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ASIM CHAUDHURI

Aging Could Be a Bliss

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Introduction

Growing old is inevitable, because it is time-dependent, and time doesn't stand still. The ravages of time affect mind and body, the reason aging is generally feared. On the other hand, how we decide to age is a choice we can all make, by stopping to align ourselves with time-based constructs. We mortals view time differently, because, in the back of our minds, we are constantly reminded of our transient existence in this world. We need to view life as a continuum, with no beginning and no end; we only stop along the way to change garments. Here we are not talking about those who are at the end-of-life stage, although research findings suggest that the experience of dying may be more pleasant than what many people believe; bliss here takes an entirely different meaning.¹

This article sees aging not as an affliction, not synonymous with getting sick, but as a deliberate choice to tap into our inner strength, experience, spirituality, mindfulness, creativity, embrace of solitude—despite life's unavoidable stresses, including loss of health. Aging could be a bliss, but we must try to make it one with constant effort. It is interesting to note that in the alloy world 'aging' takes an altogether different meaning, it is a process to strengthen some alloys, ironically.

What is bliss anyway?

Cambridge, Oxford, and Merriam-Webster, all three dictionaries define bliss as 'perfect happiness'. But defining bliss this way

leaves a lot of things to be desired, because what we call happiness, or perfect happiness, is related to the mind and material things of external world. Bliss, on the other hand, is an experience pertaining to the soul, going beyond mind and intellect. In Hindu scripture, bliss has a very special meaning. In a spiritual context, bliss, or *Ananda*, is an eternal aspect of Brahman which we experience when we are united with Him. It is firmly embedded in the expression *Sat-Chit-Ananda*, or Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, to denote Brahman. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* elaborates on this concept, explaining that true happiness is not dependent on external stimuli but is an intrinsic quality of the Self.

But we will not get into the nuanced definition, as that is not the objective of this article. We shall go with the common dictionary definition: bliss means supreme happiness or joy. If someone wants to associate it with the joys of heaven or heaven itself, which is termed 'eternal bliss' or 'heavenly bliss', he is welcome to do that. But this article doesn't get into that sublime level of spirituality where one completely surrenders to God and enjoys heavenly bliss on earth, because that level of spirituality is beyond the reach of most people.

Follow your Bliss

Joseph Campbell's (1904-1987) aphorism 'Follow Your Bliss', though he introduced the phrase in the 1970s, became a catchphrase after his PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) interview with Bill Moyers in 1985, these

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interviews aired later being titled as ‘The Power of Myth’. What Campbell really means by that catchphrase is that it offers a path to happiness, joy, understanding the meaning of life, positive psychology, and self-awareness. He acknowledged the contribution of Hindu scriptures to his idea thus:

I came to this idea of bliss because in Sanskrit, which is the great spiritual language of the world, there are three terms that represent the brink, the jumping-off place to the ocean of transcendence: *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. The word ‘Sat’ means being. ‘Chit’ means consciousness. ‘Ananda’ means bliss or rapture. I thought, ‘I don’t know whether my consciousness is proper consciousness or not; I don’t know whether what I know of my being is my proper being or not; but I do know where my rapture is. So let me hang on to rapture, and that will bring me both my consciousness and my being.’²

He further added:

If you do follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.³

What he is essentially saying, which is also shown by research, is that when people enjoy what they are doing, they do more of it, and unexpected help seems to appear from nowhere. And that’s what ‘bliss’ really is. It is all about doing what you love, doing what you really enjoy doing.

Happiness comes with age

In this article’s context, it is relevant to discuss the excellent book by journalist Jonathan Rauch titled, *The Happiness Curve*:

Why Life Gets Better After 50. Rauch will be the first to admit that this is the general trend, but may not be universally applicable. He expressed that sentiment saying:

I am not promising bliss in your eighties. As always, the motto of this book is: Your mileage may vary. Just as there is no guarantee of having a midlife slump, there is no guarantee of having a late-life upswing. We are talking about tendencies. The river has regular undercurrents, but no two voyages are alike.⁴

In pages 112 to 137 of his book, Rauch discusses ‘The Paradox of aging—Why getting old makes you happier’; his comments are not cited here individually. It is interesting to note that almost throughout his book, and particularly in these pages, he acknowledged the research of Dr Laura Carstensen, who we’ll visit later in the article.

