What is happiness? by Paulo Coelho

This is a question that has not bothered me for a long time, precisely because I don't know how to answer it.

I am not the only one. Through all these years I have lived with all sorts of people: rich and poor, powerful and mediocre. In the eyes of all who have crossed my path – and here I include warriors and wise men, people who should have nothing to complain about - I have always found that there was something missing.

Some people seem to be happy: they just do not think about it. Others make plans: "I'm going to have a husband, a home, two children, and a house in the country". While this keeps them occupied, they are like bulls looking for the bullfighter: they don't think, they just keep moving forward. They manage to get their car - sometimes even a Ferrari – and they think that the meaning of life lies there, so they never ask the question. Yet, despite all that, their eyes betray a sadness that they themselves are quite unaware of.

I don't know if everyone is unhappy. I do know that people are always busy: working overtime, looking after the kids, the husband, the career, the university degree, what to do tomorrow, what they need to buy, whatever it is they need to have in order not to feel inferior, and so on.

Few people have ever told me: "I'm unhappy." Most say: "I'm fine, I've managed to get all I ever wanted." So then I ask: "What makes you happy?" They answer: "I have everything that a person can dream of – a family, a home, work, good health." I ask again: "Have you ever stopped to wonder if that is all there is to life?" They answer: "Yes, that's all there is." I insist: "So the meaning of life is work, the family, children who grow up and leave you, a wife or husband who will become more like a friend than a true love-mate. And one day the work will come to an end. What will you do when that happens?" They answer: there is no answer. They change the subject.

But there is always something hidden there: the owner of a firm who has still to close the deal he has always dreamed of, the housewife who would like to have more independence or more money, the new graduate who wonders whether he has chosen his career or has had it chosen for him, the dentist who wanted to be a singer, the singer who wanted to be a politician, the politician who wanted to be a writer, and the writer who wanted to be a peasant.

In this street where I am sitting writing this column, looking at the people passing by, I bet that everyone is feeling the same thing. That elegant woman who has just walked by spends her days trying to stop time, controlling the bathroom scales, because she thinks love depends on that. On the other side of the street I see a couple with two children. They live moments of intense happiness when they go out with their kids, but at the same time their subconscious is busy thinking about the job they might not get, the tragedies that might occur, how to get over them, how to protect themselves from the world.

I leaf through magazines filled with famous people: everybody laughing, everybody very happy. But since this is a segment of society that I am quite familiar with, I know it is not like that: everyone is laughing or enjoying themselves at the moment that photo is taken, but at night, or in the morning, the story is always quite different. "What can I do to keep on appearing in the magazine?", "how can I disguise not having enough money to afford all this luxury?"

To end, I recall the words of Jorge Luis Borges: "I will not be happy any more, but that doesn't matter, there are many other things in this world."

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