

Chris Rice

From Pandemic to Renewal

**Practices for a World
Shaken by Crisis**



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CHAPTER ONE

Bearing Joy for a World of Frantic Anxiety

And then

*once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed one, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.*

DENISE LEVERTOV, "PRIMARY WONDER"

Airplanes are a barometer of the national mood. My daughter is a flight attendant, and over the course of 2020, as Covid-19 battles, racial tensions, and election division intensified in the United States, so did her “you won’t believe what happened on the plane today” texts and stories about abusive language, fights, and incidents of rudeness and defiance. As Americans took rising anger and anxiety from living rooms to airplane aisles, the term *air rage* hit the headlines as a growing threat to air travel.

Anxiety was already increasing before this time of crisis. In a 2020 book *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout*

Generation, Anne Helen Petersen writes, “Increasingly—and increasingly among millennials—burnout isn’t just a temporary affliction. It’s our contemporary condition.”¹ Petersen speaks of US millennials mired in endless to-do lists and debt, and of digital work becoming 24/7 work and social media becoming all-consuming.

This accelerating condition of burnout and anxiety extends beyond the United States. In 2020, a video went viral in China of a student from an elite university riding his bike at night while working on a laptop perched on the handlebars. An onslaught of online photos of similarly overwhelmed and overworked students followed. Workers at large Chinese tech firms, who once referred to their long work hours as “996” (nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a week), now speak of “007” (working online twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week).

“Every age has its signature afflictions,” writes Byung-Chul Han, the Korean-born, Germany-based philosopher, in *The Burnout Society*. Burnout, for Han, is depression and exhaustion. Whatever our location or walk of life, the pandemic intensified this signature affliction of our age by reducing our chance for social encounter, confining many of us to our phones, and giving us many alarming things to be anxious about.²

CAPTIVITY TO ACTIVITY

Han writes that our age has become captive to the illusion that “the more active one becomes, the freer one is.” One wonders: If not by action, then how will we address the challenges of this pandemic era? But seeing more activism as more freedom is a captivity that I have struggled with over many years.

Earlier in my life I lived in Jackson, Mississippi, as part of a multiracial church and community development organization

called Voice of Calvary. I became close with a black Mississippian named Spencer Perkins (his father, civil rights activist Rev. John Perkins, founded the organization). Spencer and I wrote a book called *More Than Equals* and created a national platform to promote racial justice and reconciliation. We lived in an under-resourced neighborhood at the margins, worshiped across racial and economic lines, and worked for change at the grassroots. With others, our families shared daily life in an intentional Christian community called Antioch. Our homes and lives were open to hospitality—from welcoming neighborhood teenagers to single mothers to men just out of prison. At Antioch we had a saying, “there’s always room for one more at the dinner table.”

At the heart of our life and vision, and of Spencer’s and my teaching, was Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan who crosses social divides to “prove neighbor” to the stranger at the side of the road who has been unjustly treated (Luke 10:25-37). Activists at heart, we got a lot right. Our motto, you might say, was “yes, we can.”

But after twelve years together, we were in crisis. Our Antioch community had shriveled up inside, riddled by unresolved relational difficulties, financial stress, and overwork. Even more, Spencer’s and my relationship had eroded. While he and I were traveling the nation preaching about justice and reconciliation, we could hardly sit at the same dinner table at our Antioch community. Our lists of each other’s sins began to grow: “You did this to me.” “Well that’s because you did that to me.” “Well you did that to me . . .”

The deep friendship and partnership Spencer and I had forged was on the verge of breaking up. Facing the intensity of our 24/7 common life and work, many of us had run out of vision,

energy, and spiritual resources to go on. In my view, “yes, we can” had become a gospel of trying harder and doing more. And that did not feel like good news. We were exhausted. The joy was gone. We were in crisis. But we had no idea how to be liberated from our captivity to activity.

John Calvin once wrote, “For what is idolatry if not this: to worship the gifts in place of the Giver himself?” Activism is a gift. But extreme activism as an end in itself can make an idol of our indispensability, replacing the Only Indispensable One—the Giver.³

THE CHALLENGE OF TRAUMA

The story of our Mississippi crisis is a lens that helps us see three challenges facing our anxious and exhausted era, our burnout society.

