

The Joy Thief

“And these things we write to you that your joy may be full” (1 John 1:4).

“The soul’s joy lies in doing.”—Percy Bysshe Shelley

“What’s stealing your joy?”

The question leveled me. It was not the first time someone asked, but it was the first time I’d heard it worded this way. Furthermore, the question came from a veritable stranger; but it cut right to the truth. Other forms—“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you talking? Why do you look so sad?”—were easier to dodge, but my evasiveness drowned in the surging desire to answer honestly such prying intrusions.

From the camps of those noticing a difference in my behavior and temperament—and who gave voice to their unfulfilled expectations—came three basic assessments:

The first group of appraisers was correct in assuming something was wrong, but the problem was too broad and ran too deep for me to pinpoint succinctly. Even if I tried to answer, these questioners grew weary before I finished or weren’t really interested in the answer. Their motive was to change my behavior to make relating easier for them. How naïve I was! Everyone was a potential counselor.

Then there was the statement:

“You’re so quiet.”

To these people, I wanted to find the most blaring character trait and retort, “You’re so fat!”—or bald or stupid or just plain obnoxious—and then counter with, “Oh, I thought we were playing ‘State the Obvious.’” However, a sense of social propriety wouldn’t allow me to say and do what I felt like saying and doing, although all others seemed to be justified in their words and actions, as well as garner laughs from bystanders.



A scholarly response such as, “Speech is silver; silence is golden” (a German proverb) was met with the most astute “Huh?” an accuser could muster, so trying to beat them with cleverness was wasted. I was throwing my pearls to swine.

Then there was sarcasm (poorly disguised as wit):

“You’re gonna have to quieten down some over there,” they derided from sidelong jowls as they reached for another handful of mixed nuts.

“I’ll try” was the opposite response they were trying to elicit, but their skewered attacks left me thunderstruck and paralyzed. Couldn’t they see I was putting forth my best effort to be attentive and engaging? Their fault-finding missions seemed to train everyone’s attention on my apparent verbal deficiency. I felt rejected, depleted, only wanting to escape...and often did.

What had happened to me? How had I arrived on this island of exile for refugees of cocktail parties and professional gatherings—retreating just as quickly (if not more so) from church retreats? Somehow I had learned to associate all group activities with pain, but couldn’t reconcile my conviction with the desire for meaningful relationships.

At the time of this new version of the old question, the most immediate answers were: yet another failed relationship and the dismissal from my job as an editorial assistant because, “You just don’t fit in,” the editor had said.

However, there was a more pervasive answer, or more likely several taproots, entangled in three decades of trying to attain happiness that attributed to the joy block. The providentially worded question—the better question, the one that caused me to search further, deeper and more thoroughly than I had done since those inchoate years—was the impetus I needed to begin unearthing the truth, make certain I believed it and move away from the altar of pain, where my bundle of joy had lain bound as a needless offering.

A month prior to the more profound question, in an Instant Message, this new acquaintance and detective of joys gone-a-missin’ asked:

“so how long ago did the saga end?”



“which one?” I replied.

“the one that makes you sad.”

“sad? whatever do you mean?” I hedged, knowing I wore the pain and that my effort to ignore it—my new strategy—wasn’t working.

“I just kind of gathered something was stealing your joy...something more than no job,” he said.

Whether he was being candidly matter-of-fact or sincerely concerned and interested in knowing the answer, my resolve to be positive, upbeat, *brave* and not convey self-pity was laid bare. That mistake had been made far too often, and my most recent attempt to establish the form of security I thought I needed nearly destroyed me.

I puzzled over his question, turning it over, inspecting it, ruminating on the answers from various points in my life. Again and again, I fixed on what I’d lost, given up, never had to begin with and had invested mind, body and soul in hunting down and attaining while kicking against the goads of reason.

When those who follow Jesus Christ as their personal Messiah use the word *joy*, they are referring to the joy of salvation or the joy of the Lord. There are traditional hymns and contemporary praise songs about the joy of coming to know Christ. Believers talk about the joy they find in their individual relationships with Him.

First Peter 1:8-9 states, “*Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls*” (emphasis added).

