

Joy in welcoming the newcomer

Gilberto Pérez Jr.

What is joy? Where does it come from? Is it attainable in the presence of pain and hardship? Can people subjected to extreme poverty and violence experience joy? Is joy sustainable for one who encounters such people as part of one's employment in the social work profession or other ministries?

It is not easy to know where joy originates and how it comes alive in us—in our feelings, thoughts, and bodies. But joy, an important ingredient in positive and caring relationships, can provide a vital foundation for social workers and other ministering people.

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Early experiences of welcoming newcomers

I was in my early teens when I first experienced what it means to be joyful in welcoming newcomers. My parents regularly opened our home for conversation and relationship with people who were fleeing threats and violence in their home countries in Central America. Our home, located in Robstown in

south Texas, was a stopping point for newcomers who were heading north. Back then I didn't fully understand what joy meant or even what welcoming the newcomer was about. But what I did know is that our new friends' faces reflected joy when we took time to listen as they told their migration stories. Our living room was a safe place. Our new friends' stories were showing us how much we needed to learn from them about life's struggles and about the human spirit.

In my early twenties I found myself living in a rural Kansas community where I was charged with conducting an assessment of

the needs of Latino newcomers. Again I spent many hours sitting in living rooms listening to stories about what newcomers experienced. But in these short conversations I learned that moving toward the newcomer is sometimes hard work: not everyone I encountered was interested in conversing with me. Some were suspicious and wondered why a community worker was asking questions about their needs. It was an imperfect needs assessment, and I didn't experience joy.

In my mid-twenties, after working hard to complete college, I finally graduated with a degree in social work. I experienced great joy at having passed a significant milestone in my life. A couple of years later, my wife and I moved to her home community in Aibonito, Puerto Rico. We had been considering a service assignment, and Puerto Rico seemed like a wonderful place to start my social work career. I worked for several years as a hospice social worker and mental health professional at a partial hospitalization program at Hospital General Menonita, and I earned a master's degree in social work. Then we decided to move to Goshen, Indiana.

Work in community mental health

While I felt excitement about moving to a new place, I was also nervous and unsure about what to expect in my role at a community mental health center. I was to offer therapy to children, youth, and adults suffering from persistent and serious mental illness. The majority of the clients I was to serve would be first-generation newcomers from Mexico. There were so many unknowns about this new job, and many unanswered questions about how to welcome clients to the mental health center. Often I found myself trying to understand whether it is possible to experience joy in this work.

In my new job I heard migration stories from Latinos who arrived for mental health services. They were like the stories I had heard as a young teenager and later as a twenty- and thirty-something. I kept hearing that making a new life in a new country is not always a joyful experience. Newcomers at the mental health center spoke of difficulty in adjusting, of not feeling welcome in their new community. Where would joy come from when some residents expressed displeasure about their presence in the com-

munity? Where would joy come from when some of those seeking my help at the mental health center had a family member who had been deported by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials?

Would community members and church members find joy in welcoming these newcomers? What could I do to find joy in social work with Latino newcomers? How could this work be a gift, when people were in so much distress?

Bienvenido

During the next few years we sought to give meaning and hope amid these questions. Newcomers engaged in meaningful conversations through the Bienvenido program, created to assist them in cultivating a supportive network and identifying ways they could get involved in their new community.¹ Newcomers and community leaders entered into welcoming spaces that allowed all to state their fears, hopes, and dreams about life in a new country. Bienvenido groups developed across Indiana, and eventually organizations and churches in other states started their own Bienvenido groups. I felt joy and satisfaction in seeing newcomers

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develop a strong sense of self. All that was needed was to create relationships with systems that could benefit from their experiences and gifts.

Literature in social work abounds in discussion about adhering to the social work ethical principles of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. There is much less literature in the profession on how to find joy in serving the most vulnerable in our society. Subtle expres-

sions of unhappiness and discontent are prevalent among social workers and religious workers. To sustain joy in this work calls for critical awareness about selflessness, hard work, and character.

Understanding joy

The Bible abounds in passages that help us understand what joy is. More than 200 verses in scripture speak directly to joy; the

majority of them are found in the Psalms. Here are three examples that help us understand joy in the Bible:

*There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:2–4)²*

*Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?"
Let the light of your face shine on us.
Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.
In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety. (Ps. 4:6–8)*

*You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand. (Ps. 16:11)*

These passages surely guide us to a place where our troubled souls can find hope and joy. But are there specific practices in our spiritual journey that help us find joy? Is joy a state of motivation, or do we have to work to find joy? How does joy connect with welcoming the newcomer? Social workers and religious workers can surely live out their ethical principles and spiritual disciplines, but it may be a bigger challenge to live them out if they do not understand some key aspects of a joyful character.

Spontaneity

In my experience, joy is deeply linked with spontaneity. A capacity for spontaneity is something all of us have probably exhibited at some point. Spontaneity might be expressed in just showing up at our friends' house and inviting them out to dinner, going out to see a film on a whim, or having an impromptu picnic in the park.

