

Joy in Layers
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Yesterday as I drove to the Fellowship, I watched an opossum running across the road. I saw it hop off the curb on the right side, and I slowed and I noticed. Not like a squirrel that will head out, then change its mind midcourse. Not like a rabbit that might dart in an unexpected direction, even straight at the car. Not even like a dog that might decide to stop and stare or bark or maybe lay down and curl up in the middle of the road. More like a cat, the possum took a decisive path straight across, though much slower than a squirrel or a rabbit or even a dog or a cat. It wasn't that the possum was taking its own sweet time, like a cat might. Rather, it is that the possum is not really made for running. It looked quite comical, its feet lifting in a paddling fashion, its short legs causing a waddling gait, but faster with every step across the street. I smiled and then laughed. And my heart opened, receiving. I felt it so, in my body.

And then I looked again as it hopped the curb on the left side of the street. I could see its hairs feathering, its skin bunching in ridges. And then I began to imagine the muscles under the skin, invisible to my eyes but real nonetheless. I imagined the electrical charges firing in its brain, moving all those parts in a way that looked odd to me but was entirely right for the opossum. And I imagined the life force that keep the little beast going even as that force kept it anchored to the larger flow of life holding it and me and all the beings, in the vicinity at that moment, in time and space in our place in the web of interdependence. Layers of connection. The moment, it gave me great pleasure and happiness—an ugly little animal with a really weird gait not meant for running but trying to live and thrive in a hostile place. And as that little weird body opened to me as more than comical, as a sign of the larger life, I experienced a flood of memories, memories of all the other times I have seen possum, always dead on the side of the road, their life emerging into life for other beings—crows and turkey vultures, flies and ants, microbes. And tears welled in my eyes, and my heart opened, receiving. I felt it so, in my body.

We have a saying in our family. We said it a lot when our children were young: "Laughter to tears, honey. Laughter to tears." So often conjoined, so rapid to alternate. The jumping on the bed, the tickling, the teasing, all the fun degenerated at the drop of a hat, as quiet as a pin hitting the floor, into upset, crying, misery. It was a regular pattern in the games with our children. It seems to be a regular pattern in all aspects of our lives, if we are mindful and take notice. If we are paying attention. The layers of connection, of relationship, the layers of feeling, the layers of meaning. They are all there. And I believe their name, the name of these layers, is joy.

Studies show that children do not make parents happy, but they do make them joyful. How can that be? Joy is a mixed emotion at its core. Complex and tragic, ridiculous and wonderful, new life emerges within dire circumstances in folk's personal lives, within the limitations of our own ability to parent, and within the world as it is, potential and hostile in equal measure, weighted differently for some of us. We laugh and play with our children. And we worry about them. We are disappointed in them. We are afraid for them. We envy them. We fear for them. Yet, children give us a sense of purpose and meaning,

connecting us to the larger life force that we can forget about in our necessary and mundane living. We are born with no name, and our adults begin calling us a name, calling to us, calling us to life. We are life, as are they. We are promise, as are they. And so, we are the embodiment of joy—complex, laden with and destined for happiness and sadness both—a reality our parents already know, some all too well. “I happy am Joy is my name,— Sweet joy befall thee!” The joy in them calls to the joy in us, and we are known to each other. We live in the layers of each other.

So far this morning, I have given you a glimpse of an opossum, a glimmering of the complication that is family. I give you now an onion. Onions always mean to me that something good to eat is about to emerge. But first, there is the sharp smell and the stinging. As you strip through the layers of a regular, yellow onion, peeling each layer away, the onion gets smaller and smaller until you get to the heart of it. A small dense lobe in the middle, reminiscent of a clove of garlic. And it makes you cry, the onion brings tears to your eyes, as you cut into it with knife and fingers. As you get to the heart of things—opossum, children, onions—your own heart can break as you plumb the depths of feeling within you. The deeper you go, the closer to the floodgates you get. Have you read *The Narnia Chronicles* by C.S. Lewis? Do you remember the wise faun Mr. Tumnus, great friend of the youngest princess Lucy? In the final part of this grand novel of faith and love, Mr. Tumnus describes ultimate reality in these terms: “A world within the world,” said Mr. Tumnus, “like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.”

