

What Makes You Feel Truly Alive?

Another December is here - another month of present giving. So what present are you going to give yourself this month? What about giving yourself permission to spend more of your time doing something that makes you feel truly alive?

One of the many tragedies of normal human life is that so many of us spend so much time doing boring, soul destroying activities, rather than spending as much time as possible on activities that make us feel truly alive. Of course, the poor of this world have no choice but to toil away trying to put food on the table. But many of us in the UK have too much to eat and too many clothes and yet we still spend far too much of our time in pursuit of material comforts or pleasures, or carrying out in dutiful chores and far too little time doing what brings us real joy and fulfilment.

Maybe we get into the habit of giving priority to unfulfilling tasks during our childhood, when we are told that if we work hard now, even at things we hate doing, we will secure a happy future for ourselves. But is this really true? I was told by my teachers at my Grammar School that if I worked really hard at Maths and Latin (not my favourite subjects) I would have a wonderful time at university. Well I did work hard at Maths and Latin and I did go to university (which was quite unusual for a girl way back then) and I was basically depressed all of the time!!

You think that might have taught me a big lesson, but I was a slow learner. Even after I started trying to be a good spiritual practitioner, I spent quite a bit of time doing stuff that did not really bring me any joy - like trying to sit very still and meditate for lengthy periods of time - because certain spiritual teachers taught that only by meditating for many hours could one reach enlightenment. Now, I have absolutely nothing but the highest admiration for those who manage to meditate for several hours every day, but I have recently come to the firm conclusion that this path to salvation is not for me! Long periods of sitting totally still in silence do not suit my fidgety personality-self and do not bring me joy. Similarly, some beautiful souls find liberation through joyfully practising yoga – not me! Some souls seem actually to enjoy eating a sugar-free diet and claim that it helps them to feel more alive – not me!

So now, rather late, but better than never, I am beginning to see that the best path through life for us as unique individuals is the one that brings us the most joy and makes us feel the most alive and 'in love' as we tread each and every step of it. Of course, that path is not going to be the same for all of us because we all have unique talents and unique strengths and weaknesses. So, if you would like to join me this month in finding real joy in life despite being in the darkest part of the year, please pause reading this message and make a quick list of activities in your life that bring you joy and uplift your spirits. Then, just give yourself the fantastic Christmas gift of vowing to do more of at least one of these activities this

month. I promise you that if you just do this one thing for yourself, your whole life will change for the better.

For example, I still meditate every day, but now I do it my way. I listen to music, only meditate for relatively short periods of time, and if I feel like moving as I meditate, I move. This flexible type of meditating definitely helps me to start each day by feeling more alive. I also teach tai chi several times a week because I love it so much. In fact I sometimes think that I should be paying my students because I feel so full of aliveness at the end of my classes.

Another example of growing through joy comes from my dear friend Gloria. For years I have been trying to persuade Gloria to go walking to strengthen her muscles and protect her overall physical health. I love walking in nature, but Gloria finds no joy whatsoever in walking long distances. Recently however she has discovered a swimming based fitness class that she absolutely loves, and not only is this weekly class strengthening her muscles, but when she returns home from what I call her Splash/Splash class, she is bouncing with aliveness.

One size definitely does not fit all in any aspect of life. Even if we want to learn the same thing, like learning a foreign language or learning to play a musical instrument, we need to find a learning style that suits us best and this is usually a method that we really enjoy. Of course, learning anything complex, like meditation or a foreign language, can feel like a slow and laborious process at times, so we do need to cultivate some sticking power and patience if we are going to master any complex skill. But in my experience, it is far easier to push ourselves to keep learning something complex if we find real joy and fulfilment in the learning process.

So this month, let us abandon once and for all that horrible adage 'No gain without pain'. Let us instead decide that from now on we are going to learn through joy. We are going to grow this month by devoting at least some time every day to an activity that really makes our heart sing.

Now please do not say to yourself at this point, 'That is all well and good, but I am just too busy at the moment to find the time to do something frivolous like actually enjoying myself!' Don't go on telling yourself, 'I will fulfil my dreams and cross off everything on my bucket list later once I have much more free time and more resources to spare.' I hate to tell you this, but that day will probably never come.

We can all come up with at least one life-enhancing, joyful activity that is free to do and does not take more than 30 minutes a day. If after thinking of something, you still tell yourself, 'I just do not have the time to do this right now!' gently ask yourself why you don't think you are worth dedicating such a small amount of time each day to becoming happier and more alive.

A long time ago, I spent a year or two training to become a psychotherapist and I noticed that a lot of unhappy, unfulfilled individuals were experts at playing the 'Yes, but...' game. Someone would make a perfectly sensible suggestion that might improve their overall well-being and the depressed person would always answer with a 'Yes, but...'. For example, I might say to someone, 'You love singing. Why don't you join that singing group near you it only costs £5.00 a week?' Then they would answer 'Yes but, that class is in the evening and I hate going out in the dark.' This may sound like a reasonable excuse, but underlying it is a subconscious negative programme telling that person that they do not deserve to be truly happy and fulfilled in life.

We all have this underlying negative programming to some extent, but if we are determined to live our lives to the full whilst we still have the chance, we have to ignore any self-sabotaging thoughts such as, 'Who are you to think you are good enough to join a choir/yoga class/tai chi retreat etc.?' or 'How selfish of you to take up singing/dancing/tai chi when your mother is so depressed and needs you to stay with her 24/7!' DO NOT LISTEN to these unkind voices in your own head. Doing something every day to help us feel more joyful and alive is in no way selfish. Joyful individuals are a real blessing in an angry, fearful, depressed world.

Joy gives us hope and we all need hope in these darkest of days. So please give yourself a wonderful present this month and do something on a regular basis that makes your heart sing. Not only will you become much more alive by doing this, but everyone you meet will then benefit so much from your joyful presence.

Peggy Foster
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