

Drawing from deep wells Joy in the work of justice

Sarah Thompson

We live in an extraordinary moment on earth. We possess more technical prowess and knowledge than our ancestors could have dreamt of . . .

At the same time we witness destruction of life in dimensions that confronted no previous generation in recorded history.—Joanna Macy¹

During the summers of my late childhood, my mother would take my brother and me with her to visit older people from our church who could not travel to attend services, or those whose bio-families lived far away. I remember these visits because of the particulars: the M&Ms at Ethel and Myron's house, the smell of Doña Catalina's house, the speed bumps on the driveway of the maze-like nursing home where Hank lived.

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During these afternoon visits, while my mother and the elder conversed, I would rehearse tunes from recent piano lessons in my head or tussle with my brother or play with any toys that were available. When asked, I would pause and dutifully respond to any questions about my life and church.

It was at these visits that I learned that I do not like peanut brittle, but I pretended to like it so as not to upset Mrs. Rodrick. She usually made it especially for our visits. She would

hand it to us with a loving, semi-toothless grin, as if to say, "If I can't enjoy it, at least you can." I was so good at pretending to like it that when I told my mother a few years ago that I dislike peanut brittle, she could not believe me!

After each visit we'd climb back in the hot car. As I shifted on the sticky backseat, I would sometimes catch part of an oblique

comment my mom made to my brother or me as she reflected aloud on these afternoon excursions. I remember some of them because of the “teachable moment” tone of her voice. One time, after a visit with a solitary but joyous elder, she put the car in reverse to leave. As she twisted around to see to back down Mr. Andrew’s driveway, she said to me, “Sarah, he draws from deep wells.” As a thirty-year-old, I am only now beginning to understand what she meant.

From depths carved out by sorrow

When you have a deep well, you draw from a place that will not dry up quickly. Though you face difficulties in your life that threaten to dry you out, if you have a deep well you can draw nourishment from waters more profound than the evil you face. Joy is found at the depths of the wells.

Joy is more enduring than any particular emotion. Joy is deeper than happiness. Joy is sustained, not fleeting. While joy may have height, the height comes not from manic emotion but from the sense of rising from depths carved out by sorrow. Some say that those who know joy only know it because they also know sorrow. Sorrow and grief are indeed powerful teachers, and when we learn their lessons our capacity for joy expands.

What makes you come alive?

Another way to know joy is through the practice of paying attention to what makes one feel truly alive. Howard Thurman, known to many as the spiritual leader of the US civil rights movement, is often quoted as saying the following to young people who came to him seeking career advice at that critical time in history: “Do not ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. Then do that, because the world needs people who have come alive!”

We are at a crucial moment in the life of the world, when consumerism driven by our desires often trumps the gospel call to respond to the basic needs of other people and the earth. Thurman’s exhortation could be seen by some as a continuation of this trend. Yet Thurman’s words point to an aliveness that comes from a depth. When I feel truly alive I cannot help but see my individual needs and dreams inexorably linked with the life and well-being of the world.

The worst of times, the best of times

In my visits with elders, I no longer play on the floor nearby but am fully in the conversation. In college in the southern United States, I interviewed older activists about the civil rights movement. Beginning in the 1950s many worked daily to end legal racial segregation in the United States. They organized intensely to change the way non-whites were viewed by the power structure and population. They rallied to call attention to the racism of wars abroad. It was a brutal, dynamic, grueling time. I heard them say over and over again that though it was the worst of times, it was also the best of times.

The drive to be fully alive, to dig a deep well, will lead to experiencing the best of times and the worst of times, joy and sorrow together. What I have experienced in social justice leadership I have found to be true of my spiritual journey as well, as a disciple of Jesus.

No matter how it is opened, a well does not automatically become deep. Metaphorically and literally, moving through earth's multilayered shell to reach underground aquifers requires consistent attention and care. This well-digging project is not simply for the purposes of extracting an earth resource for individual consumption. Rather it is lifework that seeks to draw responsibly and respectfully from these waters in order to share and replenish the ecosystem.

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Meeting God knee-deep in the muck

To do what makes me feel fully alive I need a deep well. After all, I have no guarantees about how much time I have in this life. I have no certainty about exactly where my vocation in faith-based global peace and justice work will lead me. I have no assurances about how this vocation will unfold. And I do not know whether I have the capacity to face the beauty and terror of life. But I trust that God will guide me and dance with me and meet me when I am knee-deep in the muck. I lean on verses I have found to resonate with my lived experience: "Weeping may last for a nighttime, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5b).

