

Preparation for Opening to Joy (December theme)

The word “joy” conjures a host of images, mostly positive, some anxious, but all intensely meaningful to the human psyche. We think of joy as a state of elation, a spiritual blessing, an overly cliched expectation that may remain just outside of our grasp. The word itself can only be defined within the context of human experience and the experience of joy varies widely from person to person.

Many psychologists differentiate between happiness, which may be based on external circumstances that are highly variable, and joy, which may be viewed as an internal function, potentially present at any time but not always accessible. Happiness may be generated by material considerations, by emotional responses to others, by beauty in nature, music, or art, and by engagement in meaningful experiences. Some psychologists distinguish between happiness, often viewed as a state, and joy, which may occur in brief moments or in longer periods of intense, immersive “flow.”

The human brain is programmed to produce positive emotions. Our brains produce biochemicals that trigger the nervous system and the endocrine system, eliciting good feelings like happiness, pleasure, excitement, and joy. But why do some people appear to have more positive emotions than others? Gretchen Rubin, in *The Happiness Project*, discusses studies of happiness: “About 50 percent, they think, is genetically determined. You’re hard-wired that way ... And then about 10 to 20 percent is life circumstances, so that's things like age and health and occupation.” Given those percentages, we may be able to influence our overall feeling of joy to a limited but significant extent.

If we think of joy as a river that flows through the human experience, to access that joy, one must be ready to step into the river. Sometimes it may be a frightening first step and the river is often hidden by scrub and rushes that obscure our perception. But joy is part of what it means to be human, and we all have the capacity for joy.

The experience of joy often comes when we have learned to identify what is important to us and when we engage in an active pursuit of a meaningful life. For some, that practice may revolve around a spiritual path, for others, family connections, fulfilling work, or a deep connection with nature bring a feeling of contentment and joy. Gratitude may lead to joyful feelings. Cognitive practices, such as meditation, selected meaningful readings, making music, singing or dancing, service to others and therapeutic activities may open us to the experience of joy. Sometimes joy just sneaks up and smacks us alongside the head for no apparent reason, but we know when we have been joy bombed.

Joy can never be found as a result of external pressure. We have no duty to be joyful, and we have not failed if we spend large blocks of our lives separated from our fount of joy. But knowing there is a way, that we may access our joy through allowing ourselves to connect with those parts of ourselves which best represent our true nature and inner spirit, allows for hope. With hope we may learn to open the gateway to our personal experience of joy.

The following quotes explore the nature of joy.

“Some of you say, “Joy is greater than sorrow,” and others say, “Nay, sorrow is the greater.”
But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed. *Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet*

We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves. *The Buddha, contemporary adaptation*

Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreaks without being broken.

Desmond Tutu

Life is ... not about counting the losses and the lost expectations, but rather swimming, with as much grace as can be mustered, in the joy of all of it. *Leisa Hammett*

Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

Questions to Ponder

1. Was there a time in your life when you felt an overwhelming sense of joy? What were the circumstances surrounding that feeling?
2. Do you differentiate between joy and happiness? How do these feelings differ for you?
3. Describe any practices you follow to help you experience more joy in your life. Are there practices you would like to explore?
4. Many of us experience difficult times in our lives. Have you ever been able to remain open to joy during periods of hardship? If you have, what was that like?
5. In what ways might you open yourself to a more joyful existence?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on how you experience joy. The Words of the Day activity uses this sentence: “An activity or experience that often brings me joy is ...”