The first is the challenge of trauma. Because of our Mississippi community’s location at America’s margins, our work of hospitality and justice, and our multiracial life, we lived in proximity to pain and brokenness, both external and internal. In a similar way to our Mississippi experience, the pandemic put all of us in close contact with trauma and conflict.

For some, that trauma has been physical, visceral, and even violent. More Americans have died of Covid-19 than from World War II and the Civil War—*combined*. While the suffering was hidden for many, not so for family and loved ones of those who died. The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis exposed patterns of violence against African Americans. As talk of a “Wuhan virus” increased, so did violent attacks against Asian Americans. All of us watched as bitter divisions over the pandemic, the 2020 election, and race tore communities and churches apart. No matter our politics, all it took was seeing

headlines or opening social media to provoke further tension and anger. All these were distressing and disturbing experiences, all various forms of trauma unleashing further anxiety.

Facing trauma, the temptation is to flee or to fight by becoming more and more active. But, as with our Mississippi community, we will eventually reach a breaking point of exhaustion and mental breakdown. Healing the trauma and conflict in and around us is a marathon, not a sprint. A yes-we-can spirituality of trying harder and doing more cannot sustain us, cannot carry us over the long haul.

THE CHALLENGE OF EXCESS POSITIVITY

A second challenge from the Mississippi crisis was revealed in the root problem that began to erode our lives and work. Our problem was not pessimism or despair. Until the crisis, our lives were bustling with activity and positivity. Our welcoming communal dinner slogan said it well: “There’s always room for one more.”

The root problem of our age of burnout and frantic anxiety is not despair but a hyperactive life of “yes, we can.” Wouldn’t you think high-achievement, prosperous, yes-we-can people have more joy? Well, they don’t. By any measure, the United States is the most wealthy, influential, and powerful country in the history of the world. And the United States also has the world’s fourth-highest stress level.⁴

South Korea had well-deserved success in controlling the spread of the Covid-19 virus, and a can-do culture of collective cooperation for the common good helps drive the country’s remarkable achievements. Indeed, just sixty years after being one of the poorest countries in the world after the Korean War, South Korea has the world’s twelfth-largest economy, hosting

global brand names from Samsung, Hyundai, and Kia to the boy band BTS. But the competitive drive for achievement has come at a high cost. Tragically, despite prosperity, in South Korea young people are known as the “seven-give-up generation,” believing they will never find love, marriage, childbirth, close relationships, home ownership, personal dreams, or hope (in the five years my wife and I lived in South Korea [2014–2019], the “give-up” list grew from five to seven). They, along with American millennials and China’s 996 generation, reflect young adults in the world who may be rejecting a kind of advancement they find meaningless.

This paradox of prosperity without joy reveals the power of philosopher Han’s insight that burnout society in our global time is rooted not in negativity but the very opposite: an excess of *positivity*. Han writes that in this age of burnout, “The complaint of the depressive individual, ‘Nothing is possible,’ is only possible in a society that believes, ‘Nothing is impossible.’”⁵

THE CHALLENGE OF ACTIVISM TURNING TO VIOLENCE

A third challenge revealed in the Mississippi crisis is how burnout breaks relationships. Deep practices of seeking justice and reconciliation were written into the daily fabric of our lives. Across racial lines, we lived in a community at the margins, talked honestly about race in our lives and in society, published a national magazine, and organized with others in a national association. Yet at the very same time, a culture of trying harder and doing more gradually began to weaken and damage our relationships, our hope, our joy.

The danger of hyperactivism turning into a form of violence never occurred to me until I encountered the writings of Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton wrote eloquently

about the great social challenges of the 1960s—from the rise of nuclear weapons to racial injustice, from abortion to war. Yet Merton warned about an insidious threat—internal, not external—overlooked by many actively involved in changing the world: what he called “a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork.” Merton continued,

The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.⁶

When Han describes the affliction of today’s burnout society, he sees what Merton saw, but on steroids—a world of overachievement and overcommunication that requires people to strive to the point of self-destruction. Writes Han, “It reflects a humanity waging war on itself.”⁷ This seems to describe the world as experienced by many young adults in the United States, South Korea, and China, a world they may be beginning to reject.

