able to save his future. If it could save individuals and families, together with other social institutions, establishments and centres, it could also save communities, countries, and even the world.

Man should also use the "inconvenience" of isolation at home to rediscover his true intrinsic side, and to forge the most important relationships in life: the relationship with Heaven and the Creator, with nature, people, family and the self. No sooner should that happen, than man will discover and will start enjoying right at home the benefits of such relationships. The truth will start revealing itself.

All of the above will be further able to enhance man's standards and to refine his tastes, enabling him to sharpen focus on future and his role in it. He will start seeing himself as a more productive and more responsible influence. He will become ever-ready to give more to the world and to demand and take less from it.

As part of a new circumstance, man will see that his family members are his best friends and allies in his life endeavours. His home is his best school and training centre. It is an antidote to everything he may psychologically and spiritually suffer from. It is at once a symbol and receptacle of all goodness.

It's a good thing that man can experiment all those boons right on himself and right at his home, being thus the first and immediate beneficiary of their numerous advantages. It follows that nothing is to stand between man and his home. No factors are to be allowed to estrange one from another.

The Qur'an and the house-versus-home dialectics

The Qur'an frequently distinguishes between a house (*bayt*) and a home (*sakan, maskan*). It generally considers the house as a physical shelter, a dwelling, and a family development centre. The home, on the other hand, is the highest consideration and symbol of habitation. On a few occasions, such a distinction between the two terms has been made - mostly indirectly though - that it could be gauged where they as concepts and definite realities converge and where they separate.

The most conspicuous example is in *surah al-Nahl*, verse 80. In it, the Qur'an is explicit that Almighty God granted man *bayt* as a gift, that is, an ability and talent to conceive and construct houses or shelters. However, that is not all, nor is it something really special, in that most animals are presented with a similar gift. For example, the Qur'an affirms that spiders and bees (have been taught as well as instructed by their Creator to) build sophisticated structures as their houses and shelters (*bayt*) (*al-'Ankabut*, 41; *al-Nahl*, 68).

As God's vicegerent on earth who acts due to thinking rather than instinctively, man is expected to do more and better. Thus, the Qur'an states that houses are only a foundation based on which homes (*sakan*), as places of rest and peace, are established. The former facilitates and frames, so to speak, the latter.

That means that having homes (*sakan*) is one of the things that clearly set man apart from animals. Having no home, but having a mere house as a shelter from the elements, is a level of mindless and instinctive animals. Whereas having neither houses nor homes is an outright betrayal of inherent humanness and intelligence.

In Islam, therefore, having a house - which is to be upgraded to a home - is a fundamental human right. Without it, a person can be neither a normal human being, nor a respectable Muslim.

Also, as an aspect of heavenly bliss in *Jannah* (Paradise), people are promised *masakin tayyibah* (pleasant and good residences or homes).

The importance of a home as *sakan* is more encompassing than it seems. As *sakan*, a home serves as a place of relaxation, peace, serenity and happiness. Therein live family members, who are led and guided by the parents. According to the Qur'anic message, the parents find tranquillity and comfort (*sakan*) in each other, enjoying mutual affection and mercy (*al-Rum*, 21), and living as well as interacting as though being clothing for one another (*al-Baqarah*, 187).

In this fashion, the parents live with and raise their children, extending thus their *sakan*, affection and mercy unto them, and turning the whole condition of such a household into an all-inclusive form of *sakan*. That *sakan* - as a home, vibe and life paradigm - is partly divine and partly man-generated.

Ultimately, when for some reason this *sakan* is imperilled, God is likely to interfere and help, as He always does with respect to His faithful servants. And

God often does so by means of sending *sakinah* (tranquillity, confidence and peace of reassurance) upon people and their hearts.

This means that the life of a believer is all about *sakan* (inner together with outer peace, tranquillity and confidence): from the ways his home is instituted and operates, through his overall personal and collective conduct, and to the highest metaphysical planes whence his being and life are painstakingly administered and guarded. *Sakan* on earth stimulates *sakinah* from Heaven.

