

For the Foundation of Ethics

The Moral Dilemma of Living

I've tried to write a proper essay on this dilemma I face so often lately. I've written it about a dozen times, taking a new approach each time, on why living life is so hard, why it feels so pointless. I am constantly asking myself what is the point of living our lives- What does it mean to live? And it seeps into every aspect of my life, every point of my being. Why I do the things that I do, feel the things that I feel, the way that I am. Time is relentlessly rushing past me, I can't stop it, I can't catch it, it moves slow like honey, then faster than the wind rushing past me. The answers feel so simple, they're right there. I turn all over to understand them- the music I listen to, the books I read, the moments of silence, the *Qur'aan* I recite in my prayers, between the *Bismallah* and the *Sadakah Allah Al Azeem*. I try to find it between the clouds, in the snow, in long deep breaths.

Because every Muslim knows that the *Dunya* was made to be enjoyed in wholehearted moderation and religion was meant to be loved in whole hearted moderation, and life was meant to happen with whole hearted joy, sadness, and hope. That we should be good people, happy people, tender people, content people, with a moderate, wholehearted ambition. But still, I wonder why- why do I have to live my life? And my chest feels so empty, and I can't think anymore. My head is so empty. My chest feels so empty. I find joy in the snow when everyone around me hates it, I sit in the cold, even when I'm shaking. And I just wonder why: why we were given the world to enjoy, and why we love, and why we hate, and if I'm capable of being worth anyone's time. I wonder why we do all the right things or the wrong things or the things in between.

If life is about mistakes, why do we hate mistakes?

If we're meant to enjoy life, why does it hurt so often?

If the world isn't ending, why does it always feel like it is?

And if we can't stop bad things from happening, why do we still try to stop them? Give charity, plan marches, use our voices to lend to those who can't, offer our hearts to those in grief? Why do we do these things? Why do we keep trying?

All the right things end up being the wrong things.

I love too much; I get taken advantage of. I cut out all the people who take advantage of me, I feel so alone. I take care of my skin, I eat my favorite foods, I drink too much coffee, I try to workout, and still, I wonder if it matters when we're alone, when we're not sure if we're worth the time, we're not sure if it's better to just do the wrong things. And what if we do the wrong things? Does it really feel better that way? Doesn't it still hurt that way?

Because I'm the oldest daughter, and the oldest granddaughter, and the oldest child in my family, and I'm trapped by the expectations that come with that, I carry the burdens and the traumas that were passed down to me. I carry the stories of all the good things and the bad things. I follow the paths of my family, back to Palestine and how they landed here. Of my grandfather fleeing Palestine, of his brother finding their dead grandmother, of my mom who lived in Jordan, of my dad who fell in love with her picture and somehow they made it work. Of growing up as my parents grew up, because they were just kids. I'm trapped by knowing all the hurt my grandparents caused their kids, and all the hurt that my parents cause me.

I love my family; I want to run from my family. I adore my mother, she feeds me when I'm ill, when I'm sad, when it hurts and she doesn't know. I despise her for all the fights we have, for not wanting me to leave, for expecting me to be bigger than my body, for telling me to swallow my pain. I love my grandmother for her love for me, for how she tries, I hurt for her because she's lonely, because she doesn't know what to do with the feeling. I despise her for how she never sees the best in us, how nothing is ever enough, for turning on me when I needed her by my side the most. I love my father, I hate my father, I wish he wouldn't tell me my emotions are too much, and I hate that I believe him, and I love him because he's a soft hearted man too, but he's too stubborn, but I'm too stubborn, and I love him, and I adore him. I think he's the best man in the world. I think, sometimes, he doesn't think the same of me.

And this hurt, of our families, of our lives together, of the duty I feel to them, it hurts, and it tugs at me. But I love them, I love so much it hurts. I love them more than they can fathom. I love them more than anything that I want to far away from them, and yet right next to them. Why do we have families and why do we love them, even when they hurt us? What is my purpose if not to be a daughter, if not to carry their burdens? Why do I live my life if not to carry them, uplift them, smile for them?