Many of us don’t like to get too close to that weepy, watery heart of things. The weepy, watery heart of the strange beauty of this world, the mystery of growing understanding, the anguish in relationship. Some of us avoid at all costs that deep well of feeling you tap when you reach down, when you dig down, into the fullness of your feelings. There is often pain there, even unbearable sorrow. And then again, there’s the pangs and aches you feel at moments of supreme joy. Our hearts are pierced equally, in agony and in delight. When we venture into the watery deep, we become awake to all that life has to give and all that human life has to offer. And when we do this, when we risk this journey inward, we find that remarkable ideas emerge, we find that we grow larger rather than shrink down into a miniscule clove or mere segment of life. As we go inward, as we go deeper, as we get to the heart of things and to the world of emotion in our own hearts, the layers grow larger rather than smaller. The importance, the meaning, the significance increases rather than decreases. We can choose to open ourselves to this joy, joy that reveals the largeness of life, the possibility of growing as we go deep. We can choose to open ourselves to our own emergence, more than we have before imagined ourselves to be. We can choose to peel away the layers that keep our compassion too small and too contained.

To choose joy, layered as it is, is to ask a fundamental set of questions, questions a religious community is uniquely poised to assist—How do you want to live your life? How will you shape yourself and be shaped so as to live this way? Who will help you? These are questions of feeling and connection, rather than questions of facts and knowing.

The great poet and mystic Rumi, a prophet familiar with the pathos of living, Rumi has some thoughts on what we risk when we resist peeling the layers of the onion down to the depths of meaning and feeling.

Hear his words: Those who don't feel this love pulling them like a river, those who don't drink dawn like a cup of spring water or take sunset like supper, those who don't want to change, let them sleep... This Love is beyond the study of theology, that old trickery and hypocrisy. If you want to improve your mind that way, sleep on. I've given up on my brain. I've torn the cloth to shreds and thrown it away. If you're not completely naked, wrap your beautiful robe of words around you and sleep. When we think only, when we cogitate and reason, we are still asleep to all of life, to Love." So ends his words

Rumi points out the problem if we resist the depths, the layers of our own joyful living. Mary Oliver offers us a way to plumb our own depths and thus those of the web of life of which we are an integral part. She writes, "Every day I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight." "It was what I was born for—to look, to listen, to lose myself inside this soft world—to instruct myself over and over in joy, and acclamation." From out "of the ordinary, the common, the very drab, the daily presentations"—out of opossum and children and onions—we become aware of "the prayers that are made out of grass."

If we want to live in this way, alive to the joy layered everywhere if only we look, what helps us? Here helps us. Here. Here, in a religious community, we get to be our complex selves, as we are in this moment. Full of promise and pain, in decline yet still miraculous beings of action and of memories, seeking meaning in a confusing and threatening world. Like all people in all times. Covid and violence and authoritarian actions and injustice, these are our equivalent of sabretooth tigers and venomous snakes and a wide sky of pinpoint lights speaking a language we understand only vaguely, only partially and minutely. Like all people in all times, we need a community to hold us in the dark and cold. We need a community of compassion and companionship to hold us within the terrors of our world and those within us. We need a community to help us open mindfully to joy, to the possibilities within the terrors, external and internal.

And so, to this place of connection, actual and virtual, we bring our frozen and scared parts. To each other, we bring our angry and tight parts, the sharp and the hazy memories. We bring our broken hearts, because this religious community can hold our recent hurts as well as ancestral history. This place can hold the muscled layers of our mystery. This is the place where we can all lay our burden down, and simply be. Just be as we are, happy and sorrowful, as we can be nowhere else. In this place, we make time—we create it out of nothing. We co-create it on this morning, for this hour, as a bastion against the onslaught of the busy-ness, the responsibilities, the worries, the sadness that eats time and gives no nourishment without the meaning-making, too. "We pause in the stillness to rest for a moment, to quiet ourselves so that we can feel what stirs within us. With each breath we draw closer to the pulse of life. With each exhalation we make room for something new. Each breath leads us deeper into our bodies, into the hollow of our chests. Each breath leads us deeper into the well of our longings, our deepest fears and desires. When life presses in and shifts us off balance, when pain assails us, when frustration mounts, may the rhythm of our breath steady us and bring us back to a place of gratitude."

So, let us remember, as John Green says, "The existence of broccoli does not, in any way, affect the taste of chocolate." We need both—the sharp and the sweet—both feed us. Let us feel the doubleness

of joy. Let us enjoy the two sides of the coin, no real exchange possible, no relationship possible, with ourselves nor between each other, without the currency of joy. This morning is a new morning for our religious community. This "Morning has broken like the first morning." And so let us praise. "Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning! Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden," for the sunlight returning. "Praise with elation," this morning, and "Praise every morning." Be mindful. Notice it all. Sweet joy befall thee!

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/11/does-having-kids-make-you-happy/620576/>