



Positive Psychology in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*

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Received: 29 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 01 Oct 2025; Accepted: 04 Oct 2025; Available online: 09 Oct 2025

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Abstract— War often reduces people into empty shells, indelibly draining them of their hope and will to live. Yet at times it also gives rise to narratives of relentless courage and optimism in the form of individuals who simply refuse to give into its appalling atrocities. Ibrahim Nurri the protagonist of Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is one such extraordinary individual. Deprived of practically everything that makes life worth living by the Syrian civil war, and condemned to become a fleeing refugee, Nuri nevertheless insists on fighting against all odds with the avowed objective of retaining life and hope. The paper marks an attempt to appraise his character through the research lens of the American psychologist Martin Seligman's concept of positive psychology, particularly his PERMA model of well-being. The ultimate goal is to set forth how Nuri's unconquerable resilience is at its core shaped and inspired by essentially the elements that make up Seligman's well-being theory.



Keywords— Positive psychology, PERMA, well-being, character development, hope

Introduction

In the annals of world literature, few remarks exhort the ideal of unyielding fortitude more forcefully than Hemingway's assertion from his classic *The Old Man and the Sea*, "But man is not made for defeat... A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (77). Yet stirring as it is, the reality is that most people confronted with adversity are likely to find the exhortation too exacting to uphold. The protagonist of Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* Ibrahim Nuri is however unlike most people. A native of Syria, Nuri is leading a serene and fulfilling life, when the harmony of his existence is irrevocably shattered by the outbreak of the civil war. The war devastates his home and livelihood, separates him from his friends, blinds his wife, and claims the life of his only son. In spite of enduring such profound losses, Nuri does not succumb to despair. Rather he puts up a valiant struggle for survival by embarking on a perilous journey to England in the hope of procuring asylum. Apparently personal tragedies cannot break him, hardships fail to efface him, and overwhelming odds of failure simply does not register with him. The critical question is what epitomizes the avowed catalyst

that fuels this extraordinary streak of resilience in Nuri? The answer is the idea of positive psychology advocated by the American psychologist Martin Seligman. On the face of it of course the proposition might impart an impression of being extremely hypothetical and tenuous to reckon with. Yet as it would subsequently suffice upon scrutiny, it is not just plausible but compelling. However, in order to arrive at this understanding, it is required that we take stock of the theoretical framework underlying Seligman's conceptualization of positive psychology in the first place.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is "a scientific and professional movement" (FL I) initiated in 1998 by Seligman during his presidency of the American Psychological Association (APA). Seligman initiated the movement as a reaction against the traditional practices in psychology particularly their undue emphasis on the topic of mental illness and its treatment. Thus positive psychology as initiated by him takes as its subject the exploration of the enabling aspects that promote the flourishing of life with the view to foster

them. Its ultimate goal is well-being, which as theorised by Seligman is comprised of five elements. These are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment, PERMA for short. It is vital to stress here that well-being in Seligman's perception essentially exemplifies a "construct" (FL 6). The five elements that comprise it are therefore mutually exclusive of each other and as such contribute individually to the overall structure of well-being. A brief account of the elements would bear out this point clearly.

PERMA Model

The first element positive emotion signifies those impulses that underpin the experience of happiness or satisfaction in life. Seligman categorizes them into three distinct types. These are those directed to the past such as "satisfaction, contentment, pride, and serenity" (AH 48), those oriented to the future like "optimism, hope, confidence, trust, and faith" (AH 48), and finally those associated to the present which he further classifies into two namely those relating to the body as "delicious tastes and smells, sexual feelings, moving your body well, delightful sights and sounds" (AH 228), and those pertaining to a higher plane of significance as "ecstasy, rapture, thrill, bliss, gladness, mirth, glee, fun, ebullience, comfort, amusement, relaxation, and the like" (AH 88). The second element of well-being engagement denotes a condition in which an individual becomes so absorbed in an activity that all sensations of consciousness and felt emotion are blocked from present experience. Seligman characterises this state as being in "flow, the state in which time stops and one feels completely at home" (AH 229). For Seligman it is not the nature of the activity but the deep psychological impact it has on the senses that accounts for engagement. Hence practically any activity we love doing such as "reading, rock climbing, dancing, good conversation, volleyball, or playing bridge" (AH 93) could induce flow.

