

Happy Birthday

by Anil Shrivastava 'Musafir'

I recently had my birthday (in December). Or to use the more apposite term, it was my 'happy birthday.' This time I didn't receive many 'happy birthdays' wishes as I removed the mention of my birth date from social media. Other than my immediate family, my sister called to convey her greetings. Yes, one of my cousins and a friend's wife also sent their greetings on the occasion. Other than a few real people I received birthday cards from department stores, American Express, my dentist, Pearle Vision, and my phone provider.

I am glad that people who cared to remember my birthday and a few who really love me sent their nods. In preceding years, I used to get hundreds of birthday wishes on social media. I do this to others including strangers every day on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter without any emotion. This has become my morning chore. Some days I resent doing this unless the person is close to me.

Talking of birthdays, it's this 'happy' thing I find difficult to internalize as a 76-year-old man. Once I watched a movie (can't recall the name) where the protagonist was walking about the street in tattered clothes and manacles. When someone said good morning to him, he retorted in a thundering voice full of angst and anger: "What is so good about this morning?" Similarly, what is so happy about a birthday wish if there is no feeling of love involved.

When I was a child, it was friends and presents and balloons, hoping none of the presents were

duplicates. During boyhood, with each birthday I celebrated more independence, my own room, lessening of restrictions and strictures, playing competitive sports, and being allowed to have sleepovers.

I felt even greater enjoyment on my birthdays during my youth looking forward to getting a degree, finding a job, moving away into my own place, and being free to take all decisions of my life. Every year I was moving closer to the fun part of life: marrying and starting a family, raising kids, and thinking of happier days ahead.

Now things are a bit different. Each birthday to a 76-year-old man represents the passing of yet another milestone on the highway of life. You are manacled, like the protagonist mentioned above. You don't indulge in good food due to the progressively tightening chains of portion control, carb control, cholesterol control, and blood-glucose control. And things will grow worse as I progress in age. I will have less freedom to do what I want, my joints will limit me and so will my kidneys and my heart and my eyesight and my memory, till I will land where I started. Total dependence.

To put it another way, when one's birthdays are happy in youth, you eat as much cake as you can, and when you are old "you can't have your cake and eat it too." Having said that, 'Happy Birthday' to all of you, should today happen to be yours.