Wages of joy

Janet Elaine Guthrie

A decade ago, when I was in the midst of a significant life transition, a dear friend introduced me to Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day." What I had given myself to for thirty years, both professionally through a career in higher education and personally in my marriage, was coming to an end. Seminary studies had not yet crystallized as the country I would next inhabit.

In that threshold time, the challenging question with which Oliver ends her poem grabbed my imagination, gifting me with spacious wonder: "*Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?*"[1]

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? The question grants that human experience is unique and valuable; each of us has but one life, and each life has precious worth. At the same time, human experience is wild, part of nature, fueled by passionate energy, and filled with surprises. How does one plan with wildness in the mix? For Mary Oliver, the approach involves an embodied openness to the present moment.

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Indeed, the poet is spending a summer day outdoors, reveling in the marvels of creation. A grasshopper hops up and eats from her hand. She notices the grasshopper's features and deliberate movements: how the grasshopper moves her jaws and gazes around . . . now lifts her pale forearms . . . now washes her face . . . now snaps her wings open . . . and floats away.

Paying attention to this other creature leads the poet to declare her own posture of presence: "I do know how to pay

attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day." The present moment holds the key. Oliver claims the blessing of seeing, movement, contact with the earth, and reverence for life. Her gratitude flows from delight in the here and now. This is the foundational place of joyful awareness from which to welcome one's vocation or purpose in life.

What will make your heart sing?

Mary Oliver's question encouraged my turning aside from the known path with its markers of prestige and material success. As I opened myself to the richness of *being*, I asked where my longing pointed, where joy was to be found. Gradually, and in answer to prayer, the new path emerged, leading me to seminary and then to a pastoral call.

Having found a calling, whether vocation or avocation, we face an ongoing need to name and claim the heart of our joy. A second compelling question has guided me in doing so: *What will make your heart sing?* This is the question posed by the Lilly Endowment to the applicants for its Clergy Renewal Program. To sit with this question in the context of stressful pastoral care, continuous worship planning, and myriad administrative details is inherently liberating. The "should" of pressing tasks, neglected household chores, and self-improvement options falls away.

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The singing heart signifies embodied joy. Cultivating joy that engages our person-specific delight is a worthy spiritual task for any ministering person who seeks to reflect the light of God.

Celtic spirituality emphasizes the goodness of creation and the development of our God-given nature as the path of grace.[2] Sometimes this is referred to as original blessing. In a similar vein, Mark Nepo invites us to uncover at the center of our being the "umbilical spot of grace where we were each first touched by God." Nepo suggests identifying two things we love doing, meditating on what

it is in each that makes us feel alive, and asking what they have in common.[3] Another telling exercise, shared with me by a friend, is to call up our ten-year-old self and recall the channels for joy that defined us prior to adolescent angst and adult social roles.

A joyful commitment to travel on foot

What will make your heart sing? has proven a valuable question to circle around, as time passes, self-discovery deepens, and I find the way home to myself. For the Lilly-funded sabbatical, my answer focused on walking pilgrimage in beautiful landscapes and encounters with my ancestral homelands in the British Isles.[4] Wonderfully, walking is a spiritual practice that claimed me, though I could not have articulated this until midlife. Having suffered a mild bout of polio as a toddler, I find that my enjoyment of walking carries with it a deeply held experience of divine grace.

In recent years, much has been written about walking as a spiritual discipline, from the confined parameters of the labyrinth to the expansive challenge of the Camino de Santiago. In our fast-paced, whiz-by world, an alternative pace of three or four miles an hour allows for close observance of one's surroundings, while one is physically in touch with the elements of nature and nurtured by the meditative rhythm of the walking stride. At the end of my sabbatical, I compiled an explicit rule of life for myself and made a joyful commitment to travel on foot whenever feasible.

Rediscovering the transcendent joy of dancing

Post-sabbatical, with my body more rested and attuned to rhythms of delight, it seemed a natural next step to rediscover the transcendent joy of dancing. I remembered myself as a ten-year-old girl dancing the part of the Sugar Plum Fairy behind my closed bedroom door. I recalled my sharp disappointment when my parents ruled out dance lessons because of their cost. Now the lively Irish, Scottish, and American tunes played by accomplished musicians beckoned, and I joined the welcoming local community of country dancers and took up contra dancing. Here was deep joy indeed: a flow of movement in sync with the music and line of dancers, stepping and twirling and addressing one another with

broad smiles, present to the moment, fully engaged as part of a larger whole. A good contra dancer not only enjoys the dance tremendously, but also, as Greg Rohde notes, "increases the joy of everyone else in the line."[5]

A Lutheran pastor who has found great delight in contra dancing wrote a blog some years back, on the subject "Why Can't Churches Be More Like Contra-Dances?" She observes, "The goal of contra-dancing seems to be experiencing joy in community. And, sometimes along the way, there are these transcendent moments when the music is humming and all the feet are stomping at the same time and the bodies are flowing. Together we have created a thing of beauty. I like to believe it's pleasing to God. And that makes it worship."[6]

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I am not the only Mennonite in our community who is a dance regular, but my being a pastor has piqued the interest of other dancers. Not infrequently, questions about theology come my way during the break between sets. Still, the most important witness I make is the joy I show. Joy is attractive, just as laughter is infectious. To express joy in the midst of the world's suffering reveals our capacity to hope and to trust in God. Poet and environmentalist farmer Wendell Berry puts it thus: "Expect the end of the world. Laugh. / Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful / though you have considered all the facts."[7]

Dancing and walking are two visible modes by which I intentionally cultivate and share embodied joy in this season of my life. Clarity around my personal joy, freely shared with the congregation and in other circles, has in turn enhanced my pastoral identity and work.

