



ALASTAIR
STERNE

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AN
INVITATION INTO
THE GOODNESS AND
BEAUTY OF LIFE



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Taken from *Longing for Joy* by Alastair Bryan Sterne.

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INTRODUCTION

AN INVITATION

Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.

LÉON BLOY

MY LAPTOP WAS MY RESPITE. A blink-and-you'll-miss-it island in an ocean of books strewn across my desk. My little chaotic mess awaiting the creative spark that brings something out of nothing. One stack of books, rising about a meter from the floor, teetered like a Jenga tower about to topple. Another stack, at the back corner of my desk, loomed over me with guilt for not yet having been read. Can anything come from this chaos? Then I sighed to myself:

Joy is exhausting.

I was overwhelmed by all the books, read and unread, for my research on joy. If my research proved anything, it is that reading books about joy rarely makes you joyful. In fact, if you read too many of them for too long, you'll make joy the culprit of your exhaustion.

But something happened as I sighed and restrained the urge to knock over my makeshift Jenga tower. The littlest smirk. *Joy is exhausting?* How absurd. A smile. Then laughter. And just like that, joy leaped off the page into my heart.

Joy is sneaky. She hides around the corner, waiting with bated breath to jump out and surprise us. Joy pulls us back into the deep



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goodness and beauty of life. But as quickly as joy revealed herself, she disappeared and I was left with my books. At least they transfigured into a slightly less burdensome mess.

I spent the better part of a decade researching and cultivating joy. My interest in joy started when I was confronted by my joylessness. I had lost the “joy of salvation” as an old king and poet of Israel put it. But when I set out to find joy, each step felt like a misstep. The path did not make life brighter. It was like walking through bramble bushes in the dark. Unresolved issues from my past, the challenges of starting a new church, the suicide of a mentor, and unhealthy patterns of coping resulted in a depressive fog engulfing me. I was confounded and started to unravel.

“What’s normal to you isn’t normal,” said my doctor. She had just looked at my mental health questionnaire and asked a few exploratory questions. My answers indicated severe depression. Her thick Irish accent eased the blow, but *severe* stung. Not mild, moderate, but *severe*? Whatever factors were at play in my depression, my doctor insisted on immediate medical intervention. Although reluctant, I complied. Because as I made peace with the word *severe*, I found relief. It was like the gift of tongues, a new language. Moments before, I could not describe the hopelessness that could weigh me down, the unshakable sense that nothing mattered, let alone explain why this happened without reason or cause. But now I could speak about it, name it, call it *severe*.

It turns out my first steps toward joy weren’t missteps at all. Instead, the path toward joy brought me back to Adam’s ancient vocation of naming the animals. A seemingly untamable, joyless animal was brought before me. I named it:

Depression.

A few months after I started medication, I was alone and I wasn’t doing anything but sitting on my couch. But I felt different. I couldn’t

name the feeling at first. Then, an epiphany. I was happy. As I sat so still as not to scare happiness away, joy said “Don’t mind if I do” and cozied between us. She felt like the presence of a friend after a long absence. You pick up where you left off.

Shoulder to shoulder, joy sat with me, for no particular reason. I let out a sigh. Relief from the darkness, relief in the light, relief in not only believing in goodness but knowing it too. Yes, medication played a part. But that doesn’t make the joy any less real. I have felt joy without medication. Either way joy felt the same. And it was good, good, it was very good. Because for so long I had felt numb, rarely happy, let alone joyful. I sat joyfully quiet on my couch as I was submerged in the beauty of life.

My pathway to joy did not require a grand adventure. I only traversed the road of recovery in search of my well-being. This involved the retelling of my life story with a counselor, clarifying my purpose with a spiritual director, and developing practices to care for myself, such as rest, exercise, spiritual friendships, contemplative prayer, and gratitude. I can’t point to one thing that helped me return to joy because each habit and attitude cultivated a garden in which joy could grow. And as joy began to peek out of the soil, I wondered if I had stumbled on a way to cultivate joy that could help others. So I set out to complete a doctorate on cultivating joy.

I have met other pilgrims on the path to joy whose journeys were also sparked by joylessness. This awareness may have come from a crisis, angst, tragedy, depression, or suffering. And if this is where you are, *welcome*. Or if you’re longing for joy, or want to think about joy, *welcome*. And sometimes the problems around us—the rise of polarization and antagonism and disconnection—stir our desire to reclaim what is good. If this is you, *welcome*.

I suspect you’re wondering, have I become more joyful? I hope so. I think so. Actually, yes. But it’s not quite what I expected either. I

don't see joy as an antidote to depression or any mental health challenge or illness. She is more like a balm to the soul. But I know through research and experience that the practices of joy can ease the discomfort of depression and even help us through the darkness. No matter what you face, you can cultivate joy and see her more regularly. The change may be modest, but even small changes can be significant.

