

# The complexity of simplicity

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

RECENTLY, I have been reflecting on the act of giving gifts. My thoughts were partially triggered by the frenzied shopping sprees

choice often veers toward what my friends would value most. For example, sometimes, sharing a cup of coffee, a work of art, a song or even the transcendent beauty of nature with a loved one can be more gratifying than receiving a material object purchased from a prestigious store.

Whenever I am wrestling with

the fragrance of a perfume still fills me with joy and happiness. It was a shared experience between the giver and the recipient—with an element of surprise infused into it!

Unfortunately, today unfettered consumerism has attained a level of unquestioned acceptability. We routinely receive blatant emails

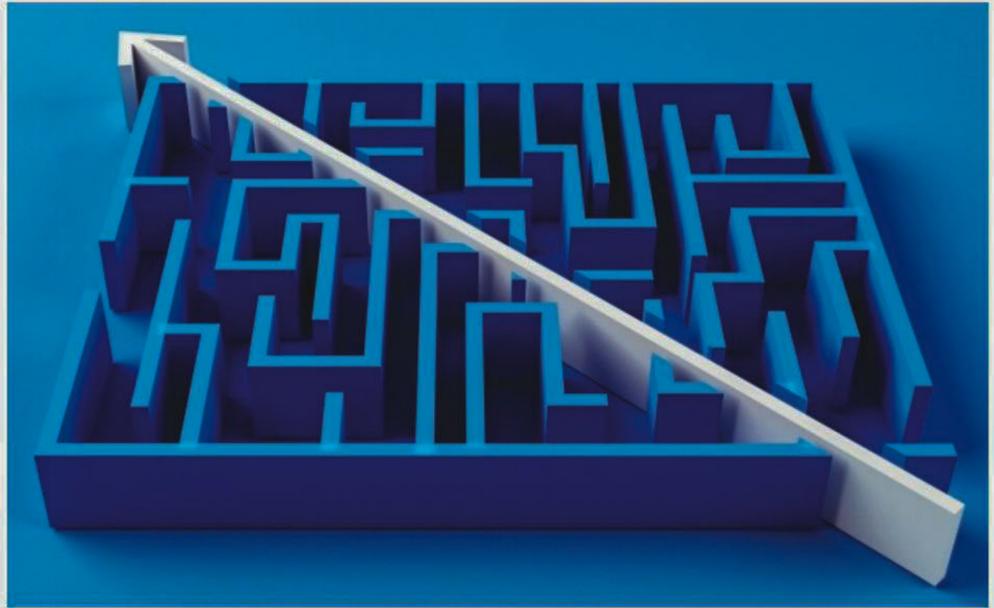
this wasteful materialism with the unfulfilled basic needs of the millions of disadvantaged people I feel a deep sense of guilt and shame. Fortunately, many people are now reacting to the staggering income inequities of our world and asking that gifts be channelled as donations for deserving causes. Hopefully this

melody of the popular Christmas carol "Little Drummer Boy", I had a kind of epiphany. The song narrates the story of a drummer boy who is invited by the magi to visit baby Jesus. The poor boy has no gift for the newborn. He decides to play his drum to honour him, but is unsure of the value of his gift. A smile lights up Jesus's face—reassuring the drummer boy that his gift is precious since it is from the heart. The carol with its resonating drumbeats and haunting melody has a hypnotic quality. But listening to it in the midst of the Christmas bustle, I was reminded of the disconnect between the spiritual message of Christ's humble birth and the unfettered materialism that marks the celebration of his birthday each year. The lavish window displays tempting shoppers toward overindulgence seemed insensitive and appalling. Yet the beautiful ambience created by the music, the colourful decorations and the laughter of children looking forward to a season of loving and giving overwhelmed me...Yes, difficult as it may be, we have learnt to live with the discord between our simultaneous loving and loathing of capitalism. A system with its brazen allure of wealth and status, but which also permits one to optimise life's opportunities.

Interestingly, every sage in history has propagated the mantra of frugal simplicity as the path to real happiness. And yet one wonders why we haven't embraced it as the ultimate way of life... Perhaps, living a simple life isn't so simple after all?

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

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I witnessed during the Christmas season in the United States. They are a shocking reminder that rampant consumerism has replaced the finer instincts of the giving process. We in the East are also not totally immune from this malaise that dominates most urban societies. The array and choice of gifts may be different, but the competitive exchange of material items is as much a trend in this part of the world as in the west.

Lest I sound like Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, let me clarify that I do believe that giving a gift is a beautiful gesture of goodwill toward a fellow being. It certainly helps nurture friendships, strengthens relationships and cultivates a sense of sharing. As much as I lament the excesses of today's consumer-oriented society, I must admit that I simultaneously partake in it. However, I find two particular aspects of the gift giving process rather discomfiting. The first is the element of competition that appears to have crept into our "gift purchase" decisions—some people seem to be focused on upstaging others by gifting expensive items or pitching gifts according to the recipient's income level. The other disturbing trend is that gifts are often chosen with minimum thought and care and the process ends up becoming a task accomplished on a list of "things-to-do". Personally, my

social dilemmas my inner compass turns to the halcyon days of my childhood and youth. I can vividly recall the sheer simplicity and utter joy of giving and receiving gifts on occasions like Eid, marriages and other celebrations. The memory of opening the packets and feasting on the colour and texture of a dress or a sari or

about wedding registries that include gift options ranging from bed linen to kitchen appliances. The most shocking was a list of honeymoon items: airfare, hotel, meals and even "massage for two". Obviously, maximising economic returns from gifts has become the new priority!

I must admit that when I contrast

movement will gather momentum and become a social norm.

