

Joy and Justice - Have Fun Storming the Castle

As read by Karen Francis-McWhite, Wenatchee Womxn's March 2020



I don't know about you, but last year, I was in the depth of both personal pain, loss and grief, and outrage at the orgy of injustice and cruelties enjoyed by too many people in our communities and in our seats of power.

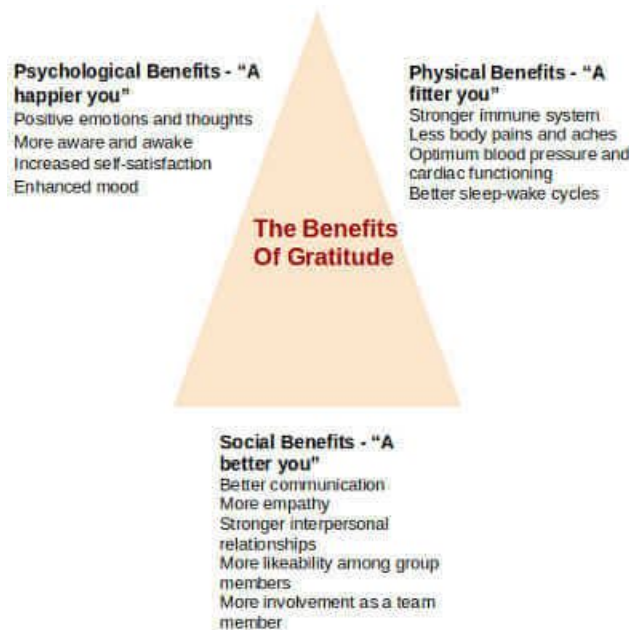
Last year, I honed **both** my gallows humor **and** my proficient F-bomb, making it nearly impossible for me to listen to NPR or watch the news in the presence of my daughter.

It was only by the grace of God that I made it through last year at all. But I did and I realized: if I don't make and/or find my silver linings, then I'm going to drown.

So I'm determined to focus on joy and justice this year, as well as the joy in pursuing justice. And I hope this appeals to you too. The better world we wish to see flourish already exists, like test gardens. So I will be grateful for them. I will nurture them, and help them grow and spread. To do that, I'm gonna need to rewire my brain. And thankfully, it's not impossible or even super hard to do. I'm committing to gratitude, to singing the song in my heart, adding some pep to my step, and setting a bigger table.

This isn't Pollyanna. It's [neuroscience](#)!

Not only do people who express and feel gratitude have more grey matter in their brains, they also benefit from more dopamine and serotonin - Nature's mood enhancers. And gratitude strengthens the neural pathways that help create a permanent capacity for positivity and happiness. These are not just personal impacts. Social psychology shows us that individual gratitude practices are fundamental building blocks to social cohesion and bonding.



Gratitude makes us more resilient, compassionate, and creative. Three things we desperately need if we are going to not just "take back" our country and communities from the emboldened forces of sexism, racism, and xenophobia. We need these three things - resilience, compassion, and creativity - to MAKE our country a truly inclusive home for all of us, even those with whom we viscerally disagree.

Which is why I am grateful for those who are fighting and often winning the struggles for immigration justice, for civil rights, environmental protection, equal rights for women, sane foreign policy, and humane domestic policy.

Gratitude is not just a noun. It's an **act** that requires practice and intentionality. And as much as I wish a gratitude jar ritual would work for me, I have settled instead on this: ***before I rage out, I thank.***

For example: I'm grateful for Trump's boastful slip about \$2T in weapons spending and the light that has shown on the true affordability of Medicare for All, universal preschool, and student loan forgiveness.

Sometimes, though, finding something to be grateful for is not easy and it's not enough. And so, in those moments, we have to hack our brains to keep from despair.



Though the science did not show it then, when the Modern Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s created, shared, and catalyzed change through Freedom Songs, they were engaged in a social psychology transformation, and every time each individual raised their voice in song - even if they were out of tune - they were creating a wellspring of resilience, determination and new beginnings. “The research suggests that creating music together evolved as a tool of social living. ... singing in groups triggers the communal release of serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and even synchronises our heart beats.”¹

¹ Cassandra Sheppard, “The Neuroscience of Singing,” *Uplift Connect*, Dec 11, 2016, <https://upliftconnect.com/neuroscience-of-singing/>

So experiencing music and art, like practicing gratitude, can rewire our brains and help us access happiness and joy when they seem almost impossible to access.

And we have to demonstrate the joy at the heart of our pursuit of justice. It's tempting to restrict joy to whatever amusement or pleasure we feel in any given moment. Gallows humor can be cathartic but it does nothing to confront or dismantle the gallows. And it's increasingly counterproductive to laugh at or shame Trump voters, yes, even the ones calling for the End Days or the formation of White Nationalist Theocratic Splinter States.



Because in the community and country that joy and justice are creating, there are conservatives, liberals, progressives, and undecideds. In the test gardens that already exist, we see people breaking bread together, learning how to listen to, converse *and build* with each other, recognizing their common humanity, and unlearning their preconceptions and ignorance about their differences. As Brene Brown has wisely pointed out, “people are hard to hate close up. Move in.” Obviously, we must move in with prudence and safety. But we can’t let the fear of harm or rejection stop us from moving in at all.

In our region, there are ongoing efforts to set a bigger table, discover and learn from each other, and create a regional culture of joy and justice. Give thanks for these efforts and to the organizers. Check one out. Start some more! Maybe plan a voter registration drive...and pair it with a concert or a multicultural food truck showcase!

The more we are willing to bring joy and gratitude *for* each other into our daily lives, and into our activism, the harder it will be to fall prey to toxic hatreds and nihilism.

Our brains are wired and designed to be rewired for happiness and connection. Even in times of loss, and grief, how we manage our reactions to these can determine the extent of our despair. Admittedly, some of us will need some medical intervention to assist with the productive rewiring. But all of us can start with small steps: find something to be grateful for, hum or sing a new song, and set a bigger table that invites and includes those we may not have much to do with today.

And for every bit of despairing and disgusting news you hear, find and express gratitude for the positive: how did we find out? Who is building alternatives? What tools exist to help prevent it from happening again? There will likely be productive answers to each of these questions. And these answers will be invitations to not sink into the muck and ashes of shame and rage but to rise up and take flight like a Phoenix or bloom like a lotus.



So let's calibrate our hearts and minds for joy as we pursue and grow justice. Another world isn't just possible. It's here - in this nation, in this state, in this region, and in this room. See it! Nurture it! Thank it! And we will *ALL* be the better for it.