In those pages, Rauch posits that stress declines after about age fifty. Stress noticeably goes up in the twenties and keeps on rising for the thirties and forties, and then starts dropping from there until it goes below twenties level in the fifties—and then drops further. Emotional regulation improves with age according to him, and reduction of stress reduces the incidence of depression compared to younger adults. Moreover, aged people become more skilled in managing depression. He does not imply that being frail or infirm makes people happy, but older people accept it more readily, and remain surprisingly happy despite their poor health.

In its November 2015 issue, the *Scientific American* reports:

In a classic 1995 study, for example, scientists at Fordham University categorized more than 32,000 Americans in age groups and found that 38 percent of seniors, aged 68 to 77, reported being ‘very happy’, whereas younger groups were significantly less likely to report such positive feelings. In a study

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this year involving more than 10,000 Danes aged 45 and older, researchers at the University of Southern Denmark found that although seniors were considerably less healthy than younger adults, they were at least as happy.⁵

Famous longevity and aging expert Laura Carstensen of Stanford University contends, reinforcing Rauch's theory, that most older people are happier than their younger counterparts. She writes: 'People over the age of sixty-five have the most stable and optimistic outlook of all adults. They have the lowest rate of depression. Most older people are relatively happy. They're active and live quite successfully on their own, not in nursing homes.'⁶ Founding Director of Stanford Center on Longevity, Carstensen further adds: 'Older people have reassurances that the twentysomethings do not; they have already made their major life choices, and they worry less about what others think of them... they're more selective about whose opinions matter, handpicking only a few to esteem, rather than fretting about how they are perceived by everyone they encounter.'⁷

Here she is talking about the American society, most Indians probably aren't much different, leaning more toward religion and spirituality as they age.

Healthy aging can contribute to the bliss

Healthy aging means adopting healthy habits and making some positive lifestyle choices that contribute to overall well-being as we age. *This can start early on in life, and it should, resulting in the postponement or reduction in the undesirable effects of aging.* One thing, however, we should not forget is that to profit from positivity effects in old age, one needs good cognitive resources.

There are three types of age: chronologic, biologic, and psychologic. The first one is

based solely on calendar years. The second one is based on the changes in the body as people age; the change happens early with some people—late with some. These two are natural processes and not germane to our discussion. With the third one, the psychological age, is associated the concept of bliss because how one acts and feels as they age contribute substantially to one's happiness. An 85-year-old who works and plans to follow his passion, looks forward to meaningful events in the future, cultivates resilience countering any negativity, and enjoys all activities with happiness and joy, will be considered following his bliss. This means aging can be a bliss if one intends to make it.

Embracing solitude with open arms is a part of the bliss

It is Henry David Thoreau who said the famous words about solitude, 'I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.'⁸ Thoreau loved to be alone, but not in loneliness.

An often-overlooked factor that may influence whether solitude is viewed as an asset or liability is how people frame the term—how they think about solitude. The beneficence of solitude will only emerge when people reframe solitude as an experience that can enhance their happiness and well-being by learning to enjoy their own company, an opportunity to connect with themselves and nature. It is about blotting out any exterior voice, so that you can listen to the voice of nature and of your own. Happiness then becomes loving the person you are alone with—that is yourself.

Some of the important benefits of embracing solitude can be summarized as:

It enables self-reflection: When we're left with ourselves, we finally have a chance to think without having to deal with interruptions.

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It reduces stress: Spending time alone can reduce stress and anxiety, giving the mind a chance to rest and relax, and introspect.

It takes the social pressure off: Socializing often comes with its unique pressure and expectations, such as trying to make conversation or worrying about what others think.

It promotes independence: Spending time alone helps us get comfortable with ourselves. We start to realize that to feel happy, entertained, or complete, we don't always need others.

