

SURPRISED BY JOY  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham  
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When I was putting together my thoughts about this sermon in the past couple of weeks, an old song from my Sunday School days kept running through my mind: “I’ve got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart, I’ve got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart to stay.”

The song has a couple more verses that devolve into a more Baptist message, but that first verse is a good one, and it got me to thinking about Joy as a natural part of human life.

So I looked it up on Google. “What is Joy?” I typed in and reviewed the results. Diverse, to say the least. Did you know that “Joy” is the “leading manufacturer of underground mining equipment?” I found definitions, I found lots of quotes, I found Joy in many languages, including American Sign Language, but I didn’t find just what I was looking for.

So I mentioned that I needed a few good ideas in my prayer one night, and it came to me in a groggy morning moment that Joy is not something we can force, like a Christmas amaryllis; Joy is a by-product of life’s workings and that though we may not be able to consciously create joy, we can set the stage for its happening.

Now a lot of people seem to think that Joy is something that comes in a bottle or in an expensive present, that a party is supposed to make us joyful or a winning team. That Joy is the boisterous good cheer we project at festive occasions

But then an article in the Seattle Times mentioned that Americans spend over 10 per cent of their health care dollars on mental health issues. Depression and other mood disorders are clearly a major problem for us. There are a lot of not-so-joyful people out there, despite the ads and the money and the opportunities to get drunk and celebrate.

So we return to the question, “What is Joy---really?”

What is Joy, in your book? Can you define it? Let’s hear what your short definition might be. (cong. resp)

Father Ron Rolheiser, an adjunct professor at Seattle University, has written *“Joy can never be induced, cranked up, or made to happen. It’s something that has to find us precisely within our ordinary duty-bound, burdened, full-of-worries, and pressured lives. This is joy: Imagine walking to your car or to the bus after a day’s work, tired, needing some rest. But just as you reach your car or the busstop, you fill with a sense of life and health; in some (illogical) way, all jumbled together, you feel your body, mind, soul, gender, sexuality, history, place within a family, network of friends, city, and country, and this feeling makes you spontaneously exclaim “God, it’s good to be alive!” That’s joy.”*

Not long ago, I got an email attachment from a friend entitled “Natural Highs”. This turned out to be a list of over 40 moments or events of the sort of thing that happens to all of us during our lives.

It listed such disparate moments as: falling in love, a hot shower, getting a real letter, hot towels fresh out of the dryer, a good conversation, having someone unexpectedly tell you you're beautiful, your first kiss, holding hands with someone you care about, watching the sunrise, knowing you've done the right thing even though others aren't pleased.

All the items on the list described a moment in time of pleasure, mostly unexpected. All the items on the list were ordinary life events that happen to all of us. None was particularly outstanding, though I personally loved the one about finding a twenty dollar bill in my coat from last winter.

I'm sure an endocrinologist would explain that these moments create a rise in our endorphin level, thereby improving our mood and sense of well-being. Yet lovely as these moments are, they are quickly over and gone and are not in themselves Joy.

Joy is something deeper, something almost mystical, something we cannot force but can only prepare to receive.

"Jazzdeb", an unidentified blogger I discovered on the Internet, has also written about Joy, in a different vein:

*"The thing about joy is that it cannot be bought and sold in the marketplace. We can't train for it or plan for it. We can't build our schedule around it and we certainly can't force it...to bloom in our lives. And because we can't control joy...we spend much of our time working to prevent the opposite of joy. Because we can't predict joy---because we don't even know what to expect from joy---we orchestrate our lives so that we will not suffer disillusionment when our hopes are crushed.*

*We organize ourselves so that grief and sorrow last a socially acceptable amount of time. We rein in our love to protect ourselves from pain. We hold back on our dreams because we don't want to be disappointed. We remain cynical and distant so that we don't ever, ever, ever look foolish."*

But to protect ourselves from pain often means to short-circuit our ability to receive Joy.

