

Searching for happiness in camp Moria

Meeting two young women

While we are walking over quite a steep path up the road to one of the so-called “exit gates” I see two young women who are just coming outside walking arm in arm. When they approach us, I estimate they are between 16 to 20 years old. These young women are wearing quite heavy make-up and they are well clothed in a way that fits their ages. While they are walking away laughing they are looking at their mobile phones possibly to check messages they received via WhatsApp.

These two young women could just as well have walked around on the street in the Netherlands. No one would have found it awkward. Just, two (Afghan, Turkish,...?) young women who would completely fit our international, Dutch street view. If not, that the *context* in which we encounter them is very different from what you would expect. Because we are in camp Moria, a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece. So these young women are refugees together with many other refugees over here and the exit-gate where they have just gone through is a hole in the fence that encircles the refugee camp...

During the past couple of weeks I worked together with my colleague from the community team in refugee camp Moria where we have contributed to the psychosocial mission of the Boat Refugee Foundation. Refugee camp Moria has got much more in use after the refugee crisis in 2015, but it was originally a military base as can clearly be noticed from the big fences and the amounts of barbwire everywhere (it is also for this reason that we are not allowed to take pictures). Even though camp Moria has a capacity of about 3,000 people there are at the moment approximately 5,500 refugees. It is not even a lot considering the fact that there were 12,000 refugees a couple of years ago (Source: Boat Refugee Foundation,2019).

Before our departure to the camp I promised to myself that I would go to the camp with personal assignment. I wanted to know how *happiness* is experienced in the camp. Not by asking the refugees, but simply by observing them. So during the last couple of weeks I have been an “observer of happiness”. Or at least what I think happiness means for these people.

In the past I have often heard or seen in many different ways what happiness is or should be. Thinking about that I always fall back on standard remarks such as: “Happiness is what you make of it yourself”, “Happiness is in the small things” or “Happiness is a road not a destination”. All remarks that I sort of understand and recognize, but that also fall into nothing when considering the conditions in which many refugees have to live. Because, how on earth can you make your own happiness if you are stuck in a camp, there is little you can or may do and you are bored to death? And why for Christ’s sake should you be happy with small things if you have left the most essential things in your life: your home and family behind in war torn country? And at last, what is meant with that so-called “road to happiness” (or that is supposed

to happiness) if that road sucks big time and you do not even know if you can nor may dream of bright future?

The stark contrast between life *here* (I am back in the Netherlands now) and over *there* made me wonder how much value such remarks in fact have in a such a context as in a refugee camp. Oh... I am not saying that we are all incredibly happy in Netherlands because we are so well off here. Also then I am reminded of another standard remark: "It is all been quite well arranged over here". Another very annoying remark, because also our happiness is relative. That I realise far too well. But still... the context in which we live and develop determines a lot. Maybe that is also why I can write that I searched for certain universal values of human happiness. Values that are so human, that they can be found anywhere wherever we as humans may be. And that is what this article is about...

The basic form of happiness

After we have passed the two young women, we climb through the hole in the fence into the camp. What I notice at first is simply activity. Camp Moria immediately gives me the impression that I entered a *living village*. What else could I have expected...

I see people walking around at a water place, I see mothers with children and jerry cans filled with water at their hands, I see children playing on a carton box with which they are trying sled down the road (at 25 degree Celsius and not even one flake of snow) and old people with sticks in their hands walking up the steep road. Further I see big tents that are set up by organisations of the UN and the European Union in which the refugees sleep together in groups. I also see smaller open tents that are used by the inhabitants of the camp as selling places for food and household goods and there are even a number of small barber shops.

This first impression of the camp immediately evokes my first happiness though: life continues (or it is in fact my second happiness thought after seeing the two young women, but I will go back to that later). *Activity* and *entrepreneurship* apparently belong to who we are as humans. Besides the fact that life = movement, gives activity us also the feeling that we can be of significance for each other. My first happiness observation seems to be a fact.

How confronting it is then that more or less one week later the refugee camp is being visited by a delegation of the Vatican. Suddenly the camp management decides that this very exclusive company is a good reason to clean up the whole camp. Also all the shops in the camp are at once being removed from the camp. The camp is being cleaned up for representatives of the Holy Spirit. Activity and entrepreneurship, the things that I think contribute to happiness, apparently do not have a place in this holy visit.

