

Living With Joy

How does one live with joy? I certainly thought I knew when I agreed to do this service about it. “Oh, that'll be easy. I know all about joy. It's like, who I am.”

But, like, no it's not. I wish it were. I spend so many hours of my life just slogging through, getting things done, worrying about how dirty my house is or how seldom I call my 88-year-old mother, or how many plastic toys I should allow my 8-year-old kid to possess and whether letting him play those violent computer games he adores will warp his sweet little soul, or whether I'm doing enough to help make the world a better place, or, oh screw the world, my front garden is an ugly pile of weeds, I'm bringing down property values and I'm an embarrassment to my neighbors who have a lovely front garden, two children and busy careers. And it goes on and on. Worrying, comparing myself to others and falling short, despairing about the oil spill and the economy and our materialistic, selfish, ignorant, gas-guzzling, TV-addicted society, and my inadequacies as a daughter, mother, wife, housekeeper and world citizen.

I am missing the boat. I sit down at my kitchen to write this homily about living with joy and see that I am missing the boat. Then I notice that there is a symphony of bird song outside my kitchen door, the sun is pouring onto the lemon tree, the breeze is softly blowing, and I've been missing it. I am certainly not joyful. Distracted, dissatisfied, and preoccupied with my endless to-do list – that's me.

And then I stop, and watch the leaves dancing in the wind, and take in the blueness of the sky at the same time I take in a deep breath and utter a “Thank you” to the universe for letting me exist in such beauty. I catch a glimpse of those tenacious purple morning glories that cover the fence between us and our neighbors – our neighbors say they detest them, but I adore them – and I see they have climbed to the very top of our neighbor's 15 ft. tall bamboo in all their purple glory, and I am suddenly filled with delight, and, yes, joy, and tears of gratitude, ...and a sense of sorrow that I don't seem capable of living inside this joyous, grateful awareness more.

I want to. But really, only a small fraction of my waking hours are spent in joy.

I take some comfort in this quote by the 20th century American philosopher Norman O. Brown who wrote:

We have to surpass the Enlightenment notion that in the life of the species or of the individual there is a definitive changeover from darkness to light. Light is always light in darkness; ... light in darkness. Yes, mysterious...

Now, Brown is not talking about joy, per se, but truth, and yet in my mind, they are linked. It is in those moments of seeing some truth about human existence that I often feel the most profound joy. And I am so often suckered into thinking “ah, yes, **now** I see the key to lasting happiness. I just have to remember **this**” whatever it is. But darn it, it's not like that. There is no

moment of “definitive changeover from darkness to light.” We seem destined to slog through the darkness a good deal of the time. Why? Why can't I spend my days in a radiant mindfulness like that described by Mary Oliver in this poem entitled “Mindful”?

*Every day
I see or I hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle
in the haystack
of light.*

*It is what I was born for –
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world –
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.*

*Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant –
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.*

*Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these –
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?*

I have moments like these, but they are moments only. I know that doesn't make me exceptional. I know that is the human experience for most folk, but then I think "ok, so there's something wrong with the human design plan here. Why am I not constantly going for the good, savoring the moment, cherishing each pleasure, rather than having this gnawing sense of dissatisfaction with myself, my life, and my loved ones so much of the time?"

One need look no further than the the Buddha's First Noble Truth: Life is full of suffering. But I read about Buddhist monks and teachers who seem to have cracked the code for living in a state of fairly perpetual joy, and then I read that they have spent the equivalent of years practicing meditation. Years! Accckkk! I'll never catch up. I don't have that kind of time!

But when I do practice, even for only 10 minutes or less at a time, I see results. I'm really very much a beginner with this mindfulness thing, so I don't have much to report yet except that I think there's something to it. When I take the time to quietly go within, I feel like I give myself a better shot at tuning into the Loving, Intelligent, Eternal Awareness that is always there (always here) waiting for us to nourish us and guide us. You may call it God, or you may prefer to call it your highest self, or the power of love, or any number of names, but whatever it is, I think we can sometimes only access it with stillness, and I think learning to calm these monkey minds of ours might be one of the major keys to living with more joy. And I think that having the discipline to do it with any kind of regularity is one of the hardest things I've ever tried to do.

So, short of going off on a meditation retreat for the next few years, what can we do to live with more joy right now? Is there any easier route?

One book I read in preparation for this service, (*Living With Joy* by Sanaya Roman) had me list seven things that feel joyful when I do them, that I hadn't done in the last several months. Just making that list was a wonderful exercise. I encourage you to do it at home. List seven things you love to do that feel joyful when you do them. Now, the book goes on to ask you to list reasons why you don't do those things, make sub-lists, make promises to yourself about when you'll do things, but truthfully, I only got as far as listing the 7 things, but I'm happy to report I've done 6 out of those 7 since writing them down.

