



Soul Matters

August 2021

*What Does It Mean To Be
A Community of Joy?*



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“And God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good.”
- The Book of Genesis

“In my own worst seasons I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again.”
- Barbara Kingsolver

Be careful this month. Our theme of joy is deceptive. One could easily see this is a way to end the year “on a light note.” But there’s deep work for us to do with this topic.

There have been many religious perspectives that begin with the idea that this world is broken, a place of misery and pain, toil and struggle. We are told that our job is to survive it, indeed transcend it, through sacrifice, confession of our own brokenness, and an industrious “Protestant work ethic.” Joy is reserved for a time far off and found in a heaven granted to those who earn it.

And yet there are others – Unitarians Universalist included – that just don’t see it this way. They look out, and like the God of Genesis, their response is “behold, it is good!” The “problem” according to this spiritual view lies not so much in a fallen, irredeemable world but with our limited perspective. Heaven, as our UU forbearers argued, is right here on earth; our job is to see it and take pleasure in it. And far from being indulgent or seductive, this “work” of pleasure and delight is the key to humanizing us. As Barbara Kingsolver’s words suggest, joy has the power to transform us.

With “one, long, holy stare at a single glorious thing,” we are suddenly re-connected. Balance is restored. We see the world not simply as brutish, broken and dangerous, but also as gentle, surprising and woven through with a Love that will not let us go. This simple act of sacred staring is not about distraction. It’s about achieving a wider view. It’s about stepping back and seeing it all as a gift. When we feel joy, we don’t simply feel delight in one tiny piece of the world; we feel welcomed back in – connected once again to the whole.

In this sense, as many have said, the opposite of joy is not sadness, but isolation and disconnection. Joy doesn’t just make us feel happy; It restores relationship. And not just relationship to the world, but also to the Divine. Theologian John Cobb describes God as “the all of everything.” Joy places us within that whole not outside it. In this way, the experience of joy is very much also the experience of God.

So, friends, are you ready for that? Are you ready to be welcomed back in? If so, look around. There are dozens of “glorious things” inviting you to return.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A: Five Photos in Five Days

The poet Mary Oliver writes,

“Every day, I see or hear something
that more or less kills me with delight,
that leaves me like a needle
in the haystack of light.
It was what I was born for –
to look, to listen,
to lose myself inside this soft world –
to instruct myself over and over in joy and acclamation.”

Anne Sexton also lifts up this pervasive and simply joy in her poem “[Welcome Morning](#)”:
“There is joy in all: in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed, that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook each morning, in the outcry from the kettle that heats my coffee each morning,
in the spoon and the chair that cry “hello there, Anne” each morning,
in the godhead of the table that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.
All this is God right here in my pea-green house each morning...”

That last line invites us to look around at our own simple and divine surroundings. It asks us to pay attention to and let in the holy joy right in front of us.

With that in mind, here’s your exercise:

Capture five images of everyday joy five days in a row!

Keep that camera on your phone ready – or if you don’t have a camera at hand simply keep a notebook near you and write it down. Just wake up and walk around with a bit more awareness of the thing that is trying to “kill you with delight.”

Come to your group ready to share your images, and how they “instruct you over and over in joy and acclamation.”

Here are some sites to inspire you:

- <http://weheartit.com/IndieFr3ak/collections/91232763-simple-joy-pictures>
- <http://www.oprah.com/oprahs-life/class/pictures-to-make-you-happy-images-that-inspire-joy>
- <http://www.viralnova.com/happiest-photos/>

OPTION B
“Let Them Eat Joy!”

Joy shared is joy doubled. And One on the best ways to pass on joy through food. When we are sad, we make and share our favorite pasta. When a friend is going through a tough time, we bring over our grandmother’s carrot cake or the best casserole we can muster. Every parent knows which meal will make their kid dance with joy. When we are stressed and need to smile, who of us doesn’t pull out the Doritos?!

And it’s not just about the delicious food; it’s about the way that food becomes a blessing and a bit of grace. We take a bite and healing begins. It’s not just delicious; it’s a communion of sorts. Our bodies and spirits are filled once again.

So what holy food heals you and brings you joy?

In addition to bringing in the recipe and a story about it, consider bringing in a sample and treating your group members to a taste!

Option c:

The Resource with Your Name on It

Sometimes none of the exercises speak to us. Or maybe this is an extra busy month and you need an exercise that is less extensive. If so, consider this more reflective option. Simply, take the time to read through the “Recommended Resources” section of this packet and pick the one or two of them that “have your name on it.” Similar to how we work with the question section. Treat the resources as spiritual companions trying to help you hear the holy in your daily living. Come to your group and share which of the Recommended Resources lit up in neon lights as you read, watched or listened to it. And share what you think it was trying to get you to see or hear.

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what Identity means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a part of a community of Identity means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?

