**Desiderata**

‘Desiderata’ by Max Ehrman is basically a philosophical poem consisting of eight stanzas of unequal length and written in free verse. Hence it can be called a prose-poem written by the poet way back in 1927 and through the poem the poet calls for a positive approach towards life. The poem is instructional as it starts with a verb ‘Go’ and continues in the same tone throughout but its relevance in its contemporariness and even today makes it a valuable piece to read and re-read and reflect upon. The didactic element in the poem is so plainly and positively portrayed/delineated that there is but little scope of boredom while reading the poetic piece. From the technical point of view the poem is written in free verse and rhyming is not the priority of the poem but the conveying of the message of optimism. However there are examples of Simile in the poem as we find in ‘Neither be cynical about love/ for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment,/ it is as perennial as the grass.’ ; as also Alliteration as in ‘But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.’ Besides the poem has examples of images too as one can visualize one’s existence amidst natural and celestial objects through the lines –‘ You are a child of the universe/ no less than the trees and the stars;/ you have a right to be here.’ The title of the poem that is ‘Desiderata’ means ‘desired things’ and it is through the poem the poet talks of things or actions and beliefs that are desirable to make a person a happy and satisfactory life. It is not difficult to sum up the counsels of the poet as conveyed through the stanzas and lines and these wise and practical counsels go to substantiate the title that is these codes which are desired and which go to make one live a contented and happy life today and in the days to come. The poem offers a few codes of life for better living and one might sum it up in the phrase ‘art of living’ . Though the poem is didactic in tone, there is emotion in it and earnestness and a tender intent that reaches out to the readers without being too moralistic and instructional but rather motivational. Over all the poem ahs a civilizing effect upon the readers and those who can perceive it.

In the first stanza the poet begins with the verb ‘Go’ that is he tells us to approach in life in a placid that is calm way amidst the noise and haste that is the din and speed offered by modern life. He tells us to remember that there is enough peace in silence which means that the experience is going to be nothing new but we should remember it and look out for serenity that is offered by silence and not noise and haste. Sometimes we are drawn into the frenetic pace of our lives and thus away from peace, hence the reminder. At the same time he tells us to be on good terms with ‘all persons’ but without surrendering as far as possible. This counsel proves that it is not always possible to be on good terms with everybody, since as the maxim goes ‘One who tries to please everybody pleases nobody’ it is indeed difficult to be friendly with everybody. Hence the poet uses the phrase ‘as far as possible’ to give us the allowance to be friendly to the best of our capacity. He also advises us not to surrender that is not to compromise with our ideals and principles while compromising with individuals; here in being diplomatic might be the catchword/meaning of what he intends to convey. He furthermore tells us to speak out our truth quietly and clearly’. For obvious reasons he doesn’t wish us to speak ‘quietly’ that is silently since that is not possible but he intends to tell us to speak softly with dignity and clearly that is distinctly to be heard by those whom we wish to listen to us. Thus we should speak softly but steadily and at the same time clearly without being rude/offensive. (This is possible when one talks without being personal but being clear of what one wishes from the other). He also tells us to be open enough to listen to what others would say. While speaking up the truth requires a type/sort of courage, bearing an open mind to listen and accommodate the views of others also requires another sort of courage that is bereft of ego and vanity. To give an ear to others requires one to believe that though one/some might appear dull and ignorant he/she/they too have their own stories to tell and that too rightfully. Their stories and experiences too have their own significance and relevance in spite of their anecdotes /experiences seeming ‘dull and ignorant’ that is uninteresting and commonplace.

The second stanza begins with the advice of the poet to us to avoid loud and aggressive persons since he says, they are vexatious to the spirit. What he means here in is that it is better to shun people who try to put forth their views and opinions in a forceful and aggressive manner without paying heed to others. These people, he says cause distress to the soul and disturbs our mental peace. He also counsels us not to compare ourselves with others as this might breed/create in us either vainglory or make us resentful. He comments quite truly and sagaciously that there would always be a person who would be greater and lesser than us that is more or less successful and prosperous than us. Hence it is always advisable and prudent to enjoy one’s own achievements than thinking about and focusing on others. This would allow us to better ourselves without suffering any sort of complex (envy) and make ourselves our own critic and admirer.