I realize this is underselling my work. But I'm not offering quick solutions, because joy is an invitation. If we follow her, we will be immersed in the good, good, very good story of great joy.

I use *her* in reference to joy. It's mostly a stylistic decision. Joy isn't gendered. But referring to joy as *it* diminishes the liveliness of joy. I hope you'll embrace this choice. Additionally, I've used invisible endnotes for a seamless reading experience. If a quote or citation intrigues you, you'll find the reference tucked away in the back of the book noted by the phrase beginning the passage.

When we read books about joy, it's often because a vulnerable part of our self hopes for a chance of a more joyful way of being. But I don't want you to force a smile or suppress "negative" emotions to get there. This book is not about feigning a happier life or pretending all is well when it is anything but well. You can cultivate a life that is more open to joy, but this requires fostering emotional health. In fact, I learned the hard way that if you do not embrace the full spectrum of emotions, you will inhibit joy. Yes, joy is a wonderful teacher about life, but so are sadness, sorrow, and grief.

All I am trying to do is open up the possibility of joy, not pin her down. In part one, "Longing for Joy," I want to ponder the beauty of this emotion we call joy—why she is here at all, how she can evade us, and what our longing for joy is all about. Then in part two, "The Story of Joy," I want to tell the story of joy as revealed in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Finally, in part three, "The

Possibility of Joy,” we will look at the places where joy is present and consider some habits and attitudes that make us more receptive to the gift of joy. But I want to be upfront with you. A more joyful life is not quickly developed. It takes time, effort, persistence, and waiting. *Oh, the waiting.* Waiting is often our least favorite thing to do. But joy won’t be hurried.

I look at the world through the story of Jesus Christ. This undeniably shapes how I see joy. I draw from my experience as a Christian, pastor, and researcher. But most of all, I write as a person who wants to come alongside you and joy. I’ve read widely about joy and will share from many perspectives because joy is a gift given to us all, irrespective of our beliefs. If you don’t see through the same lens as I do, I hope you’ll still glean something from this book. At the very least, I hope you’ll see that God is not perpetually frowning. If there is a God, may you see that the face of God smiles with joy.

PART ONE

LONGING FOR JOY



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PRESENCE

Joy is the uproarious labor by which all things live.

G. K. CHESTERTON

IT FELT OUT OF PLACE, a gas station in Banff, nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. My family was on a summer road trip and we stopped at a Husky station to fill the tank and grab a quick bite to eat at the A&W. As we waited for our food, we sat outside at a small black table with immovable chairs. We took a beat to enjoy the trees and mountains, breathe fresh air, and bask in rays of the sun. And then a black-billed magpie arrived. She captured our attention. With elegant small hops, she scoured for food. Thankfully, the bird also redirected the impatience of my younger daughter, Maggie—who we call Magpie. She stopped asking when our food would come out. It could now wait. Nature triumphed for a moment—and it was good.

Hamburgers, chicken strips, and orange juice show up moments later. Maggie finally had a plain hamburger with ketchup in one hand and a cup of orange juice in the other. Then she let out a deep, appreciative sigh and said, “If I could have anything I want, I would have a hamburger with ketchup, orange juice, and I would be sitting in the sun at this table with my family.”

My wife, Julia, said, “So Maggie, is this moment your dream come true?”



She said, “Yes. The hamburger. The orange juice. The sunshine. Sitting next to you. It is good.”

Maggie slowed down and took it all in. She savored something more than convenience. She enjoyed and appreciated the goodness of life. As she did, joy found a seat at the table. And together, our family basked in her presence.

The joy of the magpie.

A few days after my elder daughter, Ansley, was born, I went on a run. But the sidewalk had turned into taffy. Each stride felt like pulling my foot loose from its sticky grip. I was under-slept and my body wasn't cooperating. Then the chorus of a song I've since forgotten pulled me free. The beauty of the moment stuck to me instead: a child, a child, a child—my own child. Legs that move, a body that breathes, even the experience of tiredness. I whispered, *It is good, it is good, it is very good*, as I ran ever so slowly and cried happily along my way.

The joy of new life.

As a teenager, Julia aspired to become a professional dancer. But her hip broke midair as she performed a *grand jeté*. She crashed to the stage and that was the end of it. Two decades later she signs up for ballet classes. There is no more aspiration. Now she dances for the sheer joy of it. When she comes home, red-faced, with stories about the quirks of her instructors and her small victories (like not breaking any bones), I see her joy in getting hold of what was lost. And perhaps it's not at all what she once wanted, but it's cherished as the sweetest gift.