Merton teaches us that we must always analyze the quest for change through a spiritual lens. He saw that deep change requires being deeply rooted in our own spirits and hearts. Rooted in the shallow frenzy of idealism and hyperactivity alone, the fruit in our lives will be tasty for only a season, then

will grow bitter and the tree eventually barren. The tree may seem strong to outside eyes, but it will gradually wither and then fall, often during a sudden crisis. This is how being rooted in overwork and frantic activism can become a form of violence to ourselves and to others, as began to happen in the growing bitterness and hurtful words and broken relationships in our Mississippi community.

THE ANTIDOTE FOR ANXIETY

Facing our time of crisis and burnout, I believe the most essential virtue is *joy*.

Joy? Given the pain of this time, shouldn't we begin with lament? With the cry of Jesus from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Yet this same Jesus is the one who "for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). In the Bible, joy does not dismiss suffering. The one crying out, the one we call Lord and whose way we follow, was one with joy deep in his bones.

The two bookends of the story of Jesus—birth and resurrection—are permeated with joy. The baby in Elizabeth leaps (Luke 1:41). The angel greets Mary with joy and Mary rejoices (Luke 1:47). The angel announces "great joy" to shepherds. The visiting Magi were "overjoyed."

Jesus' words are filled with joy. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). "You will weep and lament . . . but your sorrow will turn into joy" (John 16:20). He goes on to say, "But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22).

Jesus got joy deep into the bones of his disciples. After his ascension, it is said they "returned to Jerusalem with

great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52-53).

Your favorite uplifting song, your team winning the playoff game, a meal at your favorite restaurant—there’s a place for things that make us happy. Yet what we see in the story of Jesus is that happiness and joy are not the same. According to missiologist Evelyne Reisacher, biblical joy is “a delight in life that runs deeper than pain or pleasure. This kind of joy is not limited by or tied solely to external circumstances. It is not a fleeting emotion but a quality of life that can be experienced in the midst of a variety of emotions.”

The antidote for anxiety is not activism. It is joy. What does it take to be rooted in joy, in “a delight in life that runs deeper than pain or pleasure”?

TRYING HARDER AND DOING MORE, INTERRUPTED

In the Bible, there is an intimate relationship between lament and joy. The beginning of liberation, the first move to a cure, is naming the condition we are in. Naming the trauma in and around us in this new era, the excess of yes-we-can positivity that gradually leads to despair, and the danger of hyper-activism breaking relationships—this is lament. Lament takes us to the depths of brokenness. Only there can we see our need for God in a way we have never experienced before. That is what happened in our Mississippi community.

In the depths of despair, we asked two mentors to fly in for a last-ditch attempt to save me and Spencer from a split-up. John and Judy Alexander had spent many years in Christian justice work. John had been the editor of *The Other Side*, the leading prophetic evangelical magazine at the

time, alongside *Sojourners*. Now they were part of a small church in San Francisco.

But John and Judy didn't come to talk about justice. All they wanted to talk about was the need to give each other grace. And Spencer and I wanted no part of it. We both felt wronged. We both wanted to win. Grace didn't sound fair.

John and Judy talked to Spencer, to me, and to each Antioch member. A couple days later, we all gathered. When John gave his diagnosis of our problem, I was on the edge of my seat.

"Which does the Bible speak of more," he asked, "loving God or loving your neighbor?"

I thought it was a trick question. How can you separate the two? Jesus certainly didn't! (Matthew 22:36-40).

After watching us squirm, John chuckled and said, "I'm a very anal person." He said he had actually counted all the Bible verses about loving God and loving neighbor. They were numerous, the latter including many about the call to liberate the poor, which had shaped our Mississippi life and work profoundly.

But John said he had made a discovery: far more than texts about loving God or loving neighbor were stories about God's love for us. The most important truth in the world, said John, is not our trying harder to love God or others, but God's unconditional acts of love for us. He had a warning: "If you don't get God's love deep into your bones you will become very dangerous people. Especially activists like you."

John went on: "The most important person in this community is not any of you, or the people in the neighborhood. The most important person in any community is Jesus. Your life has to keep Jesus' love at the center."

Over the next couple days, John and Judy failed to get me and Spencer to forgive each other. Privately, I told John that I could see no option but to leave. John said something that pained me—that the conflict with Spencer was mostly my fault. And then John said something that made me pause. “Chris, maybe you need to stay, simply as an act of faith. And, by staying, to wait and see what God does.” It wasn’t what I wanted to hear. But it had the ring of gospel truth. Sometimes a breakthrough can only come when we feel we have come to end of our own power. Only when, in weakness, we surrender ourselves to a new and greater truth, a deeper power.

