

February 7, 2021, “Gateways to Joy” First Unitarian Church of Toledo



Meditation, Contemplation, and Prayer: “Moments of Joy”, Judy Lee Trautman

So much sadness and grief abounds in our times. So many deaths, COVID deaths, and deaths from other illnesses or old age that seem so much sadder, as we cannot congregate to honor the lives that have touched us.

Deaths from violence, such as the recent, local domestic violence shooting of three little children, seem so much more grievous. Why does anyone need to kill when pandemic death is all around us? Why do people continue to harm others, out of anger, or sometimes just because they see them as different?

We are also deprived of the solace of human contact. We cannot meet the new babies that have come into our families. We miss hugs and meals out with friends, entertaining friends in our homes, greeting people in church or other places of worship – things we took for granted a year ago. We are lonely in ways we have never been before.

Many people are suffering losses – of income, homes, food security. Other people seem to be consumed by indifference and selfish greed.

The pandemic has brought out the worst in some people.

Yet, amid all this sadness, moments of joy still happen.

Babies are still being born in our families and friend circles, even though we may have to greet them virtually. People are falling in love, getting married, completing degrees, and entering new professions, in spite of the challenges and perhaps without the usual in person celebrations. While walking out in nature, we can still see beautiful sunrises, sunsets, trees, and skies in all their seasons of beauty, birds, and squirrels and deer. Even virtual conversations can trigger memories of joyful moments that we can relive, if only for just a moment. Some people are still creating beautiful music, poetry, or art that bring us moments of joy. We are inspired to create new ways of connecting with friends, and perhaps appreciating our friendships even more. Grassroots efforts are springing up to support those who are hungry or homeless.

The pandemic has brought out the best in some people.

Let us take one minute of silent gratitude for the moments of joy we still have.

Sermon: “Gateways to Joy”, by Judy Lee Trautman

Last November, in the midst of the angst, sorrow, and suffering of the continuation of COVID and the realization that winter was coming, and the pandemic had not gone away, I chanced upon an article in *The Conversation* titled “Finding joy in 2020? It’s not such an absurd idea, really”, by Angela Gorrell, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology, George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. We still have not conquered COVID, winter is not over, and political unrest plagues us in other ways. Is finding Joy not an absurd idea?

The author makes a profound distinction between joy and happiness. Everyone seems to be seeking happiness. There are entire books written about happiness. There is even a happiness quotient that

rates countries for the happiness of their citizens. But joy is not a topic that is often a part of the conversation, or if it is, it is considered synonymous with happiness.

In making her distinction between the two, Professor Gorell says,

I want to be clear: Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness tends to be the pleasurable feeling we get from having the sense that life is going well.

Joy, on the other hand, has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorrow and even – sometimes, most especially – in the midst of suffering. This is because joy is what we feel deep in our bones when we realize and feel connected to others – and to what is genuinely good, beautiful and meaningful – which is possible even in pain. Whereas happiness is generally the effect of evaluating our circumstances and being satisfied with our lives, joy does not depend on good circumstances.ⁱ

She further acknowledges that you cannot “do” joy. And I realize that we are a solution driven society. We want to know what we can *do* to relieve our sorrow or suffering. So, it may take a little altering of our thinking, for us to profit from what she calls “Gateways” to joy that can prepare us for and make us more open to joy.

The poet Rumi says, ‘Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.’ I think the same thing is true of Joy. We need to seek and find all the barriers we have within us that we have built against joy. We need to look for Gateways to Joy.

Gratitude

One of the gateways she mentions is gratitude. It is certainly not a revolutionary idea that Gratitude is a good practice for our mental well-being. Just as the sun is always there even when covered by clouds, there are always blessings alongside our sorrows and suffering. Gratitude can become a gateway to joy when we make it a spiritual practice.

At a particularly dark period of my life, I read a profound book called *The Artist’s Way*ⁱⁱ, which advised keeping a gratitude journal in which I was to write five things I was grateful for before retiring for the night. I was desperate to feel better, so I tried it. At first it was tedious and difficult. Oh, I could write the first five, maybe even the second and third. But it became a challenge to come up with a new five each evening. I cannot say that I found immediate joy. However, after faithfully trying to do the practice, even when sometimes my teeth were grinding to get to number 5, there gradually was a shift. I did begin to realize that sorrow and suffering was not all that was in my life. There were some very good things, especially supportive friends. And in fully realizing the blessings of those friendships, I eventually experienced joy. Going back to Gorell’s definition of joy, that it is a “feeling deep in our bones” that we experience when we feel connected to others, my gratitude journal eventually brought that realization of connectedness.

