

CLAIMING JOY

I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy

Down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart.

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Down in my heart, down in my heart

To stay.

I've been thinking a lot about joy lately, what it is and what we mean when we speak, or sing, of joy. What unique place in our life experience does it have? Why isn't it the same as happiness—or gladness or delight. What if my talk this evening were about 'claiming happiness'? No, it's not the same. So what is 'that joy'—and is it 'down in our hearts to stay'?

Unfortunately in spite of the lovely words of the song, I've noticed that, in our daily, ordinary lives, we don't often use the word joy or joyful to describe our own positive state of being. Try saying to yourself: I was full of joy on that occasion. We might possibly say 'it was a joyful occasion', or, as a teacher once wrote on my daughter Alisa's report card, "She's a joy to have in the classroom." We're much less likely to claim a true, full-of-joy state for ourselves. We're much more likely to say we were happy or glad or delighted.

What, I'd like to ask, are we reserving joyfulness FOR? Is it in our lives at all.....what does it look like, feel like, what's its taste? What's keeping us from naming the name, from saying 'I am joyful'?

Perhaps we've put joy in a drawer labeled religious happiness. We pull it out for religious use: for worship services, to express Easter gladness, or sing about at Christmas time.

The truth is that joy does have spiritual connotations, and I think that is its unique gift of. A joy-filled experience rises from deep within us, from the very center of our being, from the place where the Spirit makes its home. It is a gift from God.

Of course there are many times in our lives, long periods of time when it seems impossible to experience joy. Being alive includes grief and hardship and long dragging days and months. Spiritual growth comes through those times, through the dark winters of our lives. We do need to face these experiences, but we also need to acknowledge and name our joy. Perhaps we have overlooked the spiritual growth that comes through experiences of joy.

So what do I know about joy?

Matthew Fox has a beautiful children's book titled *In the Beginning There Was Joy*. I love the wisdom of that title. When we re-joyce, we are reclaiming something which was in the beginning, we are finding something we have mislaid or forgotten. We re-joyce, we joy-once again. It's one way we are re-made into the wholeness God created us for. In the same way that re-membering is putting our parts or members back together into wholeness, re-joyicing is bringing alive within us the joy which was in the beginning. We are claiming something which truly belongs 'deep in our hearts to stay'.

So the first thing I know about joy is that it was from the beginning, and is for us to reclaim today.

I also know that joy is a genuinely physical state, that our bodies participate in our joy. Can you imagine feeling really joyful and NOT having it touch your face? We laugh with joy and our faces light up. We are likely to throw our arms wide, give voice to our feeling; we're inclined to start dancing or singing. Joy is physical, and some of our most joy-filled moments rise from our experience of the physical world. From Judaism comes the tradition that, on the

day of Judgment, God will only ask one question: Did you enjoy my world? How would we answer God's question? Did we enjoy God's world?

In the book *Animal Dreams*, Barbara Kingsolver writes in the voice of her protagonist Codi, "It seemed extraordinary and accidental that I was alive. I felt crowded with all the sensory messages that make up life, as opposed to survival, and I recognized this as something close to joy." This opening to life, enjoying God's world for the first time becomes the turning point of Codi's life. The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia has a painting by Henri Matisse called "Joy of Life". It's a full, lush, sensual painting with figures dancing joyfully in a circle, playing musical instruments, gathering flowers. The tones are rich with vibrantly colored trees seeming to sway fluidly, joyfully with the music. This is true joy, truly being alive in the world.

Claiming our joy is claiming our embodied, sensory selves, and the sensory world we are in.. It invites us to a kind of playfulness which we often don't allow ourselves. Joy takes us off the leash of our seriousness, and says, 'Come, laugh, come play, come rejoice!' 'Can we', we respond, 'dare we?' A year ago I received as a gift a kite: .not on a string but on a long telescoping pole, complete with beautiful dove and a long beribboned tail. In order to use my gift, I had to wave my arms around swooping the kite over my head or run across the lawn so it would fly high after me. Although I started out quite seriously intent on learning how to master this unusual gift, I ended up laughing with the pleasure of playfulness as the dove dipped and soared at the tip of its pole with its ribbon trailing and dancing around it. Joy rose within me and took me by surprise.

Joyful experiences can sneak up on us unexpectedly, ambush us like an unexpected wave from the ocean, and we stagger a bit for balance while we laugh. I should note here that I think some joyful experiences come like waves, but others may be quieter ripples which surround us

as we sway lightly with them. Joy varies in intensity.....but it is never anything we can plan on experiencing. In truth, we are claimed by joy; we don't do the claiming. Once, many Januarys ago, I was at Kirkridge Retreat Center when a winter snowstorm descended. By evening the sky had cleared and three of us decided to venture out into the knee deep snow . The powdery surface sparkled and glittered like diamonds in the moonlight. Unexpected joy flooded us and, without speaking, we began to dance around a stone pillar. Laden by heavy coats and high boots, we eventually fell backwards into the drifts and stretched snow angels into the whiteness. Still without a word being spoken, we rose and returned to our dry warm beds. None of us spoke of it the next day either. There had been a spiritual depth to the joy that claimed us that night which took us far beyond the place of words.

Anne Lamott's book *Plan B Further Thoughts on Faith* recounts an experience of being surprised by joy. She and a friend were in San Quentin prison for the first time, doing a presentation for some prisoners on how to write.. Anne's talk gave advice but her friend simply enthralled them by starting to tell stories. They begged to know how to tell their stories. As Anne tells it, "we had evoked the listening child in these men with the only real story anyone has ever told, that the teller has been alive for a certain number of years, and has learned a little." And Anne's tentativeness and fear were swept away by a wave of joy as she saw these men anew as "beautiful rough-edged glass" with lives which had value.

