

Hail happiness

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It was a cold December evening in the north. I had just bought myself a pair of leather stiletto shoes that I had been lusting after. Returning home late from work, I walked up the quiet street. Most homes had their doors and windows tightly shut against the cold and there were very few people outside. In the hutments a little away, I could see people huddled around the open fires over which their meagre meals were being cooked.

The sassy clickety click of my shoes on the road was an immensely pleasing sound and I walked happy. Suddenly, from nowhere appeared a street urchin, a little boy of four or five. Driving an imaginary scooter, he buzzed past me in a thin shirt and leggings, his bare feet thumping loud and clear on the cold asphalt. The shame at my own vanity and the embarrassment at not being able to silence the harsh sound of my heels that night has stayed with me to remind that true happiness does not lie in stuff, it lives inside of the heart like it did in that little boy's.

The happiness butterfly flits about teasingly. I wait for it to rest on my favourite music, parties, shopping, 'likes' on Facebook, a gourmet meal, a designer watch, a holiday, but it takes off, proving again and again that true happiness lies within the heart, not in worldly trappings.

Happiness is a choice

Like others of my generation, I too grew up on an overdose of the sad and the melancholy – the films, the songs, the literature. The heroes were drinking themselves to death; the heroines were drowning themselves in pools of their own tears and slashing their wrists. The songs of unrequited love and disillusionment were sweeter than those of hope and joy. Everyone almost wanted their love to not be reciprocated; to remain forever sad and

heartbroken. Sadness was cool. It took years to unlearn that; to believe that the purpose of life is to live in joy — to unleash all the joy we can, not just for ourselves, but for all whose lives we touch.

Being happy needs practice. You cannot keep happiness in safekeeping till the moment you embark on that long-awaited Europe tour. Why not bake that cake, clean the windows, or play with the dog which will make you happy instantly? Then, day by day, moment from moment, happiness to happiness, we move and learn to live in that state. Happiness has to be cultivated and nurtured. Temporary setbacks, failures, lows and mood swings do not stifle a happy heart. A heart that has learnt to be happy will just spring back to its original state. A happy heart is one that embraces and accepts life with all its failings.

Elusive, transient, ephemeral is how happiness is most often described. This is true for momentary emotional states of bliss and joy like pleasant surprises, lucky breaks and other workings of the higher world, but today we know the science behind happiness and understand that a happy state of mind is an acquired art. Self-help books, spiritual gurus, life coaches and psychologists have ready-made formulas for achieving happiness — ‘The Ten Step Guide to Happiness’ and such.

Why do we live from one weekend to another? Why do we have the Monday morning blues and thank God for Fridays? Why do we long for breaks? And forever plan holidays? Because the original state of our mind longs for peace and tranquillity but is beleaguered by unease, discontent and feelings of emptiness. A busy morning is a microcosm of our lives — a razor-nicked chin, a burnt toast, spilled coffee, missed school bus, unscheduled power cut leading to frayed nerves, confusion and tears. This frantic pace of life and the demands of ‘professionalism’ complicate our living so that we are forever gripped with fear and self-doubt, packing more and more activity to stay ahead.

Accomplishment, praise, self-fulfilment contribute to personal happiness but not without the balance it requires in slowing down, accepting oneself, making time for others. A game of squash, a spa visit, a concert, lunch with friends are momentary pleasures that grow into conscious, regular habits of unwinding, leading to a lasting state of contentment and happiness.

Being happy

Good health, friendships, family, faith, charity, fulfilling career are known factors leading to the state of happiness. Dark chocolate and coffee will give you an instant high but try providing for a hungry child’s meals or a poor one’s education; just give a pair of slippers or a warm sweater to a poor kid and it will give you a high for life.

Physical and emotional well-being also contributes to happiness. It has been scientifically proven that exercise releases endorphins that give you a feeling of happiness. Working in the garden livens us up as the soil absorbs our negativity from the fingers. So you know that losing your head over the cobwebs will lead to cortisol build-up and a disgruntled house-help. Pick up the mop yourself, instead.

For me, being happy is also shedding inhibitions and living without regrets. While being wheeled in for a major surgery, the uncertainty of life a stark reality, I thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m going to die without learning to eat with chopsticks or dancing!’ It is my firm belief that people who can sing and dance are happy. Also because I can’t do both. Every time people break into an impromptu jive, I run for cover. So, when the other day, the crowd around the bonfire broke into a random boogie woogie, I slunk into the shadows. Two left feet, my regular excuse, usually works but this adamant woman dancing with abandon and rather badly too, would have none of it. “No one’s looking at your feet!” she said and pulled me into the circle. Once I let myself go, it felt wonderfully liberating. So, happiness to me is also waving out to the kids standing along the railway tracks or calling up my old aunt who I haven’t spoken to in years. It is these moments of unbridled joy that make a life of happiness.

As for wealth being the source of happiness — a rich man near death was sad that he could not take his hard-earned money with him to heaven. So he prayed hard and God decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man got his largest suitcase and filled it with gold bars. He died and arrived at the gates of heaven. St Peter, on seeing the suitcase, said, “Hold on, you can’t bring that in here!” The man explained that he had permission. St Peter checked and said, “You’re right.

You’re allowed one bag, but I’m supposed to check its contents.” He opened the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaimed, “You brought pavement?”

When a parcel from home arrives and you hit a high, you know it isn’t the things really but the love and affection that lies silently folded inside. Happiness is a broad spectrum emotion — from the peace that descends on the 24x7 unswitchable mind on a quiet hill to the powerful feeling of satisfaction on a goal accomplished. It is relative, it is wavering. Robert Frost was spot on when he said, “Happiness makes up in height what it lacks in length.”