1. How is joy inviting you to return to life?
2. When was the last time you *choose* joy?
3. What needs removed from your life in order for joy to return?
4. Could a little more courage on your part invite joy back in?
5. Have you exchanged status for joy?
6. Who helps you see the joy in front of you? And when was the last time you hung out with them?
7. Are you too responsible to let joy in?
8. Are you too tied to convention to let joy in? Too embarrassed to stand out?
9. Could joy be staying away because you've lost touch with "the real you"?
10. Is it time to simplify? Is joy having a hard time finding you in the midst of the mess?
11. Is joy holding back until you deal honestly with your sorrow?
12. Is joy waiting for you at that protest on the corner or that march on the street?
13. Is joy waiting for you to risk trusting and loving again?
14. When was the last time you did something "useless"? Might joy be waiting for you there?
15. Is there a child in your life calling you to joy? Are you listening?
16. When was the last time you were "recklessly joyful"? Is it time again?
17. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a community of Joy*.

WISE WORDS

Every day, I see or hear something
that more or less kills me with delight,
that leaves me like a needle
in the haystack of light.
It was what I was born for –
to look, to listen,
to lose myself inside this soft world –
to instruct myself over and over in joy and
acclamation.

- *Mary Oliver*

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of
God.”

— [*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*](#)

To be joyful in the universe is a brave and
reckless act. The courage for joy springs not
from the certainty of human experience, but the
surprise. Our astonishment at being loved, our
bold willingness to love in return – these
wonders promise the possibility of joyfulness,
no matter how often and how harshly love seems
to be lost. Therefore, despite the world's
sorrows, we give thanks for our loves, for our
joys and for the continued courage to be happily
surprised.

- *Molly Fumia*

It is difficult to know what to do with so much
happiness. With sadness there is something to
rub against, a wound to attend with lotion and
cloth. When the world falls in around you, you
have pieces to pick up, something to hold in
your hands, like ticket stubs or change. But
happiness floats. It doesn't need you to hold it
down. It doesn't need anything... Since there is
no place large enough to contain so much
happiness, you shrug, you raise your hands, and
it flows out of you into everything you touch.

You are not responsible. You take no credit, as
the night sky takes no credit for the moon but
continues to hold it, and share it, and in that
way, be known.

- *Naomi Shihab Nye*

“Joy is not just about “feeling good.” It is also
about perspective. The spiritual life is, in part,
about seeing our lives as being invited to the
best party in town. Our challenge is to stay
awake to that, to continually pull ourselves back
from the mindset that our days are simply a
series of challenges and responsibilities. It's all
about balance. We are called to look around and
see all that must be done. We are also called to
look around and see all that has been given.”

- Soul Matters Minister

Happiness is not another place, but *this* place.
Not for another hour, but for *this* hour

- *Walt Whitman*

Stay close to those who sing, tell stories, and
enjoy life, and whose eyes sparkle with
happiness. Because happiness is contagious and
will always manage to find a solution, whereas
logic can find only an explanation for the
mistake made.

- *Paulo Coelho*

“To get the full value of joy you must have
someone to divide it with.”

— [*Mark Twain*](#)

They say a person needs just three things to be
truly happy in this world: someone to love,
something to do, and something to hope for.

— [*Tom Bodett*](#)

On this day of your life I believe God wants you
to know... that safety is not the thing you should
look for in the future. Joy is what you should
look for. Security and joy may not come in the

same package. They can...but they also cannot. There is no guarantee. If your primary concern is a guarantee of security, you may never experience the truest joys of life. This is not a suggestion that you become reckless, but it is an invitation to at least become daring.

- Neale Donald Walsh

All around you, people will be tiptoeing through life, just to arrive at death safely. But dear children, do not tiptoe. Run, hop, skip, or dance, just don't tiptoe." - Shane Claiborne

The existence of broccoli does not, in any way, affect the taste of chocolate.

— [John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*](#)

It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.

- E.B. White

“Our faith rightly reminds us we have a duty and responsibility to ease the burdens of others, to bend the arc of the universe toward justice. But it also reminds us that we have a duty to joy, even a duty to plain old “useless” fun! Which, of course, is not really useless. Joy, celebration, play and revelry are means of replenishment. We must always remember that we will have nothing to give, if we don't make room for getting filled up.”

- Soul Matters Minister

Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened.

— [Dr. Seuss](#)

Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.

— [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

The average child laughs 400 times a day. The average adult: 18.

- Anonymous

Remember: Joy is not a sin; sacrifice is not a virtue. - Paulo Coelho

Joy is not an emotion. It is a choice.

- Greg Foster

I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy. - Rabindranath Tagore

POEMS

Talking to God on the Seventh Day

by Ruth L. Schwartz

“You're not so sure about this world?

Listen. Take another look...”

<http://beamfyant.typepad.com/blog/2011/11/talking-to-god-on-the-seventh-day-ruth-l-schwartz-.html>

Beannacht

by John O'Donohue

On the day when
the weight deadens on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.

...may a flock of colours, indigo, red, green
and azure blue,

come to awaken in you a meadow of delight....