The joy of broken dreams limping along into something good, good, very good.

Many years ago, in the unremarkable office of my counselor, I wrestled with my imperfections and brokenness, or what the Hebraic poets and prophets call *khata* (sin), or what the cheeky British

novelist Francis Spofford calls the HPtFuU (how people tend to “mess” things up) principle. Shifting into rabbi mode, my counselor told me a parable:

There was a farmer who went to the river every day. He filled up two buckets. With a pole across his shoulders and a bucket on each side, he walked the same path back and forth. But one bucket was well worn and littered with small cracks and holes. Every time this bucket was filled, water slowly sprinkled out of it. By the time the farmer returned to the farm, the bucket was empty. This happened again and again, day after day, season after season.

Finally, the bucket could take no more of it and said to the farmer, “Why do you continue to use me? Your other bucket brings water for your field, but I cannot. Please find another bucket.”

The farmer was not dissuaded. “As we return from the river today,” he replied, “look at the path.” On the journey back, the bucket noticed that the path beneath the other bucket was dry and barren. But beneath its side of the path were chrysanthemums with hues of white deepening into pinks and purples, coneflowers jutting out like towers with gradients of pink to red, all surrounded by asters of deep purple.

Then, my counselor said, “Beauty can be birthed through your brokenness, Alastair.”

The joy of goodness working in broken things, like ourselves.

I am well acquainted with my brokenness. As a pastor, I needed to apologize to my church on more than one occasion. One time I sat with my church and apologized for how I’d handled firing a staff member. I owned my mistakes, shared steps I would take in the future, and asked for forgiveness. It wasn’t easy to do, but it was necessary. After the meeting, the weight and sorrow of it lingered.

But then a friend surprised me with a kiss on the forehead. He said, “You’re golden.” I can’t explain what happened. One golden kiss made my shame evaporate. I was transported into the painting *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt. It felt as if Christ himself had kissed me. And I suppose he had, because the mystery of faith is that Christ dwells in us.

The joy of grace that births golden kisses.

Oh, two years later I received a letter on Easter Sunday from the staff member I had fired. They offered me the gift of forgiveness, and it felt like the miracle of Easter danced in my bones.

The joy of perfectly timed letters and *khata* and HPtFu forgiven.

Jesus was a rabbi, and he told great parables too. One is about two people with debts. One person has a minuscule debt, and the other an unfathomable how-could-you-possibly-rack-up-that-much-debt kind of debt. Then, for no reason whatsoever, the moneylender cancels their debts. “Now which of them will love him more?” asks Jesus. The answer is obvious, but what is the point? Love follows forgiveness. If we’re forgiven much, we will love much. And this is how Jesus explained the presence of a questionable woman washing his feet during a dinner party among religious elites.

The joy of awkward teachable moments.

As forgiveness gets deeper into us, however, it really does fuel love. One spring evening, I did something that had percolated in my heart. I gave an unexpected gift to a friend to meet their need. It was a stretch to make it happen, but I knew there was something deeper prompting me to do it. When I went through with it, my friend made a James Taylor reference. It didn’t mean much to me because I’ve never listened to James Taylor. But after dropping off the gift, I got back in my car. I turned the music on. The next song on a random playlist was “Shower the People” by . . . James Taylor. The chorus resounded in my soul: “Just shower the people you love with love. . . .

Things are gonna work out fine if you only will do as I say.” It felt like everything in the world is orchestrated by love. Because it is.

The joy of good stirrings and holy coincidences.

But even though I’ve known the joy of shame evaporating, the joy of sins forgiven, and the joy of love fueled by forgiveness, I can still struggle with shame and my worth: *What have I done? What does my life amount to? Do I matter?* Do you know what I mean?

I was pondering these questions while sitting in my rocking chair. I had a cup of coffee warming my hands. In the silence, I tried to dwell with the well-worn promise that God is with us, always, as well as the promise that God will not turn away from a broken and contrite heart. And then, a nudge in my soul, “Go see a waterfall.” So, the next weekend, my family and I drove to Shannon Falls in Squamish, BC. It’s not Niagara Falls or Victoria Falls, but smaller beauties are no less astonishing.

Biophilia is our innate, emotional connection to life, other living organisms, and nature. Biophilia is why peace washes over us in the outdoors and why we feel awe over things like waterfalls. In the woods of the Pacific Northwest, in the presence of the quiet roar of a waterfall, biophilia did its work. But perhaps we’re wired to connect with nature in this way so we can go deeper still. Because creation can help invisible realities become visible to us. That’s what happened to me at Shannon Falls. The meek waterfall declared, “You are loved, loved, loved.” And in that moment, I knew it was true. Not because I heard the words but because I knew the waterfall was created as a gift to enjoy, because we are loved.