It sparks creativity: Solitude can spark that 'aha' moment without diluting our own ideas with other people's opinions or distractions.⁹

All these benefits lead to finding happiness and joy in your own company. That is what Thoreau was referring to.

There has been an article in a different context, contrasting loneliness and solitude, where is emphasized the benefit of spending time in nature—alone—enjoying a hike in the trail, watching the flowers in bloom, and listening to the birds chirping, that fills one's heart with sheer joy, and is good for mental health.¹⁰

The article also discusses how to transition from loneliness to solitude, and how contemplation on God can help in that transition. The positive feeling derived from spending time in nature is exemplified by William Wordsworth's (1770-1850) poem 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' that most of us read in high school. It is sometimes titled 'The Daffodils'. The first and the last stanzas are quoted below:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

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For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth here deftly expresses the wealth that scene has brought to his heart, and how this scene of the yellow carpet of daffodils fills his heart with pleasure and a 'bliss of solitude' when in a 'vacant or in pensive mood'. With age will come wisdom, and the bliss of solitude 'will flash upon that inward eye' that a high school student may not experience. Here the poet refers to the profound joy and transcendence found in quiet contemplation of nature's beauty. So can we.

It may be interesting here to learn that in Netherlands, the art of switching off, being idle, and taking time for oneself without any particular purpose, is called 'Niksen', which in Dutch means 'doing nothing'. It caught the attention of the world in 2019, as it may help decrease anxiety, bring creativity to the surface, and boost productivity—thus avoiding burnout. It involves taking time to sit quietly and observe the surrounding environment, listen to music, or enjoy a leisurely walk. The art can be adopted during the normal process of aging.

Can happiness and suffering coexist?

Suffering from various afflictions is normal with aging. According to National Council on Aging research, nearly 95% of adults 60 and older have at least one chronic condition, while nearly 80% have two or more. Happiness experienced by such sufferers seems counterintuitive. And there lies the second paradox: It has been found that people aging with a chronic illness can not

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only experience happiness and joy despite their illness, but also as a consequence of it. From the perspective of medical anthropology and disability studies, Silke Hoppe of University of Amsterdam, in her article ‘Chronic Illness as a Source of Happiness Paradox or Perfectly Normal’, concludes:

This study has sought to question the assumptions underlying the disability paradox and demonstrate that such a paradox represents non-disabled people’s judgment of the quality of life of people with a disability. The paradox is essentially problematic not only because it ignores the perspective of people with a disability themselves, but also because people living with a chronic illness or disability are seen as having a low quality of life. Using empirical examples of people who have been diagnosed with MS [Multiple Sclerosis] this study has argued that happiness and disability are not mutually exclusive phenomena, but coexistent states of being where people can indeed experience happiness in spite of illness, or through illness.¹¹

The study is essentially saying that we usually assume that suffering is inherently incompatible with joy, but it is the view of external observers, not of the sufferers. It is very possible that the sufferers experience happiness and joy from their successful ability to deal with their condition by deriving pleasure from other parts of their lives. It is

the wisdom they acquire with age that allows them to do this, as they realize that happiness comes from being less associated with money, status, possessions, or validation of their views by others. It could also come from changing their focus to God, spirituality, and nature, discussed earlier in the section about embracing solitude, where they will find a form of happiness that can transcend suffering. They develop an attitude of determination to focus on what mattered in the present moment—thus cultivating resilience, appreciation, and gratitude.

Concluding remarks

There are, however, impediments to having an old-age-bliss. Some are within the person’s control, some are not. The major one belonging to the first category is lethargy, plain laziness, neglecting self-care, not taking positive action in one’s life and failing to pursue the activities, decisions or passions that bring happiness and joy. Holding onto grudges and past betrayals can also drain one emotionally and robs him or her of happiness—forgiveness then is divine and can lead to a joy-filled life and well-being. Serious cognitive decline when the person loses the ability to communicate, unable to eat, drink, or swallow, loses awareness of what’s happening around him, etc., falls under the second category. ■

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