The poet in the third stanza advises us to focus on our own career however humble it may be.

According to him it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time that is in the face of changing times for the good or the bad one can find in his vocation his real possession to remain interested with and engaged in. There is however a word of caution from him too as he says that we should be cautious in our business affairs that is our vocation related to our earning and sustenance. In this regard he says that the world is full of tricksters who might manipulate our strengths and weaknesses to their advantage. This is practical in any kind of job we are involved in since otherwise we would not only be vulnerable to such trickery by the manipulators but also suffer in regard to our career and hence socio-economic position. At the same time he doesn’t wish to sound sceptic and scary, so he adds that this attitude of being cautious shouldn’t make us blind to the virtue of true friendship and kindness that exists in this world. Angels walk alongside demons and we, while shunning the company of demons shouldn’t shun the angels as well. He reminds us that by being cautious about the tricksters and by embracing/accepting true friendly would help us/many strive for high ideals as the world is full of heroism. The ‘heroism’ refers to the prudent/intelligent acceptance of motivation and innate tenacity to strive to reach one’s goal that helps one to reach/achieve high ideals. (prudent because otherwise indiscriminate acceptance would let the manipulators make us prey to their machinations).

In the fourth stanza he advises us to be ourselves and not to imitate others. By imitating others in our behavioural manners and lifestyle we lose our genuineness and become mere copy-cats/imitators. He mentions that on a special note we should not feign affection that is we shouldn’t pretend to show affection/feelings to those whom we do not intend to do so. This would make us be true to ourselves and make others realize that we are at least not pretentious/false. (No pseudo action pays in the long run and gets revealed in the course of time). He also says that we should not be cynical that is critical about love, by using the (determiner)/(adverb) ‘Neither’ he relates the third line of the fourth stanza to the first two lines. Thus the meaning stands that while we should not only exhibit our genuine feelings towards someone, we should also not be critical about the love and affection that is shown to us. In an optimistic and somewhat conciliatory tone he says that in the face of all ‘aridity and disenchantment’ that is while we feel disinterested and disenchanted about life and get quite bored and frustrated about it we shouldn’t forget that true love ‘is as perennial as grass’ that is true love doesn’t die after a specified period of time but survives through the change of seasons. Grass has been used as a simile to show that true love grows like grass, unconditionally, without any special treatment and irrespective of change of conditions. (in case of grass it is the seasons and in case of love it is the change of conditions).

The fifth stanza begins with a different instruction/counsel of the poet as he says that we should accept with kindness the counsel of the years and gracefully surrender the things of the youth. Here ‘counsel of the years’ on the one hand means the wisdom that we gain through years of growing and also the counsel of the elders who have seen and understood the world more than us. The youthful memories as also youth related passion and restlessness and impulsiveness should be surrendered to our own matured stage as we grow up and older as also to the wise suggestions and advices of our elders. But this process of transformation or rather evolution should be done with dignity that is ‘gracefully’ and not only being guided by blind emotion. The elders obviously include our parents, elderly relatives, teachers, neighbours and well wishers. ‘Strength of spirit’ lies within us and is a part of our persona, this is something that we should nurture that is cultivate and this in turn would help us to stand up against unforeseen misfortune. With this quintessential strength of spirit we can face adversities without feeling helpless or breaking down or being at the mercy of others to help us out. In a nutshell the poet advises us to be self reliant in the face of adversities with a strong mind and dauntless heart. At the same time he advises us not to distress ourselves with ‘dark imaginings’ that is negative thoughts which are often the outcome of lonely moments, distrust, and anger as also prolonged ailment related depression. He identifies that fears are mostly born out of fatigue/tiredness and loneliness/seclusion. Having identified the causes of negative thoughts he advises us to steer away from such thoughts and rein in ourselves and mind to overcome these perceptions. In the last two lines the poet is discerning enough to set standard for us as he says that ‘beyond a wholesome discipline’ we should be gentle with ourselves. Here he means that the discipline that we should practice for ourselves should be wholesome that is complete in itself for our well being but beyond that limit we should give priority to our personal and family’s comfort and peace of mind. Most probably he is speaking against the fact of our being in the rat race of this modern world to live a materially better life and advocating in favour of our living in peace and happiness, away from this race and also away from being mere consumers.

