

Cultivating Joy in Our Lives

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Saturday, November 17 was a cold, gray day filled with freezing drizzle, breath that you could see coming out of your mouth, and a very crabby Yours Truly. Phoebe and I had signed our Goldendoodle Butterscotch up for a “nose work” class with All Breed Rescue and Training, in which he and other dogs would get to smell the room for treats, find them and eat them while a bunch of dog owners sat around, ate snacks, and made friends. Sounds wonderful, right?

Well, it sounded like it would be wonderful on a nice day. Honestly, I hoped they would cancel the session due to the weather. I didn't want to go out in the cold, slippery mess. All-Breed's building is not really handicapped-accessible, which meant that my aching knees and I would be taking Butterscotch up and down icy stairs with frozen handrails each time he cycled through the process, which took place one dog at a time. I knew we would be driving home after dark, which threatened dangerous roads, a slick backyard at home, and a possible challenge getting up our back stairs into the house. I kept waiting for the trainer to cancel; when she eventually messaged us to say the class was on, I am embarrassed to admit that I grumped all the way to All Breed while Phoebe patiently drove the dog and me, suffering my martyred silence and folded arms. When we got there, she had to remind me to stop playing games on my iPhone and put it away.

But then something happened. Butterscotch was first in the rotation, so before long I was up in front of the room with him, watching him figure out the game and love it. He started out with his tail between his legs, afraid; by the end of his first round, I had to work to get him away from the treats and out the door, he was so happy. When I looked up during his sniffing, I saw Phoebe video recording us as everyone else smiled. I couldn't help but smile back. Once Butterscotch was back in the car between rounds, I found that I was rooting for the other dogs. I cheered along with everyone else as each dog found the treats the first time. When a dog who seemed to have had a rough puppyhood came out, all of us fell silent until he succeeded at the game. A staff member helped me get Butterscotch in and out of the building, and I even found a way up the dreaded stairs without using the frozen handrail. As the final round ended, I noticed that my bad mood had dissipated completely and that I felt something else instead: joy. As we headed home, Phoebe asked me if I was glad that we had gone and I said yes without hesitation and meant it.

Joy is a curious thing, isn't it? It comes out of nowhere when we least expect it, and yet sometimes we have to let it in. On that dreary Saturday, when I wanted to be anywhere other than where I was, I had to let go of my bad mood to allow joy into my heart. I had to be willing to feel differently. Once I let that happen, the joy showed up.

If we want to have less sadness and more joy, we could go a step further than I did that day. Beyond resisting joy, beyond grudgingly letting it in, we could go after it. We could cultivate joy in our lives. And joy is certainly an appropriate topic for this season, both because many of our winter holidays and holy days involve joy, and because some of us need to work harder to cultivate joy in the time of early nights and cold days. I'd like to spend our time today thinking about what joy is and what that means for our attempts to seek it out and cultivate it.

First, joy is a response to abundance. We may find ourselves called to joy by experiences of love, moments of human generosity, material and social success, a sense of well-being, the beauty of nature or the arts, the tenderness in our relationships, or times when compassion and peace break into our too often cruel and violent world. So, we can rejoice and be so glad when we see a bird in a deep blue sky or hold a baby or attend a rally in support of humaneness in government. Or, as it happened to me, when I watched my fearful dog become bold and happy while gentle smiles reassured us. Our theme this month at High Plains is mystery, and joy can certainly also be a response to the abundance at the heart of all things, however we name it or elect not to name it. I happen to call it the mystery myself, and contemplating its depths often brings me joy.

If we want to cultivate joy in our lives, we can ask ourselves what we are doing to cultivate abundance: emotional abundance, relational abundance, spiritual abundance, creative abundance, and all other forms of abundance that open our hearts and bring us gratitude. Whatever abundance looks like in your life, as you practice it, you are practicing joy along with it.

Second, joy does not connect only with abundance; it also shows up in the context of love, peace, hope, and other positive feelings. Thus, our hymn “There is More Love Somewhere” starts with love but quickly moves on to hope, peace, and joy. These are all valued states of being and they have something to do with each other. There is joy in loving and in feeling loved; a sense of peacefulness can be a joyous experience. The expansiveness of a sense of hope can similarly bring joy with it. And thus, too, our call to worship, adapted from Israel Zangwill, in which coming into the circle of love and justice, the community of mercy, holiness, and health brings not just peace but the experience of joy as well.

If we want to cultivate joy in our lives, we can ask ourselves what we are doing to cultivate love, peace, hope, kindness, generosity, compassion, humility, and all of the other markers of well-being that make us happier and make the world a better place. As these capacities grow in our hearts, joy will grow along with them.

Third, joy is not just an individual matter; it has a collective component. We experience joy in our relationships as well as in our private lives, and, just as misery loves company, joy loves it too –but even more. Our joy makes those who love us happy, and the joy of those who love us magnifies itself in our own hearts. I have even had the experience of feeling joyful when someone I don’t know, someone who calls to schedule a doctor’s appointment or who bags my food at the supermarket, seems to be in a good mood. Joy can be contagious. In fact, I would say that my ability to feel joyful at my dog Butterscotch’s class had a lot to do with the joy in the eyes of the other dog owners.

If we want to cultivate joy in our lives, we can ask ourselves what we are doing to cultivate joy in the lives of others – people we know, people we don’t, people we seek out or people who we are thrown together with through happenstance or circumstance. If we are making a point of making other people joyful, they will almost surely return the favor.

Now, it’s easy to think of joy as something simple and pleasant, the “peaceful, easy feeling” that the Eagles sang about. But joy also has a more serious and even controversial side. I have

mentioned three rather lovely aspects of joy. Now it's time to mention three of its more complicated elements.