The next day I stood in our church choir as we sang the song “The Potter’s House.” The words penetrated into my hard heart: “You who are broken, stop by the Potter’s house. You who need mending, stop by the Potter’s house. The Potter wants to put you back together again.” Tears welled up in my eyes. I began to feel a seeping into my bones, breaking through my pride, telling me I was beloved, that I could let go of trying to win, that I could surrender to a cup I wished not to drink from.

In the last meeting before John and Judy were to leave, still on the verge of splitting up, somehow the love that John had spoken of penetrated our stubborn bones.

Spencer had come to the meeting to give me grace to leave Antioch. “I want Chris and Donna to be happy,” he said, “even if it means them leaving.” And I had come to the meeting to somehow say we had found the grace to stay. And we gave each other the grace to make a new beginning.

A new reality overwhelmed our list of wrongs, and the interruption shook our life at Antioch to the core. Over the following weeks, a fresh joy came to our life. We began talking about what it would mean to replace the culture of demands

with a culture of grace. Spencer said it was “like going back to kindergarten,” learning a new language and new practices.

Joy, we learned, comes when we get God’s love deep into our bones, and in being a community of people who find ways to do that for each other every day.⁸

HOLDING TWO STORIES TOGETHER

But another tragedy soon hit our Mississippi community that challenged our renewal of joy.

Two months after the breakthrough, Spencer and I led a major conference we had organized in Jackson. The last night, we stood side by side as we often did, giving the final conference message. We told the story of our breakthrough, and what it was teaching us about the larger quest for justice and reconciliation in America.

But just three days later, at age forty-four, Spencer died suddenly of a heart attack. One day life was normal, and the next, never the same. It was a devastating loss—for our church, for Antioch, and most of all for Spencer’s family.

I was shaken with grief. But I tried to keep everything going at first. Yes-we-can is so deep in my bones. I believed I needed to keep the ministry Spencer and I started moving forward. But I was coming apart. I had to pull away.

I drove to a retreat center in northern Mississippi. I walked the grounds. Alone, full of grief under a dark night sky filled with stars, I poured out my heart.

It was there, in stillness and silence, that I came to an astounding and disturbing discovery. For the first time, I realized that during seventeen years of intense life and work in Mississippi, I had never once taken time to get away alone to cease work, be still, reflect, and pray. *Seventeen years.*

I was drawn to the story that Spencer and I told whenever we spoke, the Good Samaritan story in the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37). In response to the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells about the outcast Samaritan on the road to Jericho, who sees and rescues a man who has been robbed and beaten. It is a story about going out of our way for the suffering stranger.

But as I read the story for the first time after Spencer's death, I saw that the Good Samaritan was not the end of the story.

Immediately after this, Luke reports that Jesus goes to Bethany, to the home of sisters Martha and Mary (10:38-42). There, with Martha so busy in the kitchen, so occupied, Mary sits in stillness at the feet of Jesus, listening to the Lord. When Martha protests, Jesus responds: "You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42 NIV).

The Good Samaritan story is about allowing our lives to be interrupted by injustice. "Go and do likewise" commands Jesus (Luke 10:37). We can't know Jesus without a spirituality of extravagant justice. Yet what immediately follows at Bethany is a story of radical devotion. Extravagant action cannot be separated from extravagant devotion.

THE GRAMMAR OF CHRISTIAN ACTION

Holding together the two stories of "go and do likewise" and "sitting at the Lord's feet" in Luke 10 speaks deeply to the captivity to activity in our anxious world, and roots us in the joy Jesus experienced.

Christian theology does not begin with a book (the Bible) but the person the book points to—*Jesus Christ*. Likewise, the

grammar of Christian action in the world—the basic structure guiding our way of seeing the world—does not begin with an *imperative* command or demand of “do this, do that.” It does not begin with the “Go and do likewise” of the Good Samaritan story. In fact it does not begin with words, but with *the Word*—with God becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). It begins with the one saying these words, with the one who sends us, with his story, life, being, character, and identity. In other words, the grammar of Christian action in the world begins with an *indicative*, a statement of fact, a revelation, a surprising and joyful reality that is true outside of ourselves, long before we come on the scene as actors. It begins with who God is and with God’s action—what God has been doing, is doing, will do.