Many of us have been in deep pain and have discovered Joy on the other side of the pain. And if we have had the energy and the time and the opportunity to think about it, we often are able to see that our sorrow and our loss have prepared us to experience Joy when it finds us.

This past Thanksgiving, I dusted off my snow tires and hit Snoqualmie Pass to go to Moses Lake for four days with my family. I may have mentioned in the past that my family of origin is quite conservative. We stretch from one end of the religio-political spectrum to the other, spaced across the continuum from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal, with devout Catholics, devout Evangelicals, and one devout Unitarian Universalist in the mix.

Surprisingly, this does not cause us problems---at least, not now. As I discovered with my sister years ago, we may not share theology, but we share "church". We can't talk easily about doctrine, but we can talk about what our congregations are doing to reach out in the community. And we can talk, to some extent, about our spiritual lives and practices.

On Saturday morning of that weekend, I attended the baptism and christening of my newest great-niece, Mona Grace Agnes. Father Schmitz explained every element of the ceremony as he anointed her squirmy little body with the chrism and then the blessed water. Godparents Scott and Diana solemnly promised their spiritual support and love as the rest of us stood around beaming.

Right after the ceremony, I headed for home, since it was one of those brief moments when the pass did not require chains, and as I drove, I thought about what it means to me that my family is so diverse and so expanded. I'm not crazy about Moses Lake, but when I'm there, I'm embedded and immersed in family. Sometimes I'm a little bored because there's little to do but read and visit. I spend all my time with family members and hardly have any solitude.

Until I acclimate to the changed environment, I'm a little uneasy and restless. But once I let myself relax into the context of family, I am thrilled to see the threads of connection between us. And I experience the surprise of Joy.

It's more than great-niece Abby's delighted hugs when she sees me after a long absence; it's more than little Davy's squeals of laughter when I pretend to tickle him. It's also Joel's and Christina's pleasure in their children and their desire to share Mona's christening with the rest of us, even though many of us are not Catholic. It's Scott and Diana's being godparents.

It's Jean and Pat's connection to their church and its activities and their taking under their wing Christina's three kids as though they were born into the family. It's Justin's funny and not so funny stories of his life in the Marines during the Gulf War. It's reminiscences about my son Mike and his summer vacation days with Scott and Justin and Susanna and Joel, when they were all little together in Goldendale.

But it wasn't always this way. There was a time when we hurt each other badly over religion and politics. There was a time when I despaired of ever being on good terms with my family because I had become a UU. My sister, who is now my best friend, refused to participate in my ordination over religious differences. There was a great deal of anger between others over Joel's conversion to Catholicism. People argued about child-rearing and education and kids who seemed to be going wrong.

But there came a point when we recognized that we were committed to each other, that religion and politics and other differences need not divide us but can make us interesting, that we belong to each other, even when we disagree or disapprove.

As I look back over how this came to be, I am wrenched all over again by the email conversations I had with my sister when she told me firmly why she couldn't participate in or attend my ordination. Our religious beliefs clashed too badly for her. And it was devastating, that she would refuse to do this for me.

I was still living in Denver then and had few opportunities to be with my family. But I was planning to return to the Pacific Northwest and hoped to see a lot of my family once I relocated. My heart would sink when I'd think about the challenge of being with them after such a painful exchange.

A few months later, I learned, through a routine physical, that I would need open heart surgery to correct a birth defect, a hole in my heart. I was scared, naturally, afraid I'd not be able to fulfill my dream of ministry, afraid of dying, not sure what it meant in my life.

I called my family members to tell them and my sister's immediate response was "I'll be there, I'll be with you throughout the surgery and as long as you need me to be."

Her words changed everything and I was flooded with gratitude. Her willingness to be present for me at this very scary turn of events atoned for all the hurt, put our strained relationship back onto a better plane, and changed my attitude toward her. I was surprised by Joy. Where I had expected more hurt, I found hope.