There is something else important about joy waves. They don't last. We can't cling to them. What we can do is feel rippling out of the wave and sway with it. William Blake said it best in these famous lines:

The one who binds to himself a joy
doth the winged life destroy;

but the one who kisses the joy as it flies,
lives in eternity's sunrise.

Eternity's sunrise! We live in joy by letting go of the experience and savoring the ripples which flow through our days.

I acknowledged earlier that our lives intertwine hardship and blessing. Sorrow and joy are both inherent in being fully human. Perhaps our joy would not be such a gift without our sorrow. Perhaps our sorrow and pain would lose their power for transformation without experiences of joy. As Kahil Gibran writes in *The Prophet*,

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been delight.

William Taber, a wise Quaker elder, talked about something which he called the cross of joy. Even though I heard him speak, and read what he wrote about this paradox, I didn't get it. He was acknowledging how, by accepting and living the painfulness, the cross of our lives, it may take on joy—while still being intensely painful. I think I get it now. My mother is almost 89, and, due to a stroke, she's in a wheelchair with one functioning arm and leg. She has midstage Alzheimer's disease. For the last three and a half years I have spent almost an hour a day with her. It has been incredibly painful to accompany her in her diminishment. I know that many of you have taken such journeys of companionship and know that pain. The joy of the cross began to rise for me when I realized that my time with her spiritually centered my day, that she was drawing me into the Divine Now.....because now is the only place she lives. I know the joy within the cross when she joins me in singing old hymns which she knows by heart even

though I need the book. I knew the joy within the cross on the recent day when she lay in her bed with her eyes closed and didn't sing but I sang. And every time I asked her if she wanted another hymn, she gave an almost imperceptible nod. Joy and pain weave together in our lives, and God is in the weaving.

I said that the title of this talk "Claiming Joy" might have been more accurate if it were "Being Claimed by Joy", but it's not as simple as that. We can be open to the possibilities for joyfulness. There are ways we can put ourselves in joy's path so that we are ready 'to kiss the joy as it flies'. Joy is gift, just as any experience of the Spirit is gift, but sometimes we are more receptive to the gift than other times. I want to remind us of some ways of being receptive.

My two and a half year old granddaughter Tessa wakes up every morning by hopping out of bed, going to her mother, who is still sleeping, and exclaiming with delight, "I'm awake, Mamma! I'm awake! Are you awake, Mamma? I'm awake!!" She finds great joy in her aliveness in the morning. Small children seem to easily live in the now. Do we savor the present moment? Can we say "I'm awake, God! I'm really awake! Right this moment I'm awake, God!!"

Back in January, the Washington Post asked the world-reknown violinist Joshua Bell to sit in a subway station one afternoon, and play his best, most beautiful pieces. He dressed appropriately for the job: jeans, jacket, baseball cap. During the hour and a half, he played, over 1000 people passed and \$32 in coins was tossed into his open violin case, but he was, the paper reported, 'all but ignored.'. Only seven people stopped to listen. Well, you say, that was a busy commuter crowd....but the longest anyone listened to him was three minutes. Sometimes it isn't the joy that is flying but we who are flying too quickly to notice it.

This practice of being awake to the present moment leads us often into gratitude, which I

think is Joy's first cousin. How often do you take time for a gratitude break? It's like a coffee break only much more nutritious—and you can't drink too much of it! What if we had a couple of brief stops in the day to notice, to name and experience the blessedness of God's gifts? Or what if we adopted the practice of the 18th century Russian Saint Seraphim of whom it is said that he greeted all whom he met as 'My Joy'. What would it be like for us inwardly or even outwardly to greet those whom we meet as 'my joy'? Surely not everyone he met was immediately and obviously what I'd recognize as a joy. But I wonder what shift would happen within us if we acted as if everyone we met had the potential for giving our day joy....even a spark of joy. I know I'd approach the checkout line in the grocery store differently.....I'd be wondering where's the potential in this encounter.

I have one more observation about inviting joy into our lives. Frederick Beuchner is famously quoted as saying "your call is where your joy meets the world's need, where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.". Underlying that wisdom is the simple acknowledgment that we experience joy when we use our gifts. When my artist friend sculpts a shapely pot, when the cook creates a tasty dinner, when the writer finds the right words, when the care-giver gives tender care, when the teacher sees a student's face light up, there is joy. Matthew Fox's book *In the Beginning There Was Joy* beautifully recounts the creation story as joy overflowing into creativity. Using our gifts is a creative experience. We are participating with God in the ongoing miracle of creativity in the world. My father was a gifted repair-er; he could fix anything. I remember his pleased chuckle as he fastened the axhandle to the axhead, set the door to swinging smoothly again, gave our old toaster a new lease on life. In his chuckle, I heard a quiet ripple of joy in even such humble use of his gift.

There's a poem prayer by Werner Janney which contains the wonderful lines 'Blow

bubbles through my mortared walls. Yeast my bread.’ This, finally, is what joy is really about. It blows bubbles through the mortared, sealed places of our lives, The surprising, physically alive yeast of joy enlarges our lives into what they are meant to become. Without seasons of joy in our lives, we are flat, solid, walled, we are not fully awake, we are not fully alive.

So, may our prayer tonight be, in the poet’s words, ‘O God, blow bubbles through our mortared walls. Yeast our bread. Pat us, God, we’ll try to bounce.’

Nancy L. Bieber

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Oasis Ministries Celebration Dinner Speech