It's good, every once in awhile, to take a look at how deliberate you're being about pursuing joy. I tend to put its pursuit very low on my list of personal priorities. After all, I've got important things to do! I've got a son and husband and household to care for, my son's school to support, my fellowship to help nurture, sick friends to visit, a world to save. I can't take the time to read a mystery novel just for fun!

Oh, self-importance and self-seriousness are joy-killers for sure. When I don't pursue my own delights, I start feeling like a burdened worker-bee, a joyless martyr. Just ask my husband. It's a path I've walked all too often. And it's those who I love most, my son and husband, who suffer most when I'm feeling over-worked and under-indulged. So I urge all of us, especially for the sake of those you love, heck, for the sake of humanity (which can use as many joyful folks as it can muster) to indulge in doing those things you love to do, like having lunch with a friend or

getting a massage, or reading a good mystery, or creating something beautiful or walking on the beach, whatever. And do it often. And you don't have to feel guilty. Tell yourself it's what you must do, because you are someone who is embracing joy as a moral obligation.

Now, pursuing joy deliberately can produce some very satisfying results, but have you ever noticed how the deepest moments of joy often take you completely by surprise? And how often that joy is linked with sorrow?

Recently, a friend of mine emailed me and some of her other gal friends to get together and spend an evening with her in lending moral support as her husband of 23 years had suddenly decided he was going to leave the marriage, and she was feeling rather devastated. So we all gathered at another friend's house, for an evening of, what I'd anticipated to be a lot of tsk-tsking, hand-patting and sorrowful commiserating. Instead we laughed and shared deeply with each other and laughed and shared delicious food we'd all brought and laughed and together puzzled about this tricky terrain called marriage. And, ok, maybe we tsked and commiserated and man-bashed a tiny bit. But mostly we reveled in each other's companionship, and the deep satisfaction of bringing healing laughter to a friend in pain. It was one of the most surprisingly joyful evenings of my life.

William Blake hit the nail on the head, didn't he? Joy and woe are woven fine. I'll never forget the moment of laughter and tears Isaiah and I shared recently. I was reading aloud to him the final pages of an amazing novel by Neil Gaiman called *The Graveyard Book*. Our school librarian had turned us onto it, saying it was one of her favorite books in the world, and told us that she'd bawled at the end, so I was not surprised to find myself crying in the final scene when a mother and son are saying farewell to each other for the last time, knowing they'll never see each other again. So there I was, with my son in my arms, and we were both imagining what it would be like to be saying goodbye to each other forever, knowing on some level that one day that will happen to us, and the tears were dribbling down both our faces, and the more I read, the wobblier my voice became, which then caused the tearful Isaiah to start laughing at the goofy sound of my reading, and then we were both crying and laughing through to the end, and then we just held each other for awhile in silence. Isaiah finally said "Is this book a treasure, Mom?" "Yes, baby, it's a treasure," and we both marveled awhile at its riches. Then Isaiah said "That's the first time I've ever cried that I wasn't hurt." And a little while later, he thanked God for happiness and sadness. He got it. Joy and woe.

When I think about how often I lose patience with my sweet boy, or when I think about any number of the world's ills, I am often disheartened, broken-hearted, or despondent. Which does nobody any good, especially my son whom I long to inspire to live a life that's geared toward making the world a better place.

When we are in the dark forest of despair, how do we find our way out?

Flashlights. We gotta leave flashlights along the trail to help us find our way back to joy.

Here's one. Some of you got this flashlight on the 4th of July. This is one of the bookmarks we passed out at the parade. Kim Rankin cited this quote in her service here two weeks ago. It's by Galen Guengerich, co-minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, and it brings me back to joy every time I read it, so I've memorized it:

“Faith is a commitment to live as if certain things are true, and thereby help to make them so. Faith is a commitment to live as if life is a wondrous mystery, as if life is good, as if love is divine, as if we are responsible for the well-being of those around us...Faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become.”

This, for me, captures what our religion is about, and why I keep coming back. One of the greatest gifts of being part of this Live Oak community is a chance to remind each other of who it is that we want to be in the world, and that we can live with this kind of faith, and that there is more love, more hope, more compassion, and more joy available. That though we have broken our vows a thousand times, though we have slogged through our lives as if they were a burden and not a gift, we can come here again and again to renew our vision of what is possible, so that we can live not only more joyfully, but also with a deep sense of purpose, “as if we are responsible for the well-being of those around us.” Not like a burden. But like a sacred opportunity. George Bernard Shaw said it best:

“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

“I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community. And as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me, it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

This is the true joy in life. We will forget it over and over again, but then we can remind each other over and over and over again. May we let our lives be shining torches for each other, and for the world. Blessed be.