This verse and similar thoughts scared me. It seemed as though I had just enough truth to be confused. I knew joy was a fruit of the Spirit. “What if my soul was not saved because there was no evidence of joy? Further, if that were true, how could people who weren’t saved have and express joy?” I wondered.



A popular contemporary teaching is that happiness and joy are not synonymous. Happiness is circumstantial; joy is undaunted by upsets. I could claim moments of happiness. Joy, on the other hand, was something I perceived to be felt only by those who were too ignorant to know the sky was about to fall. Joy was not a feeling I could allow myself to feel let alone express, because my fear was that as soon as I did, as soon as I relaxed, inevitable disaster would occur; and there I would be grinning stupidly while something too serious to laugh at needed attention, cleaning up, to be fixed, made right and restored to its proper working order.

What *was* stealing my joy? Why was I locked within the rigid confines of what I'd learned was socially acceptable while everyone else seemed to be telling me such behavior was not socially acceptable?

There didn't appear to be a legitimate reason.

What personal experience of pain is strong enough to supplant genuine joy? Furthermore, what would someone such as myself—an independent college graduate with a pretty face and control of her faculties—know about it? Someone who had wondered where her next meal was coming from or the worry of *home* being a different shelter the next night had a right to worry. A girl whose family worked and sacrificed to provide exceedingly well above basic needs because they loved her—what right did she have to self-loathing pity parties?

The incongruity of the evidence versus the way I felt led to the realization there's a difference in what I *know* and what I *believe* to be true. The things we know are those facts taught to us: Two plus two always will be four. The things we believe are those things we learn unconsciously and hold most deeply—and therefore the most difficult to refute when they're engrained in our belief systems. Believing involves options, choices. However, we get into trouble when we choose to believe a lie, regardless of whether we realize it's a lie. The sum of the things we know and believe affects everything else that touches our lives, because those are the things composing our truth, which is the direct result of our experiences and environment. However, our truth without God's truth filtering or being applied to it is incomplete and inaccurate.



Slowly, I began to see I'd been focused on the tool that caused the pain rather than the reason the tool was necessary. The shears God had been using to prune me, to shape my life, were the object of my scorn. All my sap ran to the wounds where branches of the life I thought I wanted and needed had been severed.

By far, the closest I had come to feeling and expressing authentic joy so far was in my relationship with Craig, the saga to which my questioner referred. Deciding to end the live-in, just-waiting-to-make-it-legal arrangement with my fiancé of seven months was the hardest thing I ever had to do. During the unemployed weeks that followed, alone in my nearly empty apartment and alternating between the duties of a job search and posturing myself on bended knees, I cried. The impossibility of reconnecting with Craig made every breath as sharp as Artic air in February. I questioned God—loudly, wretchedly with a tone that was the bray of a dying beast—exactly why He would let me get so close to someone, why He would let me care so deeply, and how I was going to function now.

What was going to happen to me? I didn't even have the strength to wrestle the shower rod that fell the first night in my new apartment; and I refused to learn my address and phone number, because I didn't intend to be there long enough to need to know them.

Amid prayers for new employment, I also prayed to be busy, not to have time to think about the life I chose to leave behind. God was faithful.

Four nights a week were spent with various Bible study groups, and employment was found as a curriculum editor with a Christian publisher. My thoughts began pairing with incoming spiritual truths against episodes from the previous year and reached further back until I could see patterns emerging that taught me there is value in pain. *“(B)ut endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ”* (1 Corinthians 9:12).

New insights were heralded by the epiphany of my identity as a collector. By third grade, my collection might have been considered impressive, but it had been handed down to me from my mothers and fathers. I had been repeating their lives, falling into the same traps they set for themselves, collecting the injuries and scars of my own misgivings and misguided footsteps patterned after their own.



The joy thief? In a word, Rage—the perfect storm of Anger, Fear, Hurt, Loneliness, Sadness and Shame—all of which are common feelings since the Fall. However, I was 41 when I learned Shame is a pervasive, all-encompassing albatross that plunges the bearer into Rage that is going to be directed in one of two directions: internally or externally. Shame has lived at the core of my deeply etched, life-robbing and soul-murdering assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors that have shaped my particular worldview and prevented me from living as my authentic self.