If life is for smiling, why is it hard to smile so often?

When I was younger, it was easier to smile, easier to extend my heart, easier to be kind. It's so much harder now. It feels so much harder, even when everyone around me says I'm the kindest person they know. Even if people say I'm giving. Even if people say I'm a light in their lives.

What is my life if not mine?

I don't think it's mine and I wonder why I live it at all. Why I stay here, why I don't walk away, why I pursue what I pursue... why do any of us do this at all?

I'm a perfect student, the kind who get's all A's since I entered university. I'm passionate about my work, I love to write, I love to create, I love the literature I read, I love to help the students I help. Even if it's fruitless, even if those students who walk into the writing center and land at my table don't even really want my help, just want a signature on my paper. Even if they hire me for private tutoring, and just want me to do the work for them, and yet I encourage them still, to learn, to love learning. It kills me, too. Semesters are long, exams kill me. I love language, it is so hard to learn, I hate that it is so hard to learn. And writing is a process, I wish my words were perfect. I wish I had thought of the words my friends thought of before me. I wish I was smarter, I wish I was less smart, I wish I had learned moderation when it came to my passion, even if that passion is academia. I wish I could imagine myself living a life after school, I can't imagine it at all.

Why do we love to learn, love to read? Why do we find ourselves in an abstract demolition derby as we try to find all the answers, through music, through love, through laughter, through the lines of religious texts, the notes of a piano, the strokes of a paint brush, the sound of your best friends voice? Why do we seek answers, seek perfection?

I wonder if there are answers, to what the point of living is. If perhaps there is a point at all. I wonder if, as I write my papers, as I go through my classes, as I smile, as I carry the heartache of my family, the burdens of being a friend, what the joy in living is, if there is joy at all. When the world is falling apart, when places are facing hunger, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, lack resources, lack any sort of living, and I live in a home, and I have opportunity just out of reach- is there any joy at all? When we face sadness, when we face death, when we face our

mortality- is there any joy at all? When it's too hot on a December afternoon and you remember how fast the earth is dying, how little time we truly have, how little control we have- is there any joy at all?

As Albert Camus said in the *Myth of Sisyphus* the only truly serious philosophical problem, we all go through as human beings is deciding if life is worth living. How do we decide? What makes living worth it?

I'm here, writing this essay to you, because even if life hurts, even if the world is so full of hurt, even if we lose people we love, even if we can never be good enough friends, even if we want to run from our families, even if we love until our hearts are dust, it is worth living. Life is worth living.

And I don't really know why, I cannot put together all the pieces yet. Because time is running away from me, and as the new year turns, I realize that I'll never get it back. That my heart is in pieces that I can't stick together, and I'll never get the time back. But the meaning, the point, the discovery, it's all there. I just don't have all the pieces yet.

Joy is ephemeral but so is pain.

Life is so long and yet so short. I am 21 years old, and that is such a long time, but there is still so much time left. The hole in my chest will mend itself, everything in time mends itself. That's what other people say. That it gets better. Will it get better for me?

And as I'm reading, I find books that make me laugh, books that make me feel full, books that make me feel inspired. I love language, I love to learn language. That even with all the barriers in the world, I can still learn to say hello, I love you, thank you, I appreciate you, in your language. That even when the world is so divided, this I can learn and I can reach out to you.

That if there was no language at all, we would still have our smiles, and I can still wave to you. I can hold your hand to tell you it's okay. You can hold mine.

Even if I love too much- why is that a flaw? A fault? If I have too many emotions, why do I lose my posture over this? I love my emotions, I love my fast beating heart, I hate my emptiness. I hate when I have no thoughts at all. I love the tears on my face, even if sometimes I'm so ashamed of them. I love that my eyes can make tears. I love that I can smile brightly, I love that I can be happy. I love that I can be sad. That I can ask why sadness matters, where this longing in me comes from- to know, to know what the point of life *is*.