Before “Go and do likewise,” we see the grammar of Christian activism rooted earlier in Luke, with Jesus’ announcement at the beginning of his public ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18, 19). The Spirit is upon *Jesus* to do these things. This is who Jesus is, what Jesus is about to do in the world. We are not in the picture yet. Jesus has not even chosen his first disciples.

Yet this is still not the deepest roots of who Jesus is. We can take another step back in Luke, to this moment:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. (Luke 3:21-23 NIV)

Jesus is still. He is praying. He has not begun his public ministry. And this is the moment when God declares that Jesus, God’s son, is beloved. Jesus is beloved *without doing anything*. Before he begins his public ministry of three years, Jesus spends *thirty* years in quiet and in hiddenness, becoming deeply rooted in being beloved. Jesus’ stillness, his belovedness, precedes his action. And precedes our action.

The note “he was praying,” and Jesus’ subsequent movement into the silence and testing of the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) suggests that he was immersed in the life of prayer. So the indicative (who Jesus is, rooted in being beloved, in being anointed to preach good news to the poor) is still not followed by Jesus’ imperative (“Go and do likewise”), but by the *optative* (expressing a desire)—in other words, Jesus’ response being rooted was prayer. We express the optative when we’re on our knees, pouring out our wishes and feelings and laments and praise to God. So the grammar is “God, since you are one who loves this world, who liberates the poor, who sets the prisoner free, will you please do something? Fill us with your belovedness and form us into ones who join you in bringing good news to the poor!” Deeply rooted in the indicative and the optative, we respond to the imperative: “Go and do likewise.”

When the imperative takes control of our lives—the demand, the must, the have to—that becomes captivity to activity. But when the indicative and optative take precedence, we live and act rooted in Jesus’ belovedness, and in our being beloved by Jesus without doing anything. In the words of John Alexander, we move with the love of God deep in our bones. This, then, is the grammar of Christian action: before we *do* we are *sent*, before we are sent we are *still*, before we are still we are already *beloved*. Following this Christ-centered pattern, the difference

Christian action makes in the world comes from being deeply rooted in being beloved, being still, and being sent.

What does it look like to live and act rooted in that kind of joy? In Jesus' joy? In being deeply rooted in being beloved, being still, and being sent? Let's turn to that now.

PRACTICES OF BEARING JOY

Business magnate Bill Gates once said, "Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient. There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."⁹ Gates was right. Mary's stillness and extravagant devotion in Luke 10 is out of place, even scandalous, in a world of frantic activity and achievement. As novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."¹⁰ For those of us living in captivity to activity, rooting ourselves in practices of joy and belovedness doesn't come easily.

After Spencer passed away, a new chapter opened for our family; we moved from Mississippi to small-town Vermont, where my parents lived, for a time of rest. I exchanged multi-racial life for the whitest state in America. Instead of Antioch's communal dinner table of twenty, it was just our family of five. Instead of important meetings to go to and crises to attend to, there was Cub Scouts and a stillness broken only by singing chickadees.

Seventeen years of intense activism didn't prepare me for this. My habits looked as if the psalmist had said "Be busy and know that I am God." Depression set in. It can be disturbing when the yardstick you have always used to measure your significance, even your devotion to God, is suddenly challenged.

Yet those months of dissonance in Vermont became a time of learning to be like Mary, to be still.

This new time in our country and culture is the opportunity of a century for deep renewal, and that renewal will not be rooted in efficiency but in joy. Still, if joy is the most essential virtue, it may also be the most elusive. I want to share three practices with you that have helped me bear joy.

CONTEMPLATIVE RHYTHMS

As I mentioned, the church I attend now, New Life Fellowship, is in Queens, which was the epicenter of Covid-19 in New York City and is known as the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world. One of New Life's core values is being multiracial and committed to racial justice. Yet what also drew Donna and me to this church in the rough and tumble of Queens is another value they consider equally important—what they call “being monastic.” New Life pastor and author Rich Villodas says this means being rooted in contemplative rhythms. He explains that while the object of mindfulness is “often better psychological and physical health (very important things),” the object of contemplative rhythms is a person—that is, its object is communion with God. And the core of that communion “is the commitment to establish relationship with God based on friendship rather than demands.”¹¹