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/beannacht-blessing>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfvS2LYbZLQ>

Welcome Morning

by Anne Sexton

There is joy

in all:

in the hair I brush each morning,

in the Cannon towel, newly washed,

that I rub my body with each morning,

in the chapel of eggs I cook

each morning,

in the outcry from the kettle

that heats my coffee

each morning,

in the spoon and the chair

that cry "hello there, Anne"
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning...

See the full poem here:
<http://mondaypoem.blogspot.com/2013/06/welcome-morning-by-anne-sexton.html>

Weather

by *George Bilgere (For Father's Day)*

"My father would lift me
to the ceiling in his big hands
and ask, How's the weather up there?
And it was good, the weather
of being in his hands ... his face smiling from
the world below..."

<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?3Fdate=2014%252F02%252F05.html>

VIDEOS

Be More Dog

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExnWRuniooY>

Joy in the Barn

Video: <https://www.facebook.com/jay.lavery.7/videos/1363204563703837/>

Article: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jay-lavery-farmer-barn-dance_n_5877f7f7e4b09281d0e9fd5d

Joy on The Treadmill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyDm-5gNeEM>

The World's Most Joyful Trash Can

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbEKAwCoCKw>

The World's Most Joyful "Staircase"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4o0ZVeixYU&feature=relmfu>

The Joy of Finding Your Way

<https://www.facebook.com/nbc/videos/10153979150879760/>

The Unexpected Joy of a Copenhagen Metro Commute

<https://onbeing.org/blog/the-unexpected-joy-of-a-copenhagen-metro-commute-video/6459/>

The Joy of Air in Your Face and Music at Your Back

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWer132Ccgw&feature=youtu.be>

Joy In Your Feet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C50WeYuvP-A>

ONLINE ARTICLES

Surprised by Joy

by *Omid Safi*

"All that sitting with suffering prepared me, and could have never prepared me for a new guest... for joy..."

<https://onbeing.org/blog/surprised-by-joy/>

How To Have A Happy Life: Four Proven Secrets From Research

by *Eric Barker*

[http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/02/how-to-have-a-happy-](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/02/how-to-have-a-happy-life/?utm_source=%22Barking+Up+The+Wrong+Tree%22+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=171b195e78-)

[life/?utm_source=%22Barking+Up+The+Wrong+Tree%22+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=171b195e78-](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/02/how-to-have-a-happy-life/?utm_source=%22Barking+Up+The+Wrong+Tree%22+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=171b195e78-)

[HL_2_5_2017&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_78d4c08a64-171b195e78-57656305](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/02/how-to-have-a-happy-life/?utm_source=%22Barking+Up+The+Wrong+Tree%22+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=171b195e78-HL_2_5_2017&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_78d4c08a64-171b195e78-57656305)

When Pigs Fly

by *Rev. Meg Barnhouse*

Do we try too hard to grasp joy when it comes?

<http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/296811.shtml>

MUSIC

Joy Comes Back

by Ruthie Foster

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXp4BfMtQ-c>

Feeling Good

by Nina Simone

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LR1bWhdoIXM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybHRX4vLhLg> (Michael Buble cover)

Happy

by Pentatonix (Pharrell Cover)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ4diEohODE>

Joyful, Joyful

from Sister Act

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaEH1eDLm0>

On The Shores

by Steffany Gretzinger

“On the shores of my soul, I give you permission to wash my tears away. Take all my disappointment and fill me with joy once again. So I am gonna sing...”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYuXNgj-0BQ>

MOVIES

Senna

“A remarkable illustration of what it means to do something for the love of it. It draws a stark contrast between someone who does something for passion and joy versus someone who does something for money and the numbers.”

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOQLegRcgKc>

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/senna>

Shawdowland

Based on C.S. Lewis’ “Surprised by Joy” and his real life experience of losing the love of his life while being sustained by a deeper joy.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1048267_shadowlands

Disney’s UP

Retired balloon salesman Carl Fredricksen, is ready for his last chance at high-flying excitement. Tying thousands of balloons to his house, Carl sets off to the lost world of his childhood dreams. Unbeknownst to Carl, an overeager 8-year-old Wilderness Explorer Russell is on Carl’s front porch! A movie about restoring one’s joy.

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/up>

Waking Ned Devine

A small town looks for a way to claim a winning lottery ticket after the winner drops dead from shock before he can claim his prize. A celebration of stumbling upon joy when you weren’t looking for it.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/waking_ned_devine

Life is Beautiful

A masterful celebration of deep joy and the power to create joy even in the midst of the life’s more terrible situations.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1084398_life_is_beautiful

Toy Story Trilogy

<http://www.popmatters.com/review/151439-toy-storytoy-story-2toy-story-3-blu-ray/>

BOOKS

The Happiness Project:

Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun

by Gretchen Rubin

<https://www.amazon.com/Happiness-Project-Morning-Aristotle-Generally/dp/006158326X>

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