



The Many Flavors of Joy

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries, and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

This month's theme is joy, and to the casual observer it may seem like a simple theme. But, when we dig a little deeper, questions arise. Is joy and happiness the same thing? When we explore the etymology of the word itself: "joy" is derived from the Latin *gaudere* or *Gaudium* meaning "to rejoice." It is related to delight, pleasure, jubilation, triumph, and exultation. Happiness is understood as an emotion — a state of being which arises from pleasurable experience. J.D. Salinger, the author of *Catcher in the Rye* once wrote: "...the most singular difference between happiness and joy is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid." We can't fully know what Salinger meant by this, but there's a case to be made that it's the other way around — that happiness is liquid, flowing in and around us due to circumstances, but joy is solid. It is something we are innately born with. Joy is our birthright.

If joy is our birthright, then we have to ask: what prevents us from feeling joyful? Not feeling joyful is different than being depressed. Clinical depression makes it impossible to feel joy. It requires good medication, therapy and support to help restore the ability to feel joy. But that's not the only reason of course. For some, expressing joy has not been part of their family tradition or cultural practice. Some cultures frown upon excessive expressions of joy. Some remember their childhood as being joyless, because of dysfunction or unaddressed grief, thereby making it difficult for them to experience joy as an adult. And some feel that to be truly joyful is a denial of the very real sufferings of others. In the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, Dharma teacher James Baraz

reflected on the relationship between serious and disciplined practice and joylessness. Because Buddhism's first Noble Truth is about the reality of suffering, Baraz believed that his suffering would help him become more compassionate. He writes:

The smiling Buddha who had so lovingly inspired during my first years of practice had turned into a stern taskmaster. Practice became a serious endeavor... this focus on suffering actually had a numbing effect. Shutting down my vitality left me feeling rather disconnected from myself and others, and less able to respond compassionately to the suffering of those closest to me.

Joy then, becomes not just one of many human emotions; it is intimately connected to our ability to respond to the struggles and injustice of the world within, among and beyond us. Baraz continues:

Joy creates a spaciousness in the mind that allows us to hold the suffering we experience inside us and around us without becoming overwhelmed, without collapsing into helplessness or despair. It brings inspiration and vitality, dispelling confusion and fear while connecting us with life... [and] Joy has many different flavors. It might overflow from us in song or dance, or it might gently arise as a smile or a sense of inner fullness. Joy is not something we have to manufacture. It is already in us when we come into the world, as we can see in the natural delight and exuberance of a healthy baby. We need only release the layers of contraction and fear that keep us from it.

Although joy is our birthright, it can be

cultivated and strengthened through regular practice. One practice is to continue to understand the nature of impermanence. When we are not attached to who we think we are, life can move through us, playing us like an instrument from which joyful music can arise. When we live in this easy connection with life, we live in joy. Another practice is inclining the mind towards the wholesome. "...This doesn't mean disregarding suffering, it means not overlooking happiness and joy... In waking up, it's important to remember that in addition to the ten thousand sorrows there are also the ten thousand joys..."

There are indeed, ten thousand reasons to live in joy — and our task is to simply find them. Every day. Even when days are hard. Even if it isn't *your* joy that you experience, but another's. We close with these words from the Buddha:

*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.*

*Look within. Be still.
Free from fear and attachment,
know the sweet joy of the way.*

—The Buddha, from the
Dhammapada,
Thomas Byrom, translator

Joyfully yours,
Rev. Kathleen Rolenz writing for the
Monthly Theme Team

Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme please see this month's Spiritual Practice Packet, available online at unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html.