First, joy is radical. I don't mean this in the sense that joy is extreme, though we can certainly feel extreme joy, but rather that joy is a deep response to life, a basic orientation toward the world. We often use the word "radical" to mean extreme, but it actually comes from the Latin word for "root." A radical consideration of something goes to the root of that thing to understand it at its depths, its core. We can cultivate joy at our cores if we choose to. That doesn't mean we will necessarily be free of anger or pain; I am certainly not. But I have spent almost half a century now trying to figure out how to be more joyful at a basic level, and I think it just might be working.

For me, finding joy at the root has been about stopping, clearing my head, and looking around to see what I might be joyful about, as often as I can. The more I look for joyful things, the more I find. In fact, as a cancer survivor, I think I can safely say that simply being alive is an occasion for joy. Every morning that I wake up is its own reason for me to be joyful. Every afternoon that I work on my job, write a song or pet the cat is joyful. Getting into bed at night to read is joyful. Treating joy as radical means that we keep on looking for joy until we find it because there is always more joy somewhere. If you have put joy at the center of your life, I am delighted for you. If you have not but think it might be worth the work, I encourage you to do it with all my heart.

Second, joy is risky. It can make you look like a dupe or a sucker. After all, so much is wrong with our society and our world. There is so much unnecessary suffering around us. Only an idiot would be joyful while children scream in border jails, white supremacists commit hate crimes, the polar caps melt, and politicians suppress the vote and then trash democracy in order to stay in power after losing elections. Right?

Well, yes and no. There are many good reasons to be somber, to grieve, and to be angry. And – not but, and – there are many, many good reasons to be joyful. For each ounce of hatred, there is a pound of love. For every lie, there are a hundred truths about beauty and human kindness. For every inch of corruption, there is a mile of human integrity. For every act of violence, there are a thousand acts of peace. We have much for which to be joyful.

There is, though, another sense in which joy is risky, and it is psychological rather than political. To be joyful is to open ourselves to vulnerability. I have had many pets in my life that I have loved with all my heart. They brought me great joy. And when they died, they brought me great pain. Finding joy in a friend or sweetheart means weathering disagreements that can be frustrating and profoundly sad. Developing a deep relationship with a parent can be as comfortable as the best memories of one's first ever neighborhood. But as I learned a few years ago, that parent's death can be disorienting and shattering in a way that little else ever has been for me. Joy calls for vulnerability, and vulnerability brings emotional risk. I suspect that for most of us, the joy is still worth it. But it is not without its hardships.

Third, and most uncomfortably, joy is inherently political. What I mean by that is less about Democrats and Republicans and more about flourishing and suffering. People have the amazing

capacity to find joy in even very difficult situations. But I am going to go out on a limb here and say that it is harder to feel joyful when you are so poor that you have to decide between paying rent and going to a doctor. It's harder to feel joyful when you are afraid to go out at night for fear that you might be attacked. It's harder to feel joyful when you are overwhelmed with hunger. And it's harder to feel joyful when you just aren't sure whether that baker will make you a wedding cake or not because you're marrying someone of your own sex. When social conditions support our flourishing, it is easier to feel joyful; when social inequality causes us suffering, joy might come a little less easily. Since our flourishing and suffering is not merely about our individual choices but is also about whether society treats us in good faith or bad faith, joy is inescapably political.

Now, that last point might sound like a real downer. But I actually think that the political nature of joy offers each of us a wonderful possibility. It's tempting to see progressive political activism as shrill and humorless, as "politically correct", as sour and joyless. Tempting, yes, but also too easy – and wrong. The work we do to make the world more loving, safer, kinder, more welcoming, to everyone, we do, at our best, out of joy and in the service of joy.

It is precisely because my racial and class advantages make it easier for me to access joy in uncomplicated ways that I want that same joy, that same abundance, to be available to people from whom I differ racially and along class lines. And it is precisely because my joy has been tempered by negative experiences that I have had as a woman and a queer person that I want all people with whom I share a gender and a sexuality to have as much uncomplicated access to joy as I perceive men and heterosexual people to have. None of this is about hating or resenting people on the socially valued side of the scale, of whom I am, after all, one. It is about wanting all of us, every last one of us to have full, utter, complete access to abundance, to love, to opportunities for happiness, to joy. And because danger, fear, and harm limit and damage joy, it is about wanting all of us, every last one of us, to be free from danger, free from fear, free from harm. That is what progressive political activism is about. It is about moving all of us from suffering to flourishing and from pain to joy. It's that simple. The strategies, the policies, the struggles are far from simple. But the goal is joy undamaged by social, political, and economic inequality. To modify our opening hymn slightly, there is more joy somewhere and we're gonna keep on till we bring it. We're gonna keep on till we live it. We're gonna keep on till everyone has it. There is more joy somewhere.

Joy is about abundance. Joy is about love. Joy is about community. Joy is about our deepest hearts. Joy is about taking emotional risks. Joy is about working joyfully for a fully joyful world. All of which means that ultimately, joy is in our hands. Joy is something we practice, not just something we feel. Joy is something we create, not just something we find. Joy is something we offer, not just something we experience. So may all of us cultivate joy, in our lives, in the lives of those we love, and in the lives of all people, that the world may become the truly joyful place it could be. Amen and blessed be.

Benediction: Our benediction today is a modification of our opening hymn. I will read it aloud, then invite you to sing it. There is more joy right here. There is more joy right here. And we're gonna share it with each other. There is more joy right here. Please sing that with me. There is

more joy right here. There is more joy right here. And we're gonna share it with each other.
There is more joy right here.