The third element meaning is different from the first two in that its orientation is not restricted merely to the realm of personal contentment. Rather it invokes a sense of purpose, value and significance in life that compels one into identifying or committing to a cause or service beyond self-interest. As Seligman puts it, meaning affirms the idea of "belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self" (FL 8). The fourth element accomplishment alludes to gaining a sense of achievement through successfully pursuing and attaining set goals. It is however important to note that accomplishment as envisioned by Seligman is not necessarily pursued with the professed objective of winning tangible recognitions as external appreciation or material prosperity. It is in fact

frequently pursued as an end in itself than anything else. To quote Seligman himself, It describes "what human beings, when free of coercion, choose to do for its own sake" (FL 9). The fifth element relationship points to forging and sustaining meaningful ties with others. In Seligman's view relationships is not an option but an imperative. As he envisages, "very little that is positive is solitary" (FL 10). It is in fact as he asserts our kinship with others that ultimately determines the quality of one's life. "When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy... Even without knowing the particulars of these high points of your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people" (FL 10). The PERMA model of well-being as Seligman's theory of positive psychology is often dubbed, ultimately consists in actively cultivating these five elements. As each typifies a mutually independent entity, they ought to be developed individually with intent. This is exactly what Nuri does in the novel, without of course being consciously aware of doing so. What ensues is an analytic illustration of how he goes about it, which in his case warrants exceptional praise considering what he has endured.

Positive Emotion

Positive emotions are hard to experience when you are a refugee on the run. Add to this the loss of family members and friends, and the prospect of ever experiencing positive emotions becomes next to nothing. This is precisely the scenario Nuri is compelled to endure in the novel. Nuri has to flee Syria if he wants to save his life, which is in itself a formidable challenge. The fact that he has to take along with him a blinded wife and carry in his heart the indelible scar of his son's loss, renders it virtually a mission impossible. Somehow through sheer grit and determination he manages to accomplish this enterprise, only to be cast into a vortex of uncertainty as an asylum seeker in the UK. If this is not enough, he is also unsure about the whereabouts of his cousin Mustafa, the one pillar of hope he is counting on. In spite of all these shortcomings, Nuri manages to experience positive emotions, which though subdued and sporadic, provides him the much-needed sense of strength to cope with his embattled circumstance. The principal source of inspiration for him in this connection are the memories of beekeeping from his earlier life in Aleppo. The son of a fabric merchant, Nuri takes up beekeeping through Mustafa. Though his choice proves to be immensely disappointing to his father, for Nuri himself it turns out to be his life's calling. "There were so many bees, and they made me feel alive. When I was away from them it was like a great party had ended" (Lefteri 11). All throughout his stay in the BNB, Nuri constantly reminisces about his

beekeeping days in Syria which fills him with a feeling of blessed contentment. Beside the memories of beekeeping, he also recalls moments spent with Mustafa's family that adds to his relief in the present.

"Every Saturday we would go to Mustafa's house for dinner. Dahab and Mustafa would cook together, Mustafa measuring every ingredient, every spice, meticulously on the scales, as if one tiny mistake would ruin the whole meal" (Lefteri 13).

Thus, though it might appear that positive emotions are absent indeed inaccessible to Nuri considering his desperate situation, the fact is they are very much alive in him. Perhaps one might say they exist in a muted form, but the truth is Nuri through conscious effort sustains them, and in doing so gives himself a chance of flourishing.

Engagement

Experiencing flow is not so straight forward as one might think. Identifying an activity that engages one completely to the extent of becoming oblivious to felt emotions, does not happen so readily. Several factors such as fortune, enterprise and daring, play a vital role in enabling flow to materialize. In Nuri's case all these factors fall into place, at least while he is in Aleppo. Set to take up a dreary job as a fabric merchant, fate intervenes happily in Nuri's life in the form of his cousin Mustafa who introduces him to beekeeping. Nuri soon discovers beekeeping is not just a probable professional option to consider, but an avocation that fills him with flow.

"In the mornings I would wake up early, before the sun, before the muezzin called out for prayer. I would drive the thirty miles to the apiaries and arrive as the sun was just rising, fields full of light, the humming of the bees a single pure note. The bees were an ideal society, a small paradise among chaos" (Lefteri 9-10).

