

*SURPRISED BY JOY*  
*Sermon given at Palomar UU Fellowship ~ June 5, 2005*  
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A few months back I was talking with one our members, Teri, outside under a tree while Teri's daughters Courtney and Megan were playing some distance away. Teri and I were deep in conversation when our attention was called to three and half year old Courtney who came bounding toward us shouting, "YEAY FOR ME!" She leapt in the air and skipped and excitedly told us of her accomplishment, the exact nature of which I have forgotten!

Teri and I stopped to take in Courtney's sheer joy of accomplishment – of being alive and in the moment and able to celebrate herself right then and there!

Teri and I speculated about what our own very adult lives might be like if we could celebrate ourselves in that joyful way – if when filled with joy we could shout, "hurray for me!" and run with exuberant abandon. There is, of course, and innocence and an ignorance about life that allows children to be so unbridledly joyful.

Young children and other animals seem to have access to joy in an unmitigated, unmediated way. There is less to interfere with the experience – no unpaid bills or lost loves, no tests to take or wait for, no failings to mourn or tomorrows to dread.

That is not to say that children do not suffer or become depressed or affected negatively by life circumstances – they do, even in the womb. Yet young children are more likely to be free from the burdens of regretting the past and planning anxiously the future – twin blocks to joy for grownups.

There is a sense in which joy is a "first state" from which we fall, for which we then yearn whether consciously or not. That describes the state of C.S. Lewis, writer, literary critic and Oxford don whose book, *Surprised by Joy* – to which this sermon owes its title – chronicled the journey of Lewis' early life and influences from his childhood faith to a foray into Eastern influences and scholarly atheist to a re-appropriated and refined Christian faith. For Lewis, in retrospect, it was a longing for joy that impelled him in his search for truth and meaning. He was as surprised as anyone else when he found in Christianity the joy that he sought.

As adults we can understand the recovery of joy as a restoration informed by the fullness of life's challenges and sorrows.

There is an immediacy in the experience of joy – a sense of being blessed in the moment – it does not rely on the accomplishments of the past or the fulfillment of some future desires. There is a "nowness," in the experience of joy.

Joy then can be seen as a spiritual state. This morning I'm going to share with you how poets and philosophers, biologists and theologians conceive of joy as coming out of a sense of our connectedness with the divine, with others, with the rest of nature, with the cosmos...

William Wordsworth - whose poem, *Surprised by Joy – Impatient as the Wind*, may well have inspired Lewis - wrote in another poem:

" With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony;  
And the deep power of joy;  
We see into the life of things"

There comes a lucidity, a vision, and ability to perceive the world around us in a profoundly moving way and to respond to that lucidity, that vision, with wonder and awe and reverence and hurray!

Rabindranath Tagore in *The Stream of Life* wrote:  
"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.  
It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flow.  
I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.”

Life connects us all, and our sense of life pulsing through us allows us to extend that appreciation to others – even to all beings and the world itself.

My mentor, philosopher David Ray Griffin, writes of a spirituality that lifts up the power of connection for those who practice it. “[t]hey feel at home in the world, and feel a sense of kinship with other species, which are viewed as having their own experiences, values, and purposes. Through this sense of at-homeness and kinship, the modern desire to master and possess is replaced in postmodern spirituality with a joy in communion and a desire for letting-be.”

Joy in communion...a sense for some of our oneness with all that is, for others with a divine love.

Commenting on the view of life as “a continuous flight from pain and persistent search for pleasure,” John B. Cobb, Jr. and biologist Charles Birch, suggest that there is more to us human beings than that.

For we are capable of, and often do, direct ourselves toward others in love for who they are not who we would like them to be. In so doing, they contend, we discover joy. “The opposite of joy is not pain,” say Cobb and Birch, “but emptiness and the boredom that follows from it. Emptiness is the lack of relatedness to things and persons and meanings. It is even lack of relatedness to oneself.

Therefore we try to escape from ourselves and the loneliness of ourselves but without discovering a genuine relation to ourselves and the world. It is into this ecological vacuum that commercially manipulated fun steps. It is not the creative fun often connected with play but the shallow, distracted, greedy way of having fun that makes joy impossible.”