Fortunately, the camp appears to be capable of finding its normal routine back again soon after the visit from the Vatican. Quite quickly the barber has put a board outside on one of the tents and a couple of days after the papal visit I see him bending forward

over a customer sitting in the barber's chair to trim away the hairs on his neck. Happily he did so...

The activity I observed during the days after is however only one of the ingredients of happiness that I observed. During the weeks that followed I observed that happiness exists in different forms. There is the *basic form of happiness* in which happiness manifests itself in good health, good relationships with the people around you, a safe and pretty comfortable place to live and the opportunity to contribute. During the period I and my colleagues worked in the camp it became very clear that there was a real shortage in those areas for many of the refugees (It was also for this reason that in the medical clinic of the camp there were many refugees with several psychological and psychosomatic complaints), but despite that there were still many refugees that still attempted to make the best of it on these crucial domains of life.

I saw refugees who had enlivened their gloomy, grey tents by putting potted plants outside of their tents. Also there were a number of refugees whom I met that made it a habit to go for a walk or a run in the morning, to stay as healthy and fit as possible. Besides that I and my colleagues found it heart-warming that all the refugees seemed to be helping each other. Was there something broken or was there anything else that needed to be done? There was always someone who could support the other. Especially relationships and the forming of relationships appeared to be significant. This, for example, also became clear with the group of "unaccompanied minors", youngsters till the age of 18 years that were in the camp without parents or care takers (there were approximately 300 present in the camp at the time we were there). Also these youngsters formed groups and they helped each other when necessary. But unfortunately many of them also appeared to be searching for their *temporary happiness* (or what could better be called the *temporary sedation of their unhappiness*) in the use of alcohol and drugs.

But well, that is not all. Human beings, I think, can be physically healthy, live in a safe and comfortable place, have significant work and good relationships, but despite all that can still be unhappy due to problematic unprocessed past, but definitely also because of unclear and grimly picture of the future.

In my work as a psychologist in The Netherlands I am used to focus my attention on understanding behavioural- and/or emotional problems that can largely be explained by what I observe in the present and what has happened in the past. Psychologists and social workers often have a retrospective view based on which they are trying to explain behavioural- and emotional problems with people. In camp Moria I observed something else though.

Explicitly we as volunteers were from the beginning of our stay given the message that in our contact with the refugees we were not supposed to focus on the past (as that could possibly trigger traumas). We had to focus on the oh so well-known "here and now". Also the future had to be left unspoken of as it is uncertain and seemed hopeless. What I noticed though was that much of the pain with the refugees was in fact there...Many of the refugees that were present in the camp want just like us to

have the feeling that a bright future is ahead of them. The rather negatively coined term “happiness seekers” in the Netherlands is, I believe, completely applicable to the refugees. Because let’s be honest, are we not all happiness seekers? Do we not all want a beautiful future? The idea that I got in the camp is that we as human beings are pretty well capable of withstanding harsh conditions in the present, as long as it is part of the road that leads to a better future. But what do you do if you do not have any security in your future? And it also seems you do not have much *control* over it?

During the group sessions I did with the refugees together with my colleagues, I observed that there were some refugees that could not accept the fact that they only had little influence on their future. Just like almost all the refugees in the camp they were waiting for the next interview in which would possibly be decided what the next step in their lives would be. In the meantime they stayed in the quite miserable situation in the camp. Some found it hard to accept this and appeared to be severely impeded by this. In vain, they were trying to have influence, when they in fact did not have any influence. For example, I can still remember a young man who had the strong conviction that we from our volunteer organisation did have influence on the camp management to accelerate his process. A kind of influence we obviously did not have. In vain he kept on pushing though and couldn’t accept it.

The idea that I got from this is that to have a feeling of control or wanting to have control over your future (I emphasise it is a feeling of control, because we will never have full control) can to a certain degree have a positive effect on our feeling of happiness. Simply because we are capable of influencing our environment. Nevertheless, the feeling of control also has the possibility to become too much if someone is trying to control matters that are in fact beyond their field of control. An abundant amount of control without actual effects leads for sure to unhappiness. Just as with this young man.

In the refugee camp, I observed more happiness in those that did not attempt to influence everything. The decision to proceed and to leave the camp was accepted as beyond their field of control though this formed an important part of their lives. In one of the group sessions this acceptance was expressed as “Inshallah” (If Allah wills). *Acceptance* of that which they couldn’t influence and they devoted to a good willing higher power, appeared to be helping in the right way through difficult times.