The joy of creation declaring the goodness of God.

Of course, there are so many more joys than these snapshots. There are far bigger joys still: the consoling joy of hearing “it’s in remission,” the somber joy of a friend who sits quietly with you in the shadow of death, the comforting joy of shared tears when you’re

left behind in the land of the living, and the explosion of joy when pandemics end, walls fall, ceasefires are declared, and ruptures begin to be repaired. In the small and grand moments, joy is here.

Joy Reluctantly Defined

You know it when you feel joy. She “jumps under one’s ribs and tickles down one’s back.” But joy dodges our attempts to pin her down. She is tricky to define. Trying to catch joy with a definition is like fishing with a shoelace, like trying to describe a friend to someone who doesn’t know them. Defining joy, says theologian Miroslav Volf, is like describing champagne as “a bubbly liquid but forgetting all about its golden color, whiffs of ripe pear and fresh baked bread in its aroma, or traces of apple, vanilla, yeast, and nuts in its flavor, and, of course, its capacity to intoxicate.” Better to drink some for yourself if you want to know the taste. So it is with joy.

Another reason joy is tricky to define is because she is characteristic of other emotions such as love, gratitude, hope, contentment, and peace. We can’t easily distinguish joy from her companions. This is why joy is sometimes defined in relationship to other emotions. Nicky Gumbel says, “Joy is love rejoicing.” This resonates, doesn’t it? But it also says more about love than joy. I imagine that joy plays between love and peace. But joy isn’t so selective. You’ll find her gently sitting *shiva* with grief and sorrow too.

The ability of joy to mingle with other emotions has led to some creative ideas, such as *conjoyment*. “Something more than mere contentment but less than full-on joy,” says author Eric Weiner. “We might experience *conjoyment*,” he continues, “when we are doing something mundane, like sweeping the floor or sorting our trash or listening to that old Bob Dylan CD we haven’t heard in years.”

Perhaps *conjoyment* is joy not quite dancing and not quite resting. It's joy getting nostalgic while cleaning. And if you've felt *conjoyment*, you know it touches on joy, but it's not quite joy either.

A definition can't catch the essence of joy. Stories are better. But a definition can still help. So, here is my best shot: *Joy is an emotion that arrives as our lives are apprehended by goodness or beauty.*

This is joy, reluctantly defined.

When Joy Says Our Name

If we have eyes to see, we uncover joy almost everywhere. Like someone searching for sand crabs on the coastline, we may not find her under every rock. But we also don't need to look too hard before we uncover her. We cannot deny the presence of joy. Even when joy eludes us, her fragrance lingers in the air like Chanel No. 5. Because joy invites, and invites, and invites us into her presence. Her invitation might be tossed into our laps during the doldrums of the ordinary. In any occasion, even at the most inopportune time, joy pops by—rather unconcerned whether or not we're prepared. When joy comes out to play, it is when something good is at hand. She stirs our hearts to celebrate goodness in its many, many forms. And so often, as is her way, joy shows up when we're with others or thinking of them. Because she is deeply relational by nature. She takes us by the hands and dances in the space between us. Joy rises and falls like a crescendo. As her symphony ends, we sigh in appreciation, *It is good.*

Everyone has stories about joy because joy is part and parcel of what it means to be human. While we can all experience joy, we can also know “the joy of salvation.” Salvation is a churchy-theological word that encompasses more than the forgiveness of sins. But often that's all we think of if we drive past a billboard with the words “Jesus Saves.” This is true. Salvation extends into the realm of forgiving *khata* and HPtFtU. But it is so much more too. Salvation

reaches into the depths of restoring and renewing all things. It encompasses the redemption of our bodies, minds, and souls; the healing of relationships, communities, and nations; as well as the holistic restoration of creation itself as justice rights the wrong of every injustice. It is the refrain sung by Benjamin Gibbard: “Only love will save this place.” This is the story of salvation—a love that is weaving together a tapestry of complete goodness and beauty. I believe every little joy is an invitation as well as a glimpse into this story. Because every moment of goodness and beauty is grace lavished upon us from the saving love of God.

The arrival of joy can take us by surprise—and she illuminates too. Joy is a herald disguised in the form of a magpie who enchants us so we can see the beauty of life. When joy taps us on the shoulder, we turn around in surprise. She often brings a revelation as her plus-one. She unveils the goodness of life, as we see through her eyes, and attunes our ears to the divine benediction in all things: *It is good, good, very good.* Joy tugs us ever closer to the joy of salvation. Ever so gently, our fears ease in her presence. We are not missing out, because with joy we rest our heads against her and listen to the heartbeat of life and salvation—*it is all gift.*



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