**Happiness in Difficult Times**

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Happiness has long been declared as an elusive state of being which cannot be necessarily followed or deliberately attained. The traditional approach towards happiness and the several factors that might lead a person to be happy has a philosophical and abstract description of happiness. It maintains the idea that contentment and peace of mind are something that can only find a person once the subject lets go of the chase. This method of explaining happiness, though sufficiently explanatory, lacks objectivity. The idea of happiness now popularly discussed and officialized goes vehemently against the orthodox perception and categorically identifies the various prerequisites that are supposed to create happiness. It gives an optimistic outlook towards happiness for those suffering from situations with an acute lack of joy or mental well-being because it demotes happiness from its previously held position of an unattainable nonconcrete phenomenon. It simply declares happiness or the lack of it as a chemical or hormonal variation which can be realistically achieved when certain real criteria are fulfilled. The current definition is therefore more favorable when discussing happiness and what may cause a person to have it or lose it.

Out of the many commonly believed triggers of happiness, a healthy relationship with family and community is an obvious serious contender. The environmental factors around a person, when combined with their biological or genetic makeup, completes the picture and decides the direction in which the hormonal scale will tip. Both nature and nurture combine their equally significant role which creates a scenario where a person is supposed to be chronically happy or sad. Family plays a vital role on both of these levels. The inherited characteristics can be positively or negatively reinforced by relationships that shape the social life of a person. Family and community form the frontline of the social framework of a person and therefore become integral to the equation which will result in the conclusion on whether the person will be happy or not.

Out of the films chosen for this unit, the one that decisively stands out in a quest for happiness in difficult times is Precious. The circumstances which define a sixteen-year-old Precious’ life cannot be covered with a blanket term like miserable or desperate. Constant sexual abuse from her own stepfather has resulted in a second pregnancy which Precious completes to term to give birth to a son. The fact that her own biological mother would not care enough to protect her from persistent sexual abuse and instead rebuke her for revealing the abuse to her teacher is very telling of her relationship with her family. The mother does not keep a child with Down Syndrome but pretends to in order to receive benefits. Her total detachment from her children and from any sane reality of the world climaxes when she declares the abuse to be Precious’ fault and blamed her for ‘stealing her man’. This is an obvious testament to her own mental instability. Why happiness or joy has eluded Precious is therefore reinforced in the form of the state of her biological parent. Its translation into a warped familial relationship with both her mother and her stepfather further becomes the reason why Precious cannot find happiness. Her community at the school is also shown as hostile as they blame her for her teen pregnancy which is a result of abuse.

Precious is shown to cope with the circumstances by daydreaming and imagining scenarios in which she is loved and appreciated. The coping mechanism, although unhealthy, keeps her going until an external factor in the form of an inspirational teacher becomes the one member of her community to gift her with a light at the end of the tunnel. This teacher gives Precious refuge when she finally musters the courage needed to run away from her abusive home taking her very young son with her. Even when under the influence of her abusive mother and while giving birth to her second child resulting from sexual abuse at home, Precious is shown to develop romantic feelings for the nursing assistant who caters to her. This is a portrayal of locating happiness and joy even in blatantly dark times. Another positive influence from the community arrives in the form of the social worker who becomes the reason why Precious takes away both her children and finally lets go of any hopes of having a relationship with her own mother. This conversion of difficulty and unhappiness into optimism has been done with the courage and emotional strength that Precious mustered because of the support she eventually received from her community.

Another film which perfectly captures the essence of searching for and eventually locating happiness in difficult times was Real Women Have Curves. Difficult familial relationships created tension and emotional strain on the protagonist in this film as well. An emotionally abusive and manipulative mother was forcing Ana to forfeit her dreams of attending university just so she could stay and work for the family owned business. The mother’s mental shortcomings are shown and confirmed at various points in the film. The entire scenario with the manipulation that asks Ana to put her family’s interests first results in despair leading to Ana missing deadlines. The support from family and community needed to turn the emotional mess around comes into the scene here when Ana’s father and her teacher openly and vocally support Ana’s ambitions. Ana’s sister and her efforts towards convincing their mother to let Ana go are also a testament to familial support bringing positive emotional change leading Ana to apply for a place in the university she wants to attend. The gesture by Ana where she convinces her father to loan money to Ana’s sister for the business also depicts how familial relationships work in reciprocation and how these relationships become emotional strength and support for both the involved parties. The scene where women at the factory remove their clothes and compare bodily ‘flaws’ to the clear disgust of Ana’s mother is a powerful reminder of resilience in difficult times. Ana persists because of support from her father and her teacher. It eventually becomes the reason why her desperate situation of unhappiness turns into happiness as she achieves not only a position at the university but with a scholarship. Optimism and glee after letting go of negative familial influence and embracing positive familial and communal support is the note at which the film ends.

Barbershop is also a commentary on community and the relationships that people may forge with each other in order to receive and reciprocate emotional support. Calvin rethinks about his decision of selling the barbershop because of the community and how it benefits from the work he does and the role he plays. The impossible situation he is later put in due to money and the false criminal charges on his barber are all there only because Calvin chose community over his previously held dream of making a lot of money very quickly. The simple fact that he is coming to terms with telling his workers that the shop has been sold and is obviously unhappy or depressed but yet chooses to spend all his money to bail out his barber is a spectacular depiction of what community means. He chooses to help his friend with the money he desperately needs and that is how he copes with his unhappiness. This is followed by a positive string of events where Ricky is converted from a life of crime towards a better alternative and the confrontation that they are saved from by the police. Helping each other in difficult times therefore keeps both the protagonists afloat until the good in life finds them and they are rewarded for returning the ATM. They hence convert an almost impossible situation into one with joy and bliss by simply being there for each other.

Families are therefore changing and evolving. This is coupled by the fact that all families act or behave differently with very varying dynamics to define the personal relationships. Happiness still depends heavily on how these relationships rest and what they turn into in the long run. If the emotional strength that a person draws from their family is constant and unflinching, searching for happiness is easier. The more difficult family and community are in coping, the steeper the climb towards happiness becomes. We must also let go of the concept that happiness is a state of being which once achieved is perpetual. Like everything else, it is transient and can be lost and re-attained. This constant process has to be identified and appreciated in order to properly understand it. These films depict all these ideas perfectly. The approach of looking for a distraction when unhappy relates to Shirley Temple and what she represented. The idea of how a smiling child was apparently supposed to make a nation forget about their economic sorrows is not the ideal way of seeking happiness. The films contradict the idea of distractions and escape but builds the concept of achieving happiness on real, human relationships with people from the family and the community. Every capitalist escape from misery or any transient distraction which is successful on a large scale can therefore be called a Shirley Temple equivalent of today.