I became executive director of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in January 2014. CPT's mission is building partnerships to transform violence and oppression. My work is administratively

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and financially supporting teams of trained, unarmed peacemakers to accompany local communities and nonviolent movement leaders in their struggle for positive social change in the context of lethal violence.

Going only where invited by local partners, four long-term CPT teams are now at work. One is in northeastern Colombia rallying alongside subsistence farmers resisting displacement by multinational corporations.

Another is in Hebron/Al-Khalil walking alongside Palestinian children who must cross through Israeli military checkpoints or face Israeli settler violence on their way to and from school. In northern Iraq (Kurdistan) we stand with displaced civilians denouncing cross-border bombing, learn from refugees, and challenge the extractive oil industry there that jeopardizes rural water availability and quality. On Turtle Island (an indigenous name for the North American land mass) we work alongside First Nations community mobilizations in Canada to stop environmental degradation and cultural devastation.

In addition to working in these specific contexts, CPT focuses on structural violence (oppression) prevalent everywhere. Using a popular education model, we provide intensive trainings that feature personality and group-dynamics analysis, address second-hand trauma, foster community building, practice conflict intervention and interpersonal resolution, study the history of social movements, do nonviolent direct action, and solidify a commitment to undoing oppression (racism, sexism, and heterosexism).

Connecting with companions in the quest

This work demands that we dig daily. We unearth rocks of violence and layers of oppression (external, internal, spiritual, physical), examining them and responding intentionally. It is demanding and drying. Though daunting, this work is what I want to do for the long haul, because it is in nonviolent social movements (liberation Christianity being one of them) where I feel

most alive. So as I started the position I crafted circles of care: circles for mentorship and for prayer support, circles of healers and peers. My well may not be deep yet, but I can connect with those whose wells are, or who are companions in the quest. So far doing so has resulted in a lot of joy on the journey. One circle of care is with other young leaders of color who meet periodically in Oakland, California (Ohlone traditional land).

Together we study with Joanna Macy, a social movement leader who grew up listening to Calvinist Christian preachers. Her ministry is facilitating powerful transformative grief work, sitting with and moving through the suffering of our planet in this critical time. Sustained through five decades of activism, she is an eco-philosopher and a scholar of engaged Buddhism, systems theory, and deep ecology. Accompanying her in leading our study is Patricia St. Onge, a Mohawk grandmother and community organizer who is an expert in deep culture work, for it is through cultural manifestations of values, beliefs, and ethics that humans express the desire to survive and thrive.

Reconnecting with each other and with all beings

The process we engage in is about reconnecting ourselves with each other and all beings, arousing our passion for life and our

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power to protect it. In the book *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, Macy articulates an active hope. This hope is a component in the type of joy that can help us face the mess we are in—personally, communally, religiously, (inter)nationally, familiarly—without drying up. The process includes coming in gratitude, honoring our pain, seeing with new eyes, and going forth.

It is tempting to dry up—to go crazy, or go numb, or close in—because of the complicated issues we see within and around us each

day. What does it mean to have joy at a moment when things are being done to the earth that cannot be undone? In addition to our current CPT projects, there are opportunities for local groups to organize with CPT to learn about a specific issue. One CPT group in Indiana went to Tennessee to learn about the depleted uranium

stored in the ground there. The half-life of that radioactive poison is more than 4.5 billion years! And it is impossible to get it out of the ground. The use of earth as a supply house and a sewer raises hard questions about what justice—if any—is available for the earth and its people, and what it would look like in this context.

Coming in gratitude

The way we can avoid drying up (as in having no more tears to cry, or having our well of compassion and insight run dry) after

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learning about such horrible things is to approach the situation in gratitude. What's needed is not a sentimental expression of cheeriness but a profound gratefulness for being alive at this moment in the universe.

“Gratitude for the gift of life is the primary wellspring of all religions,” Macy affirms.²

Being thankful in all circumstances is a starting point from which to approach all challenges. One can be grateful to have been made aware of a situation and therefore able

to empathize. I am attempting to reflect the meaning of the words written to the early church in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). This baseline of grateful joy develops the muscles of compassion, which we need in order to have the courage to move toward situations of suffering and sorrow rather than away from them.

Honoring our pain

Profound changes can “occur when we own and use, rather than repress, our pain for the world,” Macy writes.³ St. Onge offered the legendary story of the Great Peacemaker and the grief of Hiawatha. Without Hiawatha's honest reckoning of his immense sorrow, he would not have had the ability to broker the formation of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy for peace.