Beauty

The other thing that the book *The Artist’s Way* gifted me was to dive into my own creativity. The journal was a step towards a practice of writing. I wrote some poetry and other reflections. I also started drawing and painting on a near daily basis. I let go of the notion that it had to be good art to be worth doing. I just did it. I wrote. I painted. And the creative process may be the real meaning to being created in the image of God.

Since I long ago gave up the notion that God was anthropomorphic, I did not imagine God as some man on a throne. But God created. We can be co-creators of our world and the act of creating brings joy to ourselves, and sometimes even to others.

Music and dance can be gateways to joy. You do not have to be a concert musician to enjoy music or a great ballerina to enjoy dance. Sing in the shower. Dance in your living room. Listen to your

favorite music genre and sing or hum along. Pick up that guitar or the trumpet you played in high school. Learn to play it again. Drum on the table. Rhythm is visceral, rooted in your heartbeat.

Another gateway to joy is nature. Looking at a tree and considering our connection to trees brings me joy. When I stare at the ocean, I realize that the waves growing, cresting, and then disappearing, only to be replaced by the next wave is an important metaphor for rebirth and renewal. It does bring me joy. And it encourages me to paint and write, so it brings creative joy also. During the pandemic, we may sometimes find it difficult to be out in nature, especially in winter. But most of us can take at least short walks and find a tree – perhaps hug it, paint it, or write a poem about it.

Remembrance

Memory can be a gateway to joy. Gorrell suggests a spiritual practice of meditating on a memory of a particularly joyful moment - falling in love, being able to help someone, receiving unexpected help, glimpsing a beautiful park, seeing a new baby for the first time, playing with a kitten or puppy. Breathing in the joy of that moment and reliving it can bring a deep return of joy. Perhaps then writing about or drawing aspects of that precious memory will further consecrate the joyful memory and bring renewed joy.

Reconnection

Reconciliation and reconnection can be gateways to joy. Since joy is about connections with others, repairing a rift with a friend or family member can bring joy. It is not always possible, but sometimes taking the first step towards forgiveness or reconnection can bring a growing sense of joy.

And even if there is not a rift, but life's busy-ness has caused neglect of a former friend, now might be an excellent time to write that letter or email, to pick up the cell phone and dial.

I know of one person who started writing an actual letter each day of the initial shutdown of the pandemic. When I got mine, it brought tears of joy. In it he expressed how he felt about me, the kinds of things we do not say in casual conversations, but perhaps should. His letter prompted me to sit down and write a response in which I could share my admiration for him.

I do not know how he felt about the practice in the end. I know that many years ago, I decided to write a letter for every day of Lent. That is 40 letters. It meant that I connected with people that I did not know well or with whom I had lost contact. It became a very meaningful practice, especially as I received responses from many of the recipients.

Compassion

When we are immersed in sorrow, grief, anxiety, or pain, it is normal to focus on that personal pain. These feelings are not a competition. Realizing that another might be suffering worse pain is not necessarily helpful. We have a right to our feelings. But reaching out and helping others, in ways that we can, may bring joy.

One thing that has impressed me during this pandemic has been the number of small, grassroots efforts to help others. Backpacks for Humans is a great example. One guy just decided that the homeless deserved dignity and help. So, he developed a program to distribute backpacks filled with necessary items for living on the streets. The program has grown and received a lot of support from individuals and even corporations. One person can initiate change.

Many neighborhood organizations have re-energized as Facebook groups to connect resources with need. Food pantries have increased their distributions and changed their formats to be safer during COVID. Even a little gesture like bringing your neighbor's trash can back from the curb, or checking on an elderly neighbor, might bring reciprocal joy.

Intimacy

Most of us are suffering from a serious loss of intimacy, the hugs and physical presence of family members and friends. Humans are wired for touch. A sustained hug can bring about neurological

changes that flood our bodies with chemicals that naturally fight depression and anxiety. Yet loneliness existed before the pandemic made hugs, kisses, and handholding dangerous.

Many of us have, at least on occasion, experienced the feeling of being lonely in a crowd. Dr. Vivek Murthy and Brené Brown in an April podcastⁱⁱⁱ shared three types of relationships that are necessary to those who do not feel lonely. Some of these are more obvious than others. One necessary type of relationship that we do not always consider is to one or a few people with whom we can feel safe enough to share our deepest feelings, our vulnerability, and know that we will be understood.