What might spontaneity look like in welcoming the newcomer? It may not mean that we act on impulse. For Christians, spontaneity might involve giving hungry people something to eat or inviting strangers into our homes and churches (Matt. 25:35). We might act spontaneously and with joy in teaching others about an injustice that newcomers to our community are experi-

encing. Spontaneity might mean collecting a special offering for a family that shows up at our church's worship service asking for money. Spontaneity might mean showing some momentary irritation in speaking to our friends about the fact that they are not actively supporting the least of these.

Could spontaneity bubble up from within us so freely that we don't worry about what onlookers will think or say about our actions in behalf of newcomers? Might spontaneity in welcoming the newcomer connect us more deeply with God's desires and interests?

Active impatience

Active impatience in welcoming the newcomer requires us to resist the typical cultural response of detaching ourselves from the issues newcomers face. People around us express a variety of detachment attitudes: "Immigration isn't something we deal with on a daily basis, so why should we worry about it?" "Let the people in the border states take care of the issue." "Find someone else to talk to about this. I'm not listening anymore." "The system is broken, and the government has to fix it. I sent a letter to my

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legislator." Encountering apathy can lead us to feel impatience, disgust, and hopelessness—so different from the joy that we want to characterize our lives.

What does active impatience look like?

Active impatience is about speaking for our newcomer friends when they cannot speak. It might lead us to meet with a representative of the local pharmacy in order to demand to know why the store has refused to fill a

prescription for someone who has presented a valid international identification card. It might mean speaking to church or service groups about how newcomers experience our community. Active impatience resists accepting delay or a slow pace for needed change. Our efforts to educate others are a way of displaying resolve and courage to engage in difficult conversations.

Active impatience could mean being publicly critical of legislators and other leaders who display passivity on the subject of immigration reform, who are too willing to yield to forces that

resist change. Our active impatience could compel us to engage strangers or newcomers when they are in need. Jesus had the option of refusing to heal the centurion's servant, but instead he chose to bring healing (Matt 8:5–13). Jesus' response is a model for us in rejecting prevailing norms of apathy and detachment to instead welcome newcomers to our communities.

Gifts of spontaneity and active impatience

I no longer work at a community mental health center, and I no longer regularly sit with and listen to newcomers as they talk about their struggles and joys. Nevertheless, I see gifts of spontaneity and active impatience all around me, and they bring me joy.

It is a joy to witness people from all walks of life working side by side with newcomers on justice issues such as food insecurity, domestic violence, and neighbor-to-neighbor relationships. I rejoice to see people in national advocacy organizations engage in fasts to press for immigration reform. Their active impatience in educating newcomers about their civil rights and positive mental

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health helps these new residents experience empowerment in this difficult time. I find joy in observing newcomer women in my community as they organize a support group for other women who are new here. What they began as a spontaneous response has turned into a weekly gathering of mutual support. Their practice, which values human connection, is a gift to newcomer women who experience injustice and pain from people whose words and actions would devalue them.

When I see newcomers engage in demonstrations that invite legislators to show compassion toward immigrants, I know active

impatience is in their souls, and I rejoice. When people who are part of organizations that support newcomers participate in Bienvenido facilitator trainings, I rejoice as they listen with compassion and curiosity to stories of migration. When long-established congregations in my community share their worship space with newcomer congregations, I rejoice to see them show that they are ready to walk the talk of being welcoming churches.

When local Latino pastors meet with county law enforcement officials to discuss the discrimination people in their congregations experience when they are pulled over by traffic cops, I rejoice to see them living out the gift of active impatience. It brings joy to see people from both sides building relationships and in the process finding their perspectives changed.

In my experience, spontaneity and active impatience characterize people who are attaining and sustaining joy through serving, recognizing the dignity and value of others, valuing human relationships, and living with integrity. I see bountiful joy in their lives, and it brings me joy.

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Where does joy come from?

We tend to think that joy comes from within. We tend to expect that if we think harder and longer—or more broadly and carefully—about how to experience joy, we will settle our troubled souls. But spontaneity and active impatience point directly to joy being something I experience as I engage with the

other and not just with myself. The movement toward our neighbors, legislators, and community leaders is what welcoming is all about, and it brings joy.

I am joyful when I think of all the things my newcomer friends and their support systems are doing together to settle their troubled souls and bring hope to our future together. In all these activities and relationships, I am learning to understand that joy begins with our reaching out to one another in trust, not fully knowing how God's joy will make itself known to us. This reaching out is the beginning of a joyful character, even in the presence of pain and suffering.

Psalm 16:11 reminds us that our path with the newcomer can be filled with joy, spontaneity, and active impatience, because it is God who gives us joy even when what we hope for takes its time to come to fruition. Joy involves an experience with the other and with the divine. This joy leads us through those imperfect spontaneous moments and imperfect active impatient experiences that come when we welcome newcomers.

Notes

¹For more information, see <http://bienvenidosolutions.org/>.

²Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

About the author

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