

Reflections on Joy

Love is a rose but you better not pick it
Only grows when it's on the vine
Handful of thorns and you'll know you've missed it
Lose your love when you say the word mine
-"Love is a Rose," by Neil Young

For this article, I am going to do something different. I normally focus on logic that stems from principles that are difficult to refute, and try to avoid matters that are personal. But if the gentle reader will work with me here in good faith, I believe I can teach an important skill. I am not trying to influence anyone's opinions here, so this is not a matter of being "right" or "wrong." Instead, I am asking for trust as I guide one through a journey. This isn't to say I won't use logic at all; I most certainly will. Rather, I mean that cynicism will not help anybody in this discussion.

I believe there is a great distinction between "joy" and words such as "happiness" and "pleasure," although if one is asked to give synonyms of joy, I suppose these two words would be the first ones on the list. I also think "excitement" would work as well, or at least be loosely associated with it. And perhaps this list will include "ecstasy." These words, however, I feel are knee-jerk reactions. We easily come up with them when put on the spot to describe joy, but something still seems wrong. Do we ever substitute "joy" for *them* in contexts where those words seem most common? I don't think so.

To ask "Are you joyful?" in lieu of "Are you happy?" doesn't seem right. When one returns from a masseuse, one expects to hear that the experience was pleasurable. A teen might be excited to go to a concert. A friend might describe a romantic experience as a time of ecstasy. To replace any of these words with "joyful" seems to destroy the whole meaning of the description, and perhaps even seems contradictory to what is meant (especially with ecstasy).

For that matter, if someone asks us how we feel, how often is "joyful" given as a response? Not often I would be willing to wager. I would also suspect that it is not normally the word of choice when describing a sensation. It seems to me that, for a word that is so familiar to us, it is rarely used and given little thought. It is almost as if we, without even thinking about it, recognize that there is something special about this word. A specialness that rises above everyday discussion. Despite the versatility of this word, we hold it back for just the right moment to use it.

We can say that one felt joy at a wedding, because saying we are happy just won't cut it. Getting a rose from one's beau can be described as a joyful moment, because saying it was pleasurable doesn't fully describe the experience. Likewise, I've seen many Catholics describe the joy they felt at adoration (praying before the Eucharist, which is the physical body of Christ here on Earth), and generally they would consider it scandalous to say it was an ecstatic experience.

I also think that joy is a word that is almost never used in the present tense. It is something that most of us will say we have experienced, and something we hope to experience again. But when was the last time one admitted to experiencing joy as it was happening? I don't recall anyone ever saying, "I am joyful now." I'm not saying this is impossible, but I do think it extremely rare. It seems that when joy is experienced, one loses the ability to control oneself. Certainly not in the sense as one being unable to stop oneself (usually from rage), but rather as in surrendering oneself, and simply

accepting whatever is bringing joy at the moment. Something caught our attention and held it for some length of time, and the moment we realized that we were lost in this something, we find ourselves back in the reality we had before our attention was so distracted.

Joy seems to catch us by surprise more often than not. We can find joy on a walk, watching a sunset, reading literature, working on a stamp collection, playing a sport or game, working math problems, solving puzzles, *ad infinitum*. When we return to that something that once brought us joy, we usually find something that is just as good, yet remarkably different. Of course, one may experience joy several times, but the transition will happen sooner or later, and often sooner. This new experience is often called peace.

If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot prepare to be joyful. The more we work to be joyful, the harder it is to experience joy. We might still find pleasure, but not what we would call joy or peace. They simply do not come from conscious effort. To find joy and peace, we need to stop working for them, and just let them happen. As Guillaume Apollinaire once said, "Now and then it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

All these reflections suggest to me that joy, as well as peace, comes from the realization that there is something out there besides ourselves, something we cannot control. The line from the song I led this paper with seems to be the key here -- you lose joy (and peace) when you claim it for your own. We only really find joy when we surrender ourselves. This surrender is what I usually call humility, and what we surrender ourselves to is what I call reality.

But, as Christians, we must be careful what we call reality. God created reality, and God only created good (Genesis 1-2). Therefore, we cannot really find joy or peace in evil. Yet we are certainly able to find joy and peace in things that have less than a good aspect to them. Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott," stirs feelings of pity because the protagonist never got to experience life as God intended her to, but was instead doomed by a curse. If one finds joy in reading this poem, it is not the plot that one humbles oneself to, but some other aspect. Perhaps it is the elegance of the meter, the richness of the poetic words, or the beauty of the imagery used to describe the setting. Perhaps what one finds joy in is the poor woman's choice to die in order to live (itself a strong Christian truism). But I will argue that there is no joy or peace to be found in the curse itself, as the curse is a denial of what is real.

But if joy comes from discovering a reality other than our own, then between our own reality and this reality, which is greater? This, I think, is the role that humility plays in this experience. It is only when we humble ourselves to this other reality that we find joy or peace. Experiencing joy and peace we can, in this life, fully accept God. This is because this is when we come closest to Him. This truth is overwhelming, which is why we ultimately begin to once again start to think of ourselves. And when that happens, joy and peace becomes a part of our past instead of our present.

But while we, in our current wretched state, are unable to maintain joy or peace indefinitely, we do have the means to experiencing it again, and we do have the promise of one day being able to maintain it forever. This is where our hope and faith brings us.

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