I've done some thinking about the relationship of sorrow to joy and I've concluded that what happened to me and my sister offers some insight into how we might prepare to receive Joy.

It seems to me that the first step must be Gratitude. A recent study published in the Times describes a scientific method for being happier, and it doesn't involve drugs. It suggests that unhappy people can become happier if they begin a discipline of gratitude, if they think every day of at least three good things that have happened to them during the day.

Feeling grateful to someone who has been kind, feeling thankful for the benefits of everyday life, saying thank you to the universe for its beauty ---Gratitude is a gift we can give no matter what our circumstances.

Remember how good it feels when someone writes you a thankyou note for something you have done for them? It makes you feel great and it makes you feel grateful in return for that person's thoughtfulness. I believe that when we give the gift of gratitude, we prepare to be surprised by Joy.

Another step in setting the stage for Joy, I think, is recognizing the connectedness we have to one another. I call this Hope, the sure knowledge that we are part of the inexhaustible stream of life, that we belong in this universe, perhaps as MacLaren in our reading earlier from "A Sudden Country" sees himself as part of Creation, not a blot upon it, despite his sins, but a part of Creation, as much as any creature.

And when we give Hope to ourselves and to others, I believe we prepare to be surprised by Joy.

The third stage, perhaps, is Love, reaching out in kindness and support to our companions on the road, whether we agree with them theologically or politically, whether we think they're nice people, whether we approve or disapprove, whether we receive from them what we would like to receive. Giving Love without limits is yet another way, I believe, to prepare to be surprised by Joy.

So we prepare for Joy by expressing Gratitude, by finding Hope in our connection to others, and by giving Love wherever we can.

I think there's a useful analogy here when it comes to finding spiritual fulfillment in our congregational life, call it the Joy of Church, perhaps!

Many of us come to services here at UUCWI looking for a spiritual home, a place to experience the mystery and the wonder of the Divine. We may find it on some days through a song or the spoken word or a reading or a moment of silence. Other days, the service just doesn't move us and we may be disappointed, wonder if we're in the right place.

I think this is a very natural and normal question to pursue. We want to feel something special when we come here. But, I think, like Joy, we have to prepare the way for that something special.

And I think the process is the same:

We express Gratitude for the efforts of those who are bringing us the experience of worship. Many hands and minds work together to bring an experience which will move and inspire us. How wonderful that they take on this work! How wonderful that they give their time and love and energy to provide this opportunity! Our gratitude for their efforts overflows and when we express our thanks, we encourage and give them Joy.

We find Hope as we experience our connection to this community, finding in each others' faces the happiness at being together, offering a helping hand in the congregation, sharing a hymnal, smiling across the room at a friend. Our sense of connection increases and our Hope is born again.

We give Love as we meet each other on the path, listening to the joys and sorrows of our UUCWI members and friends, bringing a cookie or a cup of coffee to someone in Grigware Hall, getting the sanctuary and the hall ready every Sunday and enjoying each other's company as we socialize during coffee hour, offering food and shelter when someone in

our congregation is bereaved or ill.

After long experience, we learn that just as eating properly for one meal does not offer us lasting health, expecting one worship service to provide all our spiritual needs does not offer spiritual health.

To receive the gifts of Spirit, we must do the groundwork, the preparation for the Mystery. Our spiritual practice can be as formal as a daily prayer time or as informal as a walk on the beach or a flash of thankfulness to the Universe for its gifts.

But regular, frequent spiritual exercise is as important for spiritual health as regular, frequent physical exercise for physical health.

And I believe that Joy and Spirit are intertwined, that Joy is a spiritual experience and that Spiritual experience is a Joy. May we all find our sources of gratitude, hope, and love to be overflowing in this season and in all the seasons to come.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #29, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee"

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, pledging ourselves to offer Gratitude, Hope, and Love to those we share this world with, that we and all our neighbors might find Joy. May the Joy we share kindle Joy in others at the great beauty and worth of Life. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.