If life is worth living, why is it worth living so *much*? Where is the meaning in it all?

And I think to the modernists, their writing so full of language. Some say it's pretentious, others classists, you can even say it's colonial. But when you look at a piece of work, one that is a bit convoluted, one that is full of language, one that is layered as if it were a cake and not a piece of text, one where you can peel back to see beneath the surface, you see it is inspired, it's more than it's criticisms. Because yes, maybe it was written with the intent to deceive those who weren't "high brow" enough, or maybe it was meant to make you feel stupid, but I see something in the works of Faulkner, of Wolfe, of Williams Carlos Williams, T.S. Elliot, that *force* you to find meaning. To figure out what it all means, to put together the pieces. You look for all the words that you do not know what they mean, you're searching for the meanings of those in other languages, you try to pick apart every allusion. You're trapped between the covers the book, the lines of the poem, you're frustrated, you want to know the meaning, but you have to find it.

Well, maybe you don't find it. It's not hidden. It's not a treasure chest. You're not playing a super sleuth game. The author already has a meaning, but you'll never know what that

is, truly. Even if they tell you, you might not believe them. How can that be? It's not what *you* thought it meant.

You create meaning. You put together meaning. You weld it into something that means something to *you*, and all the things that hurt you, loved you, put you together, tore you apart. You create meaning out of what you know, of what you learn, of what you desire. Other's created meaning and created in their own languages, created new, inspired genre's like Transnational literature and art. You create meaning, and I create it too. We add to what we know, we change it, we weld it, we mold it, we paint it, we say it.

And when I think of my life, of all the things I talked about before- family, school, learning, friendship- we create meaning in that too.

Why do we have friends? Why do we seek companionship?

Because we want to mean something to other people.

We want to create traditions, we want to create emotions, we want to create love, connection... we want to express those things. We want to be artists, we want to be writers, we want to read until our eyes are tired. Because we think poetry is beautiful, and that prose is exceptional. We think that we relate to those on the page. You think *dear author, I understand you*. You grip for dear life reading a thriller, you don't want to see your favorite character die. You weep over the pages of a book that your aunt used to love. You read your favorite storybooks to your children because it *means* something to you. You write letters that you never send, you draft texts that may never reach that person.

I had a professor one semester whose class I loved, the things I read and watched for her literature class stuck to me like glue. I think about them often, I carry the knowledge she passed

down to me all the time. I was told she died in passing, and it didn't sink in then because I was surrounded by classmates, and it felt strange to think a professor I only had online due to covid was someone so important to me. But a few days ago, I found a movie she couldn't find and I found myself weeping as I realized I can never share it with her. And isn't that part of what makes life so important?

We imbue parts of ourselves into others. We are lasting impressions, no matter how big or small. We pass down the knowledge that we have, we talk to people about that knowledge. We remember who told it to us, sometimes we don't, sometimes we think of them a long time after they told it to us. We think of great uncles that we didn't know well, and the hole they leave in our families after dying. And how your dad remembers him as he drives you through New York City towards the airport, telling you he taught him this route, that he remembers hours in the car with him, learning to drive there, the things he said to him. And he tells you those stories because his uncle's life was important.

Because he lived it, and that's important. He made that decision to live it, despite having to flee his home and move to a country with a language he didn't know, despite having to build his life from nothing. Despite having to see some of the best of it, even seeing some of the best of it. He was important.

My professor was important.

All the people who have been lost these past two incredibly difficult years, they were important too.

And somehow, I survived, somehow you did too. You're reading this and you survived too. And I just keep asking why I'm here, if I'm wasting my opportunity, if I'm not good

enough. If I don't care enough. If I don't love enough. If I don't ask enough questions, read enough books, write enough stories.

And I just think that we as human beings care so much. We care, even if we wonder if it's worth caring. We care even if we don't know why, exactly, we should. I care. I care too much sometimes. I care so much I don't care at all, it feels like.