Let me revert to my reflections on the commodification of gift giving – a phenomenon that we observe each year in the US during the holiday season. This December, while strolling in the neighbourhood mall, drowned in the beautiful

# The quirks and perks of getting old

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

AGING and quirks are like Siamese twins and seldom be separated. This is why as you grow older you will inadvertently acquire a good

diligently reading. The tendency to talk more and listen less (not at all if possible) is yet another curious trait that accentuates as one ages. You want everyone to know the details of your crazy, convoluted dream – even while you pause to figure out whether it was a porcupine or a hedgehog that was trying to attack you as you were retrieving your documents from the secret cave in the garden. But when someone pipes in to relate his

you hit your 40s and 50s. At parties you will confidently address people by the wrong name hence the entire conversation will be a dialogue of cryptic phrases until of course, the horror of realisation will dawn upon you and you will quickly scuttle away. At this stage of your life it is wise not to even bother trying to remember names of children of your friends and relatives – just be bold and ask them – they expect you to not remember.

hiding in the corner as you pass, you have probably overdone the imparting of the pearls of knowledge and it is time to look for other unwitting victims. The biggest drawback about aging however is that while your body has fully embraced it and is busy making the necessary compromises and protests, your brain just refuses to let go of those 'groovy' times when you had too much hair and an 18 inch waist. You immerse yourself in denial

and on the laps of strangers, the age deniers think that wearing bright (read garish) coloured clothes and makeup will hide the sagging skin, double chin and standard belly fat that keep up as you acquire more years. But the real quirkiness starts when you decide you will take up 'youthful activities' without going through the pain of getting physically fit. At an age when any sudden movement could result in muscle pull or bone breakage, some of us decide we can will ourselves to be youthful and take on unnecessary, deadly challenges such as dancing like a maniac all night with twenty-somethings at a New Year's party.

The good news is that while aging can bring out the grouch in you for most of your wakeful hours, there is something to look forward to. After you have crossed middle-age which is the puberty of old age and hence traumatic, hormonally chaotic and crisis-ridden, you will reach the stage when there is no need to hide your age anymore. Birthdays will no longer be an occasion of dread and depression. Younger people will treat you like a piece of papyrus which can disintegrate with the slightest pressure. In fact you will be proudly announcing your age to all and sundry. As for quirks like being repetitive, forgetful and cranky – you are now officially entitled to have them without any guilt or shame. What's more, most of the time you will be blissfully unaware of them since you have now acquired diplomatic immunity that prevents people from openly declaring what an insufferable old bat you have become.

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crankiness and a bucketful of eccentricities that the young (and cruel) will snicker about behind your back. One particularly painful characteristic (quirk sounds a little patronising which is the last thing we, the aging, will tolerate) is the growing lack of patience one has for 'nonsense'. You may be walking, talking and thinking in slow motion yourself, but you just can't stand it when the tea comes a few minutes late and that too tepid and uninspiring, when you can't tear off that darn plastic seal from the water bottle, when the waiter speaks some hybrid version of the English language to explain how delicious the fish-chicken-egg fusion item is but no sorry Saar/Mam' there is no coffee because the machine is broken and worse of all, when the cocky sales person 'advises' you on which garment to buy because it is the hottest selling item (everybody is buying it, another off putting phrase).

Perhaps it's because we feel we have too little time left hence the let's-get-on-with-it-shall-we that makes it mandatory to have subtitles for films in languages we know – although it is rather irritating when you practically miss most of the visuals while



near death experience in the Sundarbans involving a rare wild cat species you either zone out or talk about your own near-death experience while eating a spring roll. Forgetfulness of course, will be exponentially multiplied as you age. If you suffered from short term amnesia since childhood, especially at exam times, be sure that you will be a regular Rip Van Winkle by the time

That is the beauty of aging. You are now in a position of being able to finally speak your mind without any shame whatsoever. You feel entitled to express your opinion – about everything and anything. You will advise till the recipients of these words of wisdom will cower with dread but who cares – you have tons of experience so they jolly well better listen. If you notice people avoiding eye contact or

and all kinds of products and procedures that promise to 'defy' aging, 'bring out the hidden youthfulness of your skin', take off pounds of cellulite to look like a young thing again or give you back the lustrous tresses of your youth. It is a little frightening the lengths to which women and men will go to look younger. Apart from hair implants and toupees that often get dislocated and

QUOTABLE Quote

ALBERT EINSTEIN  
GERMAN-BORN THEORETICAL PHYSICIST

Wisdom is not a product of schooling but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- NFL team
- Hackneyed
- Wise saying
- Ocean's motions
- Like Loki
- Christmas helpers
- Catch some z's
- Ram's mate
- Ra, e.g.
- Fiber source
- Winter song
- How somestocks are sold
- Winter song
- Pleads
- Checked out
- Drop back
- Male turkey
- Crew need
- "Tomorrow" singer
- Higher than
- Mall business
- Ohio city
- Forum garb
- Dick Tracy's love

DOWN

- Singer Joplin
- Bible book
- Albania's capital
- Urgent call
- Flight part
- "Don't open -- Xmas"
- Adjective modifier
- Tolerance
- German steel city
- "Amahl and the Night Visitors" composer
- Get comfortable with
- Pesky swarm
- Farm sights
- Player at first, e.g.
- Crude shed
- Seasonal quaff
- "Becket" actor
- Makes rugs
- Detonation
- Getup
- Course needs
- Radio's Glass
- Drill need

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

M	A	G	M	A	P	A	T	H	S
E	R	R	O	R	A	S	H	E	N
S	T	A	B	S	S	H	E	R	A
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott