

Life in Spirit: Reclaiming Joy

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These words from poet William Blake – titled *Eternity*:

He who binds to himself a joy, does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sunrise.

Today we're exploring one of life's paradoxes; that in the middle of tragedy, sorrow, pain, and suffering, we can experience moments of joy, happiness, and transcendence. And, that in moments of transcendence, joy, and happiness, cruelty, inhumanity, melancholy, and heartbreak may also be present. The complex nature of our human experience can be breathtaking, amazing, wonderful, and confusing.

Joseph Campbell, author and philosopher, wrote this advice, "Participate fully in the sorrows of the world. We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy."

How in the world do we live in this fragile, transient balance? How do we make sense of tears of joy, when we have also shed tears of sadness? How do we celebrate life, filled as it is with not only memories of happy experiences and joyful triumphs, but also with haunting reminders of our losses and failures? Do we choose to live in joy? Can we bind joy to ourselves, storing it up as a shelter against hard times? In the depths of despair, how do we hope, praying that joy might return and brighten our days once again?

I want to share with you words and poems about joy from a variety of sources – different cultures, various parts of the world, different ways of thinking. I hope that you will listen attentively, hear deeply, reflect thoughtfully, and find your own way to walk the path of life's constant paradox awakened and alive – filled with joy in every moment.

Roger Housden, author of the TEN POEMS series:

"Joy is an upwelling of life, of spirit, a blossoming of freedom. It is what we are here for. It is wholehearted, full-bodied, all-encompassing. In a moment of joy, you are no longer a kingdom divided – between right and wrong, this way or that way, should or shouldn't.

The poems I'm reading this morning are all from Housden's book, "Dancing with Joy: 99 Poems."

Anne Sexton poem: *Welcome Morning*

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Unitarian's own beloved Henry David Thoreau said,

"Surely, joy is the condition of life."

Joy is an attribute of a rich, full, and meaningful life. It is a spiritual quality, not merely an emotion evoked within a set of circumstances. It is a deep way of being in life, an expression of an abiding belief, a faith, that life is inherently good. Joy comes from feeling intimately connected with life, with feeling in sacred relationship with all of creation. Theologian Wendy Wright has written, "joy arrives when divinity dances in us."

Li-Young Lee poem: *From Blossoms*

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The Rev. Richard Gilbert, from a sermon:

"We tend to forget that the full meaning of tragedy is not simply the failure of human plans or the cruelty of fate. Tragedy grows out of the good. Tragedy is our human fate – the ultimate tragedy is that however much we love life, we die. We are unique among creatures, not because we will die, but because we know that we will die. Knowledge of

our finitude ought to be enough to make us miserable, but it also makes us glad. Because we know each day is a precious reprieve from non-being. Life is moving, but in this very passage, we find our joy in being. We are here to live. Life, I conclude, is a tragedy full of joy.”

Jack Gilbert poem: *A Brief for the Defense*

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Roger Housden, from “Dance with Joy:”

“What is it about happiness – not to mention joy – that prompts (us) to suggest it might be so daunting? Could it be that we live in such a difficult, tragic world that it can seem a betrayal or denial of our common darkness to jump for joy? That, in embracing happiness, we somehow turn our back on the suffering of others – and, indeed, our own sufferings – and so deservedly bring upon ourselves the retributions of guilt?”

Suffering can be a great purifier, a forger of character; but joy can free us from our character altogether, at least for a time. It can take us out into the wide world beyond our own self-preoccupations.”

Rumi poem: *The Source of Joy*

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Lama Surya Das, from “Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be:” “Constant, unwavering application of mindfulness helps us understand that life is full of losses through change and impermanence. This can help us deal with our sadness; it can also help us experience joy. It can help us renew and transform ourselves and change how we relate to whatever befalls us. This is the spiritual magic of acceptance and equanimity.

The Buddha’s long life of spiritual work and serve is an example for all of us. Cultivating inner peace, equanimity, and an attitude of non-attachment doesn’t mean giving in to complacency and indifference. It doesn’t mean turning our backs on the suffering, poverty, sickness, and injustice in the world. And it doesn’t mean giving up on the joy and delights of life itself.

Living is a precious opportunity, not to be squandered. Life is a miracle, a gift; it must be cherished and protected. Buddhists believe that a better world, whether it’s called an enlightened life or nirvana itself, is right here and can be found within this world.”

Mary Oliver poem: *Mindful*

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The Buddha, from “The Dhammapada:”

Live in joy, in love, even among those who hate. Live in joy, in health, even among the afflicted. Live in joy, in peace, even among the troubled.

There is no fire like passion, no crime like hatred, no sorrow like separation, no sickness like hunger, and no joy like the joy of freedom. Health, contentment, and trust are your greatest possessions, and freedom your greatest joy.

Look within. Be still. Free from fear and attachment – know the sweet joy of the way. Follow then the shining ones, the wise, the awakened, the loving, for they know how to work and forbear. Follow them, as the moon follows the path of the stars.

Inuit Shaman Uvuvnuk: *The Sea*

The great sea frees me, moves me, as a strong river carries a weed.

Earth and her strong winds move me, take me away, and my soul is swept up in joy.

Blessed be.