Honoring the pain I feel about the brokenness in myself and the world reduces the demobilizing grip it has on me. It is then I can ask the deepest questions that are within, and I can hear from others' experiences without comparing. I sit in the Oakland cohort as I have sat with comrades in Elkhart, Atlanta, Jerusalem,

and Rosario. We are all asking these questions. As common as these questions are through generations, this is an extraordinary moment in planetary life:

How do we collect the shards of our broken selves that have been flung far and wide by the impact of life's blows? How do we process individual and collective pains that have ripped apart our cores? How do we become whole after traumas that threaten to splinter our souls? Where do we find wellness, and to whom, or to what, do we turn when relief seems illusory?"⁴

Reframing

Co-arising with the energy of compassion is the necessary tool of insight. Insight from scripture, science and scholarship, our lives, and religious and cultural traditions leads me from wallowing in the pool I can see toward deepening my well.

With insight we notice that the sorrow and anger we feel for ourselves, other humans, and the planet doesn't match the assumption that we are separate, independent beings whose happiness must often be secured at the expense of others. On the contrary, Macy taught us as we gathered as a cohort,

it is from our interconnectedness that feelings of pain for the world arise . . .

As we allow the world's pain to flow in, it rearranges our internal structures. Then, on the outflow, our gifts of response release back into the world.⁵

This is good news! Jesus was one who saw our connectedness to all things and blessed those who were scorned, torn, and mourned (Matt. 5:3–12). His tales of the kingdom of God constantly illustrated cosmic and societal reordering. His invitation was to people from all walks of life to begin that reordering by an acceptance of messianic consciousness and a sense of their oneness (John 17:22–23).

Acting exuberantly

For me, joy comes in daily rediscovering this honoring and framing of sorrow. Like a cup that runs over, I have much joy to share.

These understandings are not for myself only, nor am I the only one that understands! I gain energy from making connections between people, organizations, and movements that are openheartedly doing healing work. In CPT, healing work takes personal, political, and spiritual forms. Joy is essential to leadership in this arena, as a lot of paralyzing forces can keep people from having courage, making a commitment, and cultivating the communities they need to sustain their faith-based activism.

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I must constantly return to the well of my deepest motivation to do this work. I must refill my cup—what one CPT colleague calls “a joy bucket.” We can give well from an overflowing cup, even though surrounded by enemies or difficult circumstances (Ps. 23:5). But we cannot give well from a cup that is not full; if we try, we will get depleted.

Cultivating joy within as a discipleship practice

It may seem that cultivating joy within as a discipleship practice is a small action, with marginal effect on the world. In my imagination, I hear Jesus speak to this by reflecting on his theological encounter with the “marginal” Samaritan woman at the well whose response to a well-deepening conversation shook up her world and her town (John 4). In their conversation they travelled through what Macy calls “the spiral of the work that reconnects”: beginning with gratitude, naming pain and brokenness, reframing (in this case, understandings of the Messiah), and acting exuberantly on the information. Here is my response in parable:

The kingdom of God is like a woman who found water in a dry place. She arrived in that land by the path of following her heart. She knelt to the ground, and her last tears fell from her eyes and sweat from her back. While others said, “There is no nourishment to be found here,” she watched as her water flowed and pooled and sank back into the earth. She began to dig. She dug through layers of clay, sediment, and stone, the earth growing cooler and damper as she reached lower. Covered in dust

and thrust core-ward by a grief determined to be heard and healed, she found the waters of joy, drank deeply, and was nourished. She was filled enough to cry again—they were tears of joy. And almost all who saw her rejoiced with her.

More than ever we need people who through great sorrow and by other paths have found their way to becoming alive. The challenges we face as a species and as a planet require that all of us play our part in making a difference. One thing I inherited from those visits to elders was practice in talking with anyone, of any age and background, convinced that everyone has a treasure or a story to share, even if it is some peanut-brittle idea that I do not like.

I could tell that the summer visits to older Christian sisters and brothers filled my mother's joy bucket. I appreciate her example and the example of many others who intentionally engage in life-sustaining activities that knit us together as a species across lines of difference, multiplying joy in the face of forces that seek to disrupt and deny our connections with one another. This engagement reflects one of the core values of the movement that gathered around Jesus. It characterizes the renewal he pointed to, the revelation he embodied, and the revolution he called for—joyously!

Notes

¹ Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers, 1998), 15.

² From Joanna Macy on "The Great Turning"—"the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization"; <http://www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html>.

³ Macy and Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, 5.

⁴ "Angela Davis and Toni Morrison / How do we become whole . . . after traumas that threaten to splinter our souls? On literacy, libraries, and liberation," *The Liberator Magazine*; <http://weblog.liberatormagazine.com/2011/06/angela-davis-and-toni-morrison-literacy.html#.U6mytPmwLFY>.

⁵ Macy and Brown, notes from cohort meeting, April 13, 2014.

About the author

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