

Peace: The Virtue of JOY

by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD

It is the nature of joy that we feel both childlike and appreciative for being alive. When we feel joyful we feel light-hearted. And although we may accept that our joy is often transitory, we still desire it to be a constant in our life. Why? Because we know joy is a measure of our happiness, an outcome of pleasurable experiences, and perhaps a measure of the abundance we sometimes feel. Furthermore, the joy we feel may be directly related to our satisfaction in helping others, or the gladness we feel for their wellbeing.

We all know the feeling of inner joy — a kind of bubbling contentment. And we also know how good it feels to share our joy outwardly with others. In both instances, it is difficult to separate genuine joy from a sense of peacefulness. The reason is because joy is comforting, and it gives us safe and secure feelings amidst the tension or distress of daily living. In this sense, making room for joy throughout the day is akin to experiencing momentary sanctuary for peace.

Expressions of Joy

What gives you joy in life? This is not a difficult question to answer for most people, yet many will attest to desiring more joy. In other words, there is a felt sense of lack of it, as if the search for lasting joy is an unending quest. Do you feel lacking in joy in certain aspects of your life? If so, are you able to do something about it? Consider the following ways joy can be expressed.

Joy often grows out of the practice of generosity and compassion.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979, was undaunted in her daily desire to help those in need. She said: “Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.” Mother Teresa’s joy was inseparable from her love, compassion and generosity.

Are you able to experience joy out of helping others and being generous with your time, energy, skills, knowledge or financial contributions?

Joy grows out of practicing reverence for life, and in embracing the inherent beauty that permeates all beings and nature.

Joy often has a kinship with awe and wonder, characterized by a feeling of inseparateness with the object of our admiration. The joy of witnessing life is different than doing something *to* life. The joy of just being in the presence of a flower, sunset, hummingbird, child, person of different ethnicity — this type of joy precludes any desire to act. The philosopher/poet Theodore Roethke talks about such joy: “I have merged, like the bird, with the bright air,/And my thought flies to the place by the bo-tree./Being, not doing, is my first joy.”

Do you make time in your day to simply be — to bear witness and merge with your surroundings so that a renewed sense of awe and wonder gives you joy?

Joy is a natural extension of showing kindness and gratitude.

This feeling of joy is often characterized by the expression of “wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve.” Furthermore, it is seen as a sincere smile. The Vietnamese monk, activist and writer, Thich Nhat Hanh has dedicated his life to help people experience peace, and he exemplifies this by his beatific smile. He says: “Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

It is not surprising that our most revered images of God-inspired or God-illuminated persons are of them smiling. Such images inspire us to readily access the joyful peace they feel inwardly as that which we desire ourselves. The Sufi faith tradition uses the phrase, “the smiling forehead,” to describe the qualities of joy, warmth, insight and revelation experienced in deep inner peace — with oneself and/or with God. Such peace is illuminating, and one’s smile is a way of emitting a light of joy to the world. Sufi master and leader, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan reminds us: “Illumination is always linked with a kind of smile, like the mysterious, lingering smile of the Buddha.”

Would you say smiling comes easy to you, or are you aware that your face often tends to be serious?

How do you express kindness and gratitude — does this give you joy?

Joy is a tether to the spiritual life.

Most faith traditions consider joy a human birthright and inherent condition of Creation. Lutheran mystic Martin Buber believes that “The beating heart of the universe is holy joy.” Philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin similarly acknowledges: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Such words are comforting, yet most spiritual aspirants would probably agree that the spiritual path is fraught with tests, failures, sorrow, doubt, and a heavy dose of seriousness. In the Christian Bible, Jesus says: “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:14) Yet, many people must trust that this is so by a continuous investment of faith. In Psalms (30:5) it is said: “One may experience sorrow during the night, but joy arrives in the morning.” Again, many people awaken each morning with sadness or an aching in the heart that questions any notion of joy.

When our spirit is tested by life, we are often bolstered by hope. Our faith practice then allows us to find hope in prayer or in surrendering our burdens to God or a spiritual teacher. Our spiritual faith, acting as a refuge of grace in our day, then becomes a stepping-stone to joy and peace.

How does your faith tradition (if you relate to one) bolster faith, hope and confidence to face life everyday? In what way does your spiritual path give you joy?

Joy cannot be talked about without recognizing its opposites.

Thus, we say joy and sorrow, happiness and sadness, smiles and tears, ecstasy and agony. It is human nature that the experience of one intensifies our awareness of the other. Many people find their greatest strength and courage out of joy's opposite. They become thankful for the intensity of feelings associated with sorrow, sadness, flowing tears and the like, and they use them as stepping-stones to a new sense of hope and joy.

It is okay to shed tears over the loss of someone or something. It is okay to feel sad or hurt. We often want to avoid those expressions or feelings that pierce our heart and make us tender. But what if we were to believe that such feelings are inseparable from life, and they help us to span the gulf separating us from others experiencing these very same feelings! Knowing this can make us more authentic, and we don't have to falsely present an image of our self to the world. The poet Kahlil Gibran believes that "He who has not looked on Sorrow will never see Joy." Joy, therefore, is a sanctuary from sorrow — it gives us hope and rekindles a flame of peace of mind.

Reflect on those times in your life when joyous feelings turned to sadness or hurt, and when tears and sorrow turned to joy. Have you ever felt that sadness, hurt, tears, disappointment or sorrow were important stepping-stones to feeling a new sense of hope and joy?

Enjoying Life

Many people go out into the world each day with a dark cloud over their head — they feel burdened, depressed, anxious and stressed. Their whole day is one of struggle, routine, duties, obligations and ultimately resentment. Such people often show their displeasure with life through a serious face or brooding disposition. Yet, most would say that the desire for joy, peace, freedom, safety and comfort rank highest on their list of values.

Joy cannot be measured by the size of the deed or activity. Its measurement may best come from small or spontaneous acts. Here are a few ideas on how to invite more joy into your life:

- Laugh. Laugh from your belly and feel your face stretch. Find a reason to laugh everyday.
- Embrace humor. Respectfully joke around and be playful. Appreciate the value of a good joke or pun.
- Watch children or animals at play; play with a child or animal.
- Kick a rock down the street. Walk through autumn leaves. Be with nature.
- Draw a picture of your "inner child" when they are most happy.
- Celebrate: the loss of a pound, a job well done, or a new season. There can almost always be a reason to celebrate, so, treat your self!
- Create a festivity to mark a key change in your life.
- Listen to inspiring music. Sing freely and passionately.
- Dedicate a few bites of your meal to a hungry child in another country.

- Volunteer.
- Paint with no reference to technique. Explore a new hobby.
- Give yourself permission to be curious, creative and uncertain.
- Take a long hot bath, shower or sauna.
- Give thanks to God.

Remember:

Joy is a powerfully simple stepping-stone to inner peace. It can measure the degree of our faith in goodness and hope. Without joy life can appear to be a tragedy; with joy and a sense of humor life may appear to be more like a tragic comedy. Always find a way to give to others the joy you feel inside.

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