We have an implication here as to what may block us from experiencing joy – that is a lack of authenticity – an inability to relate meaningfully to others and our world.

Now I appreciate the notion that emptiness may be one of the opposites joy, but I wish not to dismiss the impact that fear and loss and have on us as we make our way in a world of challenges as well as great beauty.

For it is easier to access joy when things are going well, and we are surrounded by beauty. As a spiritual discipline, the challenge is to cultivate joy in order to be able to sustain it, or at least know it as a possibility, when we are faced with life’s adversities.

#### *JOY AND FEAR AND LOSS AND CHANGE*

When my dear feline companion Lil’ died, I was bereft. The sadness was profound as we shared a deep bond. My sister, so far away, worried and ached for me, unable to console me even had she been here, yet she knew in her heart that though my grief was great, there resides in me a capacity joy – for I held on to the fact that even in the depths of my anguish and loss, I could hear the birds – the dove cooed for me, and the skies were still blue and I could love you and see all of that through my tears.

There is no way that I felt joyful at that time – I am not advanced enough to hold on to that in the deepest of the dark times – and it is as much an assurance as a reality even now, but

what I know is my capacity for joy and it is in that knowledge that I rested, when rest would come.

I felt what I needed to feel and trusted the wisdom of a long-time teacher - Ram Dass who said, "Our joy cannot be rooted in the denial of suffering. Our joy has to be rooted in being fully with what is."

By engaging with suffering, acknowledging it and learning to let go, we open the way for joy. This idea of is not found just in religious traditions.

Biologist Ursula Goodenough finds this same sense of being present to what *is* in life as leading to an abiding joy – an acceptance of the inevitability of mortality; a recognition that while life is not always as we would like it to be it is possible to respond actively, to "assent," as Goodenough calls the *affirmation of life as it is*. Recognizing that this response comes often not spontaneously but may come after a period of questioning and discontent. Where the adherent to traditional religion may move from "Why, Lord? Why This? Why ME? And then to "Thy will be done."

Goodenough responds as a religious naturalist in her own words with, "What Is, Is," which then allows her to respond with "Blessed Be to What Is" with thanksgiving. To give assent," she writes, "is to understand, incorporate, and then let go. With the letting go comes that deep sigh we call relief, and relief allows the joy-of-being-alive-at-all to come tumbling forth."

Joy does not negate or deny suffering – there is an abidingness in joy though... a sense of yes, people fall in love, life dies and goes on, new life appears, this world spins, our cosmos unfolds... and in through it all comes an affirmation of life.

For ultimately, I think that's what joy is – an affirmation and celebration of life. And out of that affirmation for all that is our life comes gratitude - a sense of being blessed and the desire to share those blessings.

I cannot think of a time when I have been ecstatic or joyful that I didn't want to share it with someone... ever... Can you? Can you think of time when you were joyful that you didn't want to share it? Or shout it?

I was talking about joy to our member, Bond, a while back and he said that bliss is his baseline and it goes up from there. He frequently says he's blessed – I'm thinking that feeling blessed and being joyful are contingent upon each other. In other words, I'm not sure one can feel joy without gratitude or have a sense of being blessed without it leading to joy.

Yeats wrote:

"My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book, an empty cup  
On the marble tabletop.  
While on the shop and street I gazed,  
My body of a sudden blazed!  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed so great, my happiness,  
That I was blessed – and I could bless."

So this joy and the blessings that flow from it naturally call us to be a blessing to the world – it spills over and cannot be contained.

Our capacity for joy is probably determined by a number of factors – disposition and discipline or predilection and practice. Sometimes it surprises us in numinous moments of mystical experience – ahh, that’s always nice. And we *can* choose joy.

We can nurture it through spiritual practice – through meditation and communion with the rest of nature; by celebrating the interval that our lives are in this moment in time; by seizing the day; and singing loudly – even if you’re off key; by engaging in the dance that is life and shouting “yeah for me!”