Watching for signs of resurrection on the heels of tragedy

My own journey and the healing work I have done (imperfectly and still in progress) model a healthy trajectory, although they do not, of course, provide a template for others. Henri Nouwen says it well in *The Wounded Healer*: "When we are not afraid to enter our own center and to concentrate on the stirrings of our own

soul, we come to know that being alive means being loved. . . . When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center, we can be free to let others enter into the space created for them and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song and speak their own language without fear."[8]

As spiritual director and pastoral caregiver, I encourage others to explore and name their sources of joy. I watch for the signs of resurrection on the heels of tragedy. I encourage play and rest as first steps toward healing. Here are three brief case studies:

An adult burdened with mental illness had no outlets for play. To create some order in this person's life seemed a daunting if not hopeless task. When the person articulated a seemingly wild desire to undertake an outdoor adventure, initial reactions included horror and dismay. Yet others saw the adventure as a possible avenue to birth joy and confidence, which is indeed what happened. The mental illness remained, but could be held differently by all parties, in the context of realized joy.

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The matriarch of a troubled and dysfunctional family began coming to our dances. She explained that it was time to inject some fun in her life. After several months of dancing, she initiated a conversation with me, asking for my listening ear and guidance. In the context of the joy she was claiming, she had gathered the strength to face the family problems along with the resolve to do her part to improve relationships.

Another woman perceived that a vocational transition was on the horizon. In paying careful attention to the contours of her childhood joys, she noticed several themes that matched up beautifully with skills she had honed in her current job. Although initially reluctant to pursue the gritty street ministry toward which God seemed to be directing her, she discovered that claiming these core passions eased her concerns and readied her for robust discernment around specific next steps.

Claiming joy honors God's desire for us as beloved children. Claiming joy is faithful to Jesus' instructions that we are to abide in love and friendship and know his joy. Claiming joy gives space

for the Spirit to work and our pain to be transformed, just as the anguish of a woman's labor fades "because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world" (John 16:21).

Pastors are called to be present to whatever sorrows and joys are before us. Last week, I officiated on Monday at a cremation service for a sixty-year-old suicide victim and on Saturday at the wedding of two thirty-year-olds. To be present and attentive to each person and each situation requires that my own heart be open and unafraid.

While at seminary, I read an article about pastoral ministry as an improvisatory art; it spoke to me about the many and varied demands faced by pastors, for which no specific protocol can be learned. Rebecca Slough includes the following in her discussion of the desirable pastoral portfolio:

> *Pastors in training must cultivate a capacity to act playfully, spontaneously, freely, creatively, seriously, compassionately. They need to learn to pray without ceasing. They need to hone their skills in reflecting on past actions, assessing responses, determining fitting choices, and cleaning up mistakes. Developing these skills allows pastors to bring the fullness of themselves as thinking, feeling, intuitive, physical, and spiritual beings to each moment of ministry.*[9]

To bring the fullness of who we are and to enter into things fully: these abilities are tied directly to our capacity for joy. Mark Nepo tells the story of a rainy day at a lake. He and his friend sat in the screened-in porch, watching the rain fall, moping about the weather. Suddenly, the friend "bounded up, slapped the screen door open, tracked his clothes, and jumped into the rain-filled lake." Mark watched, then shed his clothes, too, and jumped in: "There we were: in the center of the lake, water from above in our mouths, in our eyes, pelting us, water entering water, lives entering their living. Each pelt of rain, on us and in the lake, uttering . . . joy, joy, joy."[10]

Immersed, naked to the elements, recasting as blessing what seemed a dreary reality, the two friends seized the moment to abandon themselves to life, in all its wild and precious ways, on this one particular and memorable day.

Thus to know the importance of joy. Thus to be fully present to the moments of our days. Thus to hear hearts singing, ours and those of our loved ones. Thus to encourage others to dive into the rain-filled lake and be blessed. Thus to give birth to peace and joy and thus, as pastors, to receive our wages of joy.

Notes

[1] Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 94.
[2] See for example, J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), chapter 3.
[3] Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2000), January 3 entry, 3–4.
[4] Clergy renewal grant "Jubilee Joy" awarded to First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana by the Lilly Endowment in 2011 for summer 2012 project activities.
[5] Greg Rohde, "Hands Four," *The Commonspace: Grassroots Civics and Culture in St. Louis*, June 2002, http://www.thecommonspace.org/2002/06/games.php.
[6] Nancy Kraft, "Why Can't Churches Be More Like Contra-Dances," *Inside Nancy's Noodle* (blog), Wednesday, November 4, 2009, http://insidenancysnoodle.blogspot.com/2009/11.
[7] Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," *The Country of Marriage* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); reprinted in *New Collected Poems* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2012), 173–74.
[8] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 91–92.
[9] Rebecca Slough, "Pastoral Ministry as Improvisatory Art," in *The Heart of the Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective*, ed. Erick Sawatzky (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 195.
[10] Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, June 27 entry, 211–12.

About the author

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