I had an experience recently that really enlarged my view of intimacy. I have led Dances of Universal Peace for many years. The Dances are spiritual, a moving meditation to sacred phrases of the world religions. In more normal times, the dances are physically intimate. We hold hands, hug, sing as we look deeply into each other's eyes. Of course, we had to stop meeting as the pandemic first surged.

A few months later, I and my co-leaders started presenting the Dances on Zoom. At first glance this seems a preposterous idea – dancing in our own homes to music played in the musicians' homes with a PowerPoint to suggest modified movements. It takes an enormous amount of work to prepare. I was beginning to doubt my sanity in trying to do it.

But during the reflection time at a recent Zoom Dance, I had suggested that each person mention something they were grateful for. As the reflections unfolded, it was apparent that many members of the circle were suffering from clinical depression, anxiety, grief, loss. To a person their gratitude was for the circle, the dances, the love that they shared with the participants, and their appreciation for the Zoom dances and the YouTube samplings and meditations that I post for their personal meditation. We pledged to pray for each other.

This was that safe space intimacy that we need even when we are not deprived of touch and is so much more vital now that we are.

Working for Change

Working for change might be a gateway to joy. Participating in a group that wants to bring about needed change in our society helps build connections so necessary for joy, and also creates a sense of meaning in life. Grief expert David Kessler in his recent book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*^{iv}, suggests that a healing stage of grief comes when we can arrive at meaning. It may be hard to see meaning yet in this pandemic, but we perhaps do see some glimmers of silver linings.

Perhaps a part of the meaning we may eventually derive is a renewed sense of the value of the kind of personal relationships that we now find unavailable – singing, meeting in person, hugs, and going to religious services, football games, or the theater.

Yet there are things about the old normal that need changing. And now might be a good time to connect with a group that is trying to effect that change. Can we be more inclusive in our society? Can we make progress towards eliminating systemic racism? Can we improve the lot of the disabled and other marginalized people? Can we mitigate the effects of climate change and the destruction of our environment? No one person can address all the changes necessary for an improved new normal. But each of us could pick a cause and join with others to make a difference. This gateway brings the possibility of connecting with others and might be a kind of anticipatory joy, the joy of a better future.

And, since this Gateway to Joy can also involve extremely difficult and even discouraging work, Buddhists might caution us to not get too attached to the outcomes. It might be well to remember the words of Mahatma Gandhi, 'Joy lies in the fight, in the attempt, in the suffering involved, not in the victory itself.' In other words, joy lies not in the destination, but in the journey.

Gorrell concludes her article on an extremely optimistic note.

In the midst of a year in which it is not difficult to stumble onto suffering, the good news is that we can also stumble onto joy. There is no imprisoned mind, heartbreaking time, or deafening silence that joy cannot break through.

Joy can always find you.

Most of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 have certainly been challenging in personal ways that are often exacerbated by the global pandemic, poverty, and political unrest. In addition, we may feel overwhelmed by the ordinary illnesses or ordinary tragedies that are complicated by restricted travel and loss of physical presence. But there are ways that we can prepare ourselves to embrace joy as it finds us. I hope that this sermon has suggested gateways to joy that will work for you. May it be so and may Joy find you now and always.

Diverse Quotes on Joy^v

Joy is something greater and deeper than delight; it springs from the innermost being, and there can be no better description of the spring of joy than the dance of the soul. --Hazrat Inayat Khan

When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves. – the Buddha

Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls. – Mother Teresa

Have no fear — all will be well. Joy is our birthright. – Julian of Norwich

A joyful heart is the normal result of a heart burning with love. She gives most who gives with joy. – Mother Teresa

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward. – Khalil Gibran

From Psalms 30:5 says, “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” And in Psalm 126:5 Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.

Words of the Buddha “We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.”

Words from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 109. “Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness.”

Words from Thich Nhat Hanh, “Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

From Isaiah 55:12 ESV, ““For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

ⁱ <https://theconversation.com/finding-joy-in-2020-its-not-such-an-absurd-idea-really-145993>

ⁱⁱ *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, (The Artist's Way), by Julia Cameron. Published March 4th 2002 by Jeremy P. Tarcher (first published July 17th 1992). Paperback, 237 pages

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/dr-vivek-murthy-and-brene-on-loneliness-and-connection/>

^{iv} *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, By David Kessler. Publisher: Scribner (September 1, 2020). Length: 272 pages. ISBN13: 9781501192746

^v <https://www.spiritbutton.com/>, https://wahiduddin.net/dance/dance_inayat.htm, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>