We fall into dark holes of doom scrolling, looking at all the bad things about the world because *we care*. And even if it hurts, even if we can't control it, we give money to those causes, we rally for those causes because we care. Because it scares us to think those people may feel left behind, unloved, uncared for.

And yes, we are innately flawed. We make the wrong moves, we say the wrong things. We wonder if there is forgiveness left for us, if we can ever change. We grow, we move on. We still make mistakes. Our best qualities are our worst too. I'm a human being who can be a bad friend, a bad daughter, a bad sister, a bad niece, a bad cousin. I want to runaway, I never want to speak again. Sometimes I say the wrong things, sometimes I forget to check up on people, sometimes I pass up an opportunity to give to charity. Sometimes I'm selfish.

And yet, that's okay.

Because if I have to live this life, can't I be selfish? Can't I throw a fit about it? I didn't choose to be here; I certainly *could* choose not to live. But I'm here. I choose to live. I choose to be selfish sometimes. I choose to be quiet. I choose to do the wrong thing.

I choose to believe that there is good in everyone, no matter how little of it.

And I don't really have all the pieces. I don't have all the answers. I don't really know why I'm here, I don't know why I'm alive. I know I want to write, I know I want to be happy, I know I have a voice that I want to use, and an existence that I want to share. But I don't really understand why. I hardly know if there is a point, or a meaning. Maybe all the words above are a naïve, overdone, cliché meanings. But we are so afraid to be cliché, so afraid to recall all the secrets of the universe that are imbued into our blood- did you know iron was given from stardust? It wasn't meant to be here, on earth, until some rock or other crashed into the earth in it's earliest phases, and that same element made it's way into our bloodstreams, keeps our eyes open, our hearts beating.

If we weren't meant to be here, I wonder why all these small and big miracles happened to get us here.

And I wonder all the time what stops me from not being here.

I wonder all the time if I'm doing the right thing, if I care enough.

On New Years Eve, as it neared twelve, I went to my balcony. I leaned against the railing. I was all alone, my family inside, the neighbors inside. It was cold, but it was nice. I like the cold. I like the feeling of the cold. And I just stared at the world beneath my house the houses lined down the hill, slanted as they go down the slopes, the warm lights coming from their windows, the sound of the countdown, the way my brother cheers when it becomes midnight, the eruption of fireworks, noise makers, cheering, music from all the world around me. I think of all the people I left behind, of all the people who left me, of all the ways the world will tell me in the morning that it is time to become a *new me* for the new year. And I wonder why life is worth

living that as soon as we become conscious of our time passing, of time fleeing us, of things changing, why we have to become new, why we have to change completely too.

That's ridiculous isn't it? That one hour turning on one day of the year, relinquishing the last year, is meant to rid of us all of this pain, this heart ache, this life. It doesn't. Nothing really changes. We don't discover new bodies, new lives, new states of the world when we finally wake up.

This year, 2022, I graduate from university. I don't know what's coming, and maybe you've picked up on it, but life is a scary ordeal to me, because I don't quite have it figured out. And yet, there is comfort knowing that nobody has it figured out, that things don't end as soon as I graduate. That when that time happens, when that hour changes, when I have my diploma, I am not a new person in an abandoned body. I am still me, and I have everything I've been through, every emotion I've felt, my heart that is mending itself.

The dilemma is larger than life, or perhaps just large enough to contain it- why do we live, why do we choose to keep on living? And I think that the answer is not so simple. But I think that part of it is, that no matter what happens, we go on in life trying to figure it out, we carry ourselves forward, all of our baggage and hurt, and our happiness too, trying to piece everything together. We discover and create meaning as we live. We are human, and it hurts, but that's okay. Because if it didn't mean something, we wouldn't be here.

What does it mean, to live?

Well, that's for you and I to create on our own, to discover for ourselves until life finally relinquishes us.