One contemplative rhythm that keeps me rooted in joy instead of demands is regular times at retreat centers and monasteries. In fact, a friend of mine, who teaches political science at Duke University, likes to joke that “Chris Rice retreats more than the French army.” That is certainly a milestone I never expected to achieve. Yes, I flee! Now with delight! I flee from all the noise that poses as urgent importance and seeks to

become dictator of my life. Indeed, I have learned that I must take at least two nights away, because I need the first twenty-four hours to “detox” from that noise. In stillness I come to the realization, time and time again, how my life has become a mile wide in frantic activity and an inch deep in clarity, peacefulness, and effectiveness.

In the practice of the sabbath, another contemplative rhythm, *Burnout Society* author Han describes a surprising antidote to the affliction of our age:

The Sabbath, too—a word that originally meant *stopping*—is a day of not to . . . a day free of all *in-order-to*, of all care. It is a matter of interval. After He created it, God declared the Seventh Day holy. That is, the day of *in-order-to* is not sacred, but rather the day of *not-to*, a day on which the *use of the useless* proves possible. It is a day of tiredness . . . a time without work, a time of, and for, play . . . a time of peace. Tiredness is disarming.¹²

Wasn't Mary's sitting at the feet of Jesus a bit “useless”? Isn't this time wasted, time that could be better spent controlling and influencing people and events directly? It depends on your theory of change. “Not-to” rhythms of sabbath, silence, prayer, and stillness root us in being beloved by a person rather than achievement and demands. In the face of so much to be done, when we cease and desist to pray, worship, rest, recreate, and feast, we declare that there really is a difference between God's endless love and ours, between God's action in the world and ours. And that returns us to the joy that Thomas Merton called “the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.” I, for one, can testify that developing

those new rhythms changed my life as much as my years in Mississippi did.

As Bill Gates observed, contemplative rhythms are not efficient. But they do slow us down to catch up with God.

SPARKING JOY

Slowing down may look like reassessing what's keeping us busy and rushed, what's filling up our lives to the exclusion of rest and enjoyment. Perhaps you've heard of Marie Kondo, the cheerful host of the TV show *Tidying Up*. Kondo is invited into homes to help Americans declutter their lives. She gently guides families to reassess all their belongings, keep only items that “spark joy,” and give away the rest. Through this practice, she helps people see a deeper vision of simplicity: centering life in what relates to joy and need. Yet people in the show often have trouble letting go of the space-filling clutter they've become attached to, and face grief in letting go of that which has become dear yet somehow blocks their growth.

It is easy for our lives to become cluttered by many things that stand in the way of the things that spark true joy.

After Spencer passed away, I met with a grief counselor. At one point I told her about all that had to be done to keep alive the national organization that Spencer and I had founded—finances, staff, programs, properties. She stopped me short with a question: “Chris, what idea of the future fills your heart with joy?”

My comeback was quick. “But you don't understand. You don't know all that I am responsible for.”

She said, “Yes, but those are details. God will take care of them. Keep your focus on the bigger picture.”

After a pause I said, “What fills my heart with joy is time to study. To reflect and learn from all that this sacred ground has taught me. And see where God leads after that.”

“Then that’s what you should do,” she said.

That grief counselor was my Marie Kondo. Until that encounter, I had never felt permission to ask myself what idea of the future “sparked joy.” And I had never felt the courage to let go of all the “have-tos” that spilled over into my life. That conversation changed my life and eventually led me to divinity school and a new chapter of growth and service for Donna and me in North Carolina.

Whatever our location or walk of life, we can take opportunities to declutter from the have-tos and create space for joy. What practices spark joy for you? For me, they include bird watching (Donna taught me); fishing (Spencer taught me); and visiting the Met Cloisters, an oasis of architectural beauty, art, and quiet located inside a busy New York City public park. They include canoeing on my favorite lake in the Adirondack Mountains as I seek out swimming holes and encounters with loons.

In Mississippi, singing in the gospel choir in our church rooted me in joy every week. Many of us find grace through music, and I am sure that choir singing kept me going through many times of difficulty. Watching the joy on the face of our choir director, singing, rocking, and clapping as one, melding my voice with those far stronger than mine, I felt caught up in some force of purpose far bigger than me. Over and over again, the Potter used that singing to put me back together again.