Now in this text I have mainly discussed the basic forms of happiness. The form of happiness that exists in a balance and building up of our living situation, the relationships we have, our health, our contribution to society or groups in the society and very important also the location and time in which we accomplish all of this.

The ephemeral form of happiness

In the refugee camp I observed another second important form of happiness. I have called it the *ephemeral form of happiness*. The word ephemeral literally means passing by, perishable and thus temporary. You could therefore also speak of *happiness moments*. The fact that these happiness moments are passing do not, however, make

them less important than the basic form of happiness. One cannot exist without the other. I will also attempt to describe this form of happiness here.

What I noticed from the first day I was in the refugee camp were the children that were playing with whatever they found in the camp. Their little (or big) worlds appeared to be completely theirs and everything they found in their world could be used as toys. Their *fantasy* simply did the rest. So a ripped open carton box became a sled and a piece of old rope a jumping rope. And when there was nothing to play with, they still always had each other. These children clearly lived in the here and now and during these moments they did not seem to suffer in any way from their past, the present or the future. Even more so, they were visibly enjoying their present.

But I also encountered this form of happiness with adults. At the library of the organisation where I and my colleagues worked for there were regularly quite a number of refugees, playing games such as cards, chess or Karambol with visible pleasure. The refugees could borrow books, to learn a language or simply because they enjoyed reading. In one of the tents of the International Committee of the Red Cross there were movie evenings being organised frequently. These were ways to find pleasure and leisure with each other for a brief moment and to escape the harsh reality for a short time.

However, one of the most beautiful examples of the ephemeral form of happiness I encountered was the visit of the Flying Seagulls to refugee camp Moria. The Flying Seagulls is a group of clowns that are travelling all over the world to provide children in refugee camps with a moment of entertainment. A very important moment in which children can play and be detached from the reality of the camp. That I had the opportunity to see the Flying Seagulls in action in camp Moria has for me been the absolute cherry on the cake.

What I observed were children that were completely involved with the game of the clowns. They were clearly having fun with each other! And the most beautiful thing I thought was that not only the children were enjoying it. The parents and other adults that were standing around the place and were watching the show also clearly enjoyed it. Happiness apparently also has a sort of *spilling-over effect*, definitely when we see children enjoying themselves. Because is it not also the carefree time of our childhood that we sometimes long for a little bit?

The intrinsic form of happiness

The last form of happiness that I think I have observed is what I call the *intrinsic form of happiness*.

During the period we were in the camp I have talked to several refugees. From the conversations I had with them it became clear to me that many of them had lost a lot. They did not have a job, no house and appeared to have almost no possessions. Beside that a number of them were forced to leave their family and friends behind or they had lost them. Moreover there was little in the camp they could contribute to. Aside of all

the suffering this most likely had caused, there was little they could attribute their *value* to.

The feeling of self-worth with many of the refugees we met up with appeared to be low and that is also what we noticed from the group sessions we did with them. When we were talking about dating with someone or searching for work (at the moment they would get that opportunity) frequently we heard people from the camp saying: “I am only refugee...” expressing in this way that simple their social/legal status was an all impeding factor in their human search for happiness. And who can tell them they are wrong? If you have little, if there is little to be proud of or to look back at and there also appears to be little in the present for which you can be significant, what else is there left?

I think the answer to that is simply that we are all worth it simply because we are human beings. We are worth it because we are all born somewhere at some time and we live on this planet that we share with each other. Only that would already be reason from which we can derive our value. Nothing more and nothing less... And that accounts for the refugees in camp Moria, but definitely also for the situations in which many other people in our modern (digital) era worldwide unfortunately still have to live, no matter how harrowing these situations also may be. The categorising word “refugee” that I have used throughout this whole piece also falls therefore in nothing. They are just like you and me just humans searching for a better future.

At the end of this story I go back to the two young women that I encountered during the first day on my way to the camp. Who they were, what their past were or what their futures are I do not know. Most likely they do not know it themselves either. What I did notice from their clothes, make-up and style of walking appeared to be *dignity*. A feeling of dignity of which I hope is with them not only from the outside but also from the inside. A feeling of internal human dignity that I wish everyone, including the people in camp Moria who seem to need it so desperately, will have. A *feeling of self-worth or intrinsic happiness*, even when you have lost almost everything and your future is unclear.

Martijn R. Hofman