The sixth stanza begins with a philosophical note and indirectly speaks about pantheism as the poet says that we are all children of the universe and are no less than the other natural objects like the living trees and the celestial objects like the non living entities, the stars. The implied reference is to the creator of this universe that is (omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent) God who considers us as His children as He does with other objects be it the trees or the stars. He reminds us that by dint of being the child/children of this universe we have as much right to be here as any other living or non living object has irrespective of what others say. The profundity of the statement ‘you have a right to be here’ lies in the fact that it is not by our will/volition or power that we are her on this earth since none can will oneself into existence but it is the will of Almighty (or for the atheist some supernatural power) and hence our destiny that we are here and what more that we are in no way lesser or inferior to others irrespective of our share (as human beings) in this universe. (We are small but no less small than the trees or animals of birds or even stars and other celestial objects so far as the profound significance of pantheistic existentialism is concerned). Hence, he says that it doesn’t matter if the exact cause of the existence of all these living beings and non living objects in this universe or all that is happening in this universe is clear to us or not, infinitesimal beings as we are, the events are themselves causes and consequences in their own right and logic and the universe is unfolding that is revealing ‘as it should’ that is by its own rule. The poet here in appears all the more philosophical and somewhat spiritually inclined too as he advises us to be a part and parcel of the happenings on this earth and beyond, and tells us not to endeavour/try to comprehend the cause and effect but just be a part of it and wait for the happenings to let them be known to us.

Hence he sounds sincerely spiritual as he advises us to be at peace with God with the allowance to conceive Him in our own way. The significance is again deeply profound as the poet tells us to conceive/imagine Him in any form or even without any form and anywhere and in any being. Being ‘at peace with God’ is in essence an advice to love and depend on Him and surrender to Him unconditionally. We shouldn’t fret over things that are beyond our control. At the same time we should also understand that life is a conundrum where there are moments of joy and sadness, expectation and fulfillment, hopes and non fulfillment of the same and associated frustration, trials and tribulations and consequential success or failures with less moments that are unpredictable than the predictable ones. Thus in spite of our labours and aspirations the there is the existence of ‘the noisy confusion of life’ and here in we need to keep peace with our soul that is we need to listen to our inner self and be true to our heart. Only then our inner peace would be intact.

The poet, in the last stanza/(seventh stanza) admits that there is the existence of falsity, menial and monotonous work and shattered dreams the world is still a beautiful place to live in. The practical and pragmatic outlook lies in the fact that the poet admits that there are false people whom we have to face, there are monotonous moments when we are forced to work unwillingly, there are moments when our dreams and hopes are broken and we feel disillusioned; but still the world is a ‘beautiful place’ as we need to look beyond. The poet is really optimistic and positive as he advises us to be cheerful and be happy that is think and act in an affirmative manner looking for the brighter side of life that in turn would help us maintain a smile of happiness on our faces. The outlook of the poet in this poem is robustly optimistic and despite admitting the existence of dismal thoughts and moments he wishes all to look beyond at the brighter side of life, the silver lining beyond.

(Accept the inevitable presence of noise, accept others as also opinions from others, shun the habit of comparison, focus on your career and ambition, focus on yourself and advice of the elders, believe in your rightful existence in this universe, be cheerful and have unflinching faith in God.)

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