This ideal condition of existence however becomes irrevocably shattered at the outbreak of the civil war. After this, Nuri goes through a phase of disillusionment in which all senses of flow are drained out of him, as he tries desperately to come to terms with his many losses. The lost sense of flow nonetheless gradually returns to him when he realizes the imperative to flee Syria. The realization spurs him into embarking on a perilous quest to reach UK, a conviction he resolves to carry out regardless of his wife's indifference to the idea. "I'm going," I said, 'whether you come or not.' (Lefteri 52). Thus resolved Nurri becomes increasingly obsessed with the expressed goal of reaching England. It imbues him with a feeling of

flow rendering his senses immune to any conscious feeling of dread or obstacle. It must be acknowledged that the sensation of flow that Nuri experiences as a beekeeper and that of a fleeing refugee are markedly distinct. Yet the fact still remains that both these activities underpin his desire to continue with life with passion, albeit in different ways.

Relationship

Flourishing is not feasible in fact utterly inconceivable without relationships. The will to attain well-being simply ceases to exist in a person left with no meaningful ties to sustain. This is true for everyone, but particularly a forlorn refugee like Nuri. Violently stripped of his home, livelihood and any promise of a hopeful future, all that Nuri has is his wife and his cousin Mustafa. However, as long as these ties remain, he not only wants to go on but dares to hope. The fact that Mustafa is still alive and settled in England is specifically critical in this regard. "I know that I have a long journey ahead. Some days I think I cannot take another step, but I have a dream in my mind of meeting you in England" (Lefteri 101). This dream however would not have been so emboldening for Nuri if not for the presence of Afra by his side. It is indeed true that Afra is the one who delays Nuri's plans to flee Syria, and Nuri himself threatens to leave her behind if she is not willing to go along. Yet one cannot but wonder whether Nuri would have carried out his threat if Afra had refused to comply. It is highly unlikely for with Sami dead and Mustafa gone; the only relation Nuri is left with is his wife. Amply Bearing testimony to this point is the transition that their relationship undergoes in the course of the journey. Nuri did love Afra passionately even while in Aleppo, but it was more inspired by her physical attributes.

"She cried like a child, laughed like bells ringing, and her smile was the most beautiful I've ever seen. She could argue for hours without ever pausing. Afra loved, she hated, and she inhaled the world like it was a rose. All this was why I loved her more than life" (Lefteri 20).

Her son's death emotionally devastates Afra and the shock of it blinds her. This coupled with the many hardships she had to undergo with Nuri on their journey to England inevitably takes a toll on her looks. Still Nuri continues to love her, but now his love is more directed towards the person and what she means to him. Their relationship as a whole matures into a higher plane of significance.

"I want to lie down with you," she says, and what she means is, 'I love you. Please hold me.' There is an expression

on her face I recognise from years ago, and it makes my sadness feel like something palpable, like a pulse.” (Lefteri 133).

Christopher Peterson one of its pioneers was asked to describe positive psychology in two words or less. His simple answer was “other people” (FL 10). Nothing could be more succinct, and Nuri's story of desperation and survival affords an ideal case in point.

Meaning

The motivation to involve oneself in a common cause that is not self-serving, is inherently felt only by a handful of humanity. The fact is that even when provided with secure and comfortable circumstances, humanity feels aroused into purposeful action only if the enterprise caters to personal interest. So, people who genuinely participate in a cause or action serving a purpose beyond subjective gratification, do not merely represent a rare but a noble breed. The rarest and noblest among these are those who rise above their self-interest in spite of their own life situation being dire. This is precisely the factor that makes Nuri's character ineffably noble and invests his life with a much-needed aspect of meaning. Nuri's actions while staying as a refugee in a park in Athens bear ample testimony to this point. Himself a fleeing exile burdened with the physical and emotional baggage of a blinded wife, the last thing that Nuri needs is more responsibility to bear. Yet this is what he takes up during his stay in the park, when he realizes Nadim is a human trafficker and decides to follow him secretly to learn about the whereabouts of the teenage twins.

“At ten o'clock on the dot Nadim got up and went into the woods. Three minutes later the boys followed. I got up and followed them too, trying to keep enough distance between us so that they would not see me, while at the same time staying close enough so that I would not lose them” (Lefteri 257).

The attempt proves to be very nearly fatal for Nuri.

“I felt intense pain across my wrist. He'd slashed me with his knife. I held my arm up like a wounded bird, the blood coming out fast, dripping onto my trousers. I rushed away from him, stumbling over to Afra, pleading with her to wake up” (Lefteri 259).