As a small digression, the Qur'an also calls the habitations and dwellings of ants as *masakin* (al-Naml, 18). This could be so owing to some miraculous and to us still secretive aspects of ants' lives and habitats. Nonetheless, what is known about ants and their colonies is astonishing. Ants are sophisticated social insects. They have complex hierarchical social structures. They thrive in most ecosystems due to their social organization, ability to adapt and modify their habitats, tap resources and defend themselves. Ants are further known as industrious creatures, dedicating their lives to the benefit of their colony. They are some of nature's great architects, building underground metropolises and writing "their architectural plans into the very walls of their buildings, during the construction process". All that could be one of the reasons why ants' habitations the Qur'an calls *masakin* (homes). They certainly deserve to be more than just shelters (*bayt*).

The Prophet Muhammad and the housing of the migrants

The Qur'anic paradigm of house *versus* home was duly applied by the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as part of his development strategies for the nascent city-state of Madinah.

Upon migrating to Madinah, the migrants from Makkah inevitably faced the housing conundrum. Being a migrant himself, the Prophet, too, faced the same problem.

Despite the difficulty in question, no sooner had the Prophet arrived in Madinah, than he mobilized all its capacities and embarked on building his mosque as a community development centre. The project lasted several months.

In the meantime, the issue of housing for the migrants was deferred. As an interim solution, they stayed with their brethren (*ansar* or helpers) in Madinah, sharing with them whatever they had. Only when the mosque was completed were the houses for the migrants planned and built.

It is often articulated that as part of the development of Madinah, building the Prophet's mosque was more pressing an issue than building houses for the migrants, so the former took precedence over the latter.

However, this is a weak and a somewhat misleading interpretation of the events and their pivotal themes. The perspective needs to be changed.

Nothing could supersede the subject of housing for the migrants, including the mosque. While there could always be improvised and temporary alternatives to mosques, there by no means could be adequate substitutes for housing.

When the Prophet arrived in Madinah, he knew more than anybody else the predicaments of the migrants. However, he also knew that the migrants did not need mere houses. In contrast, they needed homes. The Prophet could have immediately built houses for them, but that would not have solved the problem. A better and more sustainable solution was needed.

The migrants might have hastened to acquire houses for themselves. But such would have been at the expense of acquiring homes, because they were in a foreign country in Madinah, having been forced to abandon their earlier homes, properties, family roots, and quite a number of closest family members in Makkah. Thus, providing homes, and not houses, was a priority for the migrants. That exactly was the thing the Prophet had in mind and the natives of Madinah were excited about offering as a solution till the migrants got the houses and homes of their own.

The helpers offered their houses to be shared with their brethren from Makkah. They offered them a genuine home - coupled with their total empathy, heart, love and compassion - which, although transitory in nature, went a long way towards the realization of the Prophet's and Islam's mission in Madinah.

While the mosque was built, the migrants in association with the helpers established and enjoyed their homes. That was a case of people being houseless but not homeless. Upon the completion of the mosque, the houses of the migrants were built next. Their houses served as frameworks for accommodating and further nurturing the already-created feelings and experiences of a home.

In any case, the Prophet took care of the migrants' housing most. But he did so in an exceptionally ingenious and sagacious way. At first, the migrants needed homes, and homes they got. Later, when they needed houses, they also got them.

Meanwhile, the construction of the mosque went on parallel to the provision of homes. The completion of the mosque marked, along with deliberately inducing, a transition from providing homes to providing houses as well.

As a result of this approach, Madinah witnessed a social integration, where everybody was perfectly integrated into the social structure of the city, like none other before and after. It became a lasting epitome of integration, unity, brotherhood, equality and justice.

Parenthetically - as a final point - many contemporary and affluent multicultural countries, to which global immigration is a common thing, regularly admit that their expansive multiculturalism and integration projects are rapidly failing. That happens despite their "sincere" efforts and their providing the migrants with everything they need, such as housing, education, financial aid, and employment opportunities.

That is all true. However, those countries are failing after many decades of trying because they seldom give the migrants their heart, true love, and most genuine empathy. Except in some rare instances, migrants are persistently seen as migrants (refugees), "them" and "others", making them feel anything but at peace and at home. Under such conditions, fully transforming the given houses into personal homes and heavens on earth, where people could treasure a sense of belonging - cultivating homes within - is likewise impossible.