In ways unseen, often related only indirectly to the anxiety we are facing, when we put ourselves intentionally in spaces that spark joy, the Potter somehow declutters and renews us.

JOY-GROWING COMPANIONS

We need more than contemplative rhythms to get the love of God deep into our bones—we need people who do that for us. Joy is intrinsically relational and communal. According to mis-siologist Evelynne Reisacher, scientific studies show that joy is psychologically healthy and grows when spread from one person to another.¹³

During my years at Duke, Emmanuel Katongole and I shared an unlikely journey into a common mission. Catholic and Protestant. African and American. Him from a land colonized by the West. Me from a land that colonized. Him a happily single priest. Me a happily married man.

When we first started work on establishing the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School, we knew it would be a difficult task. We agreed that we might fail. But we made a vow: even if we failed, we would have fun along the way. We would keep pain and hope together.

One vision we carried forward was organizing a gathering of Christian leaders from countries in East Africa. We met in Kampala, Uganda.

The first day was very challenging, hearing all the painful stories of violence, church divisions, and political turmoil. That night, following our tradition, Emmanuel sat outside behind our guest house to debrief the day. We reflected on the stories of pain we heard. But for us, pain and hope were almost inseparable. Also following tradition, we spent a good deal of time laughing.

The next morning after the entire group worshiped together, we met in plenary, and invited the participants to stand and name gifts they had received so far during the gathering.

A participant from Rwanda stood up to share. Her name was Josephine Munyeli. Josephine was a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. In fact, her life was saved by a member of another ethnic group.

“I want to name the gift of the organizers of this gathering,” said Josephine with a smile. “Last night I couldn’t sleep because the organizers were laughing so loud outside my room!”

Emmanuel and I served side by side for almost ten years. Spread from one to the other, joy grew deep. It enabled us to stick with each other through thick and thin.

Joy-inspiring companionship has helped sustain people in most difficult places of suffering. In *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara A. Holmes writes of the deep wells of spirituality that rooted the activism of Fannie Lou Hamer of Mississippi. A sharecropping farmer, Hamer faced constant and brutal white oppression, including numerous beatings in jail.

Holmes tells of asking one of Hamer’s friends why Hamer died so young. “Don’t you get it?” said Hamer’s friend. “If it hadn’t been for the Civil Rights Movement, she would have died sooner.” Writes Holmes, “It had never occurred to me that the Civil Rights Movement could become a monastic space, an opportunity for respite for a woman who had been ‘buked and scorned’ by the black-woman/man/children killing system of the day.” Hamer, she continues, “entered the Civil Rights Movement as a novitiate enters a convent—not for retreat but for the restorative love of the community and the space to fight for justice.”¹⁴

As with Fannie Lou Hamer, friendships in a common mission can root us in a joy that sustains us through thick and thin. I am afraid to think about who I would be without Spencer.

While our crisis almost ended our relationship, we had a joyous companionship on either side of that mess. We made each other better. We made each other laugh—constantly, until our sides ached. Spencer once told me, “I love you like a brother.” Words like that will put the love of God into your bones. We need friends who do that for us. Who grow the joy within us, enabling us to continue to continue.

In our pandemic time, habits of isolation have increased, with more people working from home, no longer attending church in person, or seeking to protect themselves due to new fears and anxieties. In such a time, joy-growing companions are all the more important.

JOY OPENS US TO OTHERS

The British church leader and theologian Lesslie Newbigin spent his career serving alongside the people of India. Newbigin said that when our service in the world becomes mostly obedience to a command, “it misses the point. It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law instead of part of the gospel.” He reminds us that the Gospel of Luke testifies that after the resurrected Jesus was taken up into heaven, his disciples “worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52). Newbigin declares good news: “Mission begins with an explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed.”¹⁵

Joy cannot be suppressed. It will not stay contained in a cell of silence, the worship of a sanctuary, or the privacy of friendship. God’s joy propels us out into the world in action and opens us to others.

We will wrestle with many pandemic-era challenges in this book, and we will see the deep change that is needed. The temptation with this new reality is to speed up our activism, to try harder and do more. But participating in God's deep change requires lives deeply rooted in joyful relationship. It is not becoming more active that makes us freer, it is becoming more beloved. It is getting more of God's explosive love into our bones. God's response to burnout is belovedness.

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