He manages to survive, and does not try to repeat his actions. However, it is not so much fear for his own life that restrains Nuri, but the fact that his wife needs him.

“The twins had not returned since last night and I wanted to go and find them. I contemplated going back to the empty well to see if they were there or to ask if anyone had seen them, but fear was stopping me from venturing into the woods again. I needed to stay alive for Afra” (Lefteri 10).

Though Nuri is unable to track down the twins, the fact that he took the effort to save them is significant. It clearly conveys that in spite of all the pains and predicaments he himself has to shoulder; Nuri still cares about others and is prepared to do his utmost to help them.

Accomplishment

The liberty to perform an activity with no apparent reason or purpose in view save the pleasure of doing it, is probably the greatest luxury that life offers any of us. However, it is certainly not a luxury afforded to all, definitely not if you happen to be a refugee fleeing for your life like Nuri. From the time he begins his journey indeed from the very outbreak of the civil war, everything that Noorie does is done out of the compulsion to keep himself and his wife alive. The situation does improve upon reaching England but the bottom line remains precarious as ever. As a result, he is required to be extremely careful about what he does so that his chances of winning asylum are not jeopardized. In the midst of all the uncertainties however, he is offered eventually one opportunity to do something out of his own freewill, without any strings attached or purpose to fulfil.

“On the ground by my feet there is a bee. When I look closely, I see that she has no wings. I put my hand out and she crawls onto my finger, making her way onto my palm – a bumblebee... She is crawling over the back of my wrist now so I take her inside with me and sit in the armchair and watch her as she nestles into my hand, preparing to sleep” (Lefteri 28-29).

Nuri knows full well that tending to the bee is of no practical utility to him in his current circumstance. yet he does it.

“She's a fighter,’ I say, ‘and it was raining last night. She won't survive out there though, not for long, if she can't fly.’ I take the bee back outside, put her on a flower and I go to bed with Afra” (Lefteri 59).

So ultimately taking care of the injured be is something that Nuri does for its own sake. Nevertheless, it proves to be critical for it takes his mind off his predicament at least for a short while and enables him to do something that he has control over. In this regard it briefly restores to him a sense of self which he has been robbed off ever since the civil war and provides him with a feeling of accomplishment. The fact that Nuri has managed to flee Syria and reach England successfully is no doubt a great achievement. However, this achievement does not provide him any well-being for his situation still remains unresolved even in England. What does actually provide him a sense of well-being is the tending of the injured bee, which not only makes it possible for him to relive his happy beekeeping days from the past but also replenishes him with a hope for the future.

CONCLUSION

The inclination that invariably comes over one and all in the face of adversity is to simply surrender and be done with it. For someone like Nuri who has suffered profound losses and setbacks, such an inclination would indeed feel immensely overwhelming. Nuri nevertheless does not even betray any impression of wanting to give up in the narrative, let alone actually doing so. His perseverance thus is so extraordinary that many might be tempted to construe it as superhuman to the point of being impracticable. The fact however is that it is by no means idealized, and this precisely is the point that scrutinizing his character development through the lens of Seligman's theory makes clear. Unlike conventional approaches in psychology that prioritise "relieving the states that make life miserable" (AH i), Seligman's insists on "building the states that make life worth living" (AH i). The PERMA model operationalises this alternative conviction by propelling individuals toward prosperity in life, then simply arresting trauma from escalating. This orientation advanced by the PERMA model is what that Nuri exemplifies in the novel. Engulfed with so much misery, Nuri is not just looking for a way to reconcile himself to his calamitous situation in the hope of obtaining consolation. Of course, given his circumstances, no one could blame him for doing so, but opting not to do so is what that makes the decisive difference in his instance. The point is Nuri does not think in terms of traditional psychology and seek mere relief, instead he does so in terms of positive psychology and strives for renewal. Nuri himself is of course not conscious of the psychological and theoretical implications underlying his choice, but his lived experience vividly bears out the transformative potential of the PERMA model. If somebody like Nuri in

the depths of despair could practice the principles of practical psychology without deliberate awareness, then those fully cognizant of its utility could practice it more readily and effectively in the face of adversity. Hemingway's exhorting words quoted at the start of this paper, are after all not so exacting to uphold as it might seem.

ABBREVIATIONS

AH - Authentic Happiness

FL – Flourish

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