

Joy: More than an emotion

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ENG 110 Writing as Inquiry

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March 17, 2022

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If someone were to ask me to recount a memory that gave me the most joy, happiness, or pleasure, I would stare at them blankly for a good long minute while I let my brain scramble and rummage through the drawers of my experiences to come up with something – anything – to answer the question. Unfortunately, nothing would turn up. For starters, these three words hold entirely different meanings to me. Happiness, for me, is somewhat in your face, emblematic of a surprise birthday party. Pleasure is like fuel that turns good things into great things– like everyone getting the exact gifts you wanted. Joy, I think, is subtle. Quiet. It’s like changing into pajamas and gazing at the confetti and wrapping sheets crumpled on the floor with a grin on your face at the end of the night.

The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines joy as, “A vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction.” Joy, to me, is vivid and nuanced. I do not think one specific memory can encompass the essence of ultimate joy, happiness, or pleasure. I believe each memory has shades of multiple emotions– as if it is peppered with a little bit of everything. Yet, we choose to look at things from a simplified perspective – consider what we felt ‘overall’ instead of diving into specifics of the range of emotions that were stirred during an experience. Emotions, like human beings, are complex. And they should be given due credit.

When I think of joy, I think of the little things – like when my mom ‘missed’ a turn into the street home is just so I could finish hearing my favorite song in the car, when my sister stayed up the night before my chemistry quiz to teach me how to balance chemical equations, when my father picked up my share of the dishes from the dinner table, or when my brother accompanied me for a 10-hour long journey to a different city for an interview.

While I look at these experiences fondly, I cannot ignore the range of emotions I felt during them. My mom ‘missed’ the turn because I was sad about a fight with a friend, and she wanted to cheer me up with whatever she could do at the time. I desperately needed a win that day. Keeping my sister awake so she could teach me chemistry the night before my quiz weighed heavily on my conscience. I felt guilty during our entire study session. When my dad picked up the dishes for me, he knew I was spaced out – preoccupied because of a project I had to do. And when my brother accompanied me to another city, I was unnerved to the extent that I stayed awake the entire excruciating travel of 10 hours. So, a joyful experience doesn't need to be just that – and nothing else. In truth, the same experience may have some sad, anxious, infuriating, or painful bits. In the book, *Making Faces* (2013), Amy Harmon wrote, “There isn't heartache if there hasn't been joy. I wouldn't feel loss if there hadn't been love” (page 140). This is perhaps one of my favorite quotes from the novel, mainly due to an acceptance there. Harmon accepted that we can feel loss in places we once felt love. It is as if love and loss are like the two sides of the same coin. We cannot dispute we can feel loss without the presence of love at some point in our lives. Similarly, we cannot dispute the presence of other emotions when we feel joy – or any other emotion for that matter. A joyful experience ‘overall’ can also invoke pain, guilt, anxiety, or concern but that does not invalidate the amount of joy felt when it happened.

In grade 9, I was fifteen years old. An academically weak student, I had firmly decided to work on improving my grades to prove to my family that I could amount to something more than a disappointment. Yes, academics were taken that seriously. I was particularly bad at English. So, I had started working on improving my writing by reading novels. My reading journey began with the Harry Potter series in grade 7. By grade 9, I had read *The Hunger Games*, *Percy Jackson*, *Divergent*, and *The Mortal Instruments* series among others. I had also developed a

penchant for listening to pop music during that time. So, with increased exposure to the English language, I noticed massive improvements in my literary expression.

Writing essays that were initially a grueling process where I would brainstorm something but would be helpless in expressing it (as if I am at a loss for words, literally) now began to seem doable. A piece of cake, even. I remember something my brother said that stuck with me. ‘If something would go into the brain, only then would it come out on paper.’ That is exactly what happened. And I still remember it was a rainy night, somewhere in October circa 2015 when I wrote my first poem ever. I was listening to “Never Let Me Go” by Florence + The Machine and I felt some deep rumbling in the pit of my heart. My mind went into overdrive as words and sentences suddenly began bombarding inside its walls. The rumbling began to burgeon until I was pushed upright – electrified - prepared for something. I grabbed the nearest pen and paper to write what came to me. Words spilled out in strings called sentences and before I knew it, I wrote my very first poem. It wasn’t easy. Because after writing it, I was hit with anxiety. Should I show this to someone? What if it is not good enough? Is the poem too cheesy? What if they don’t like it? On and on went the intrusive thoughts.

Objectively, I had achieved a breakthrough in terms of personal development. I had written my first English poem! But the only thoughts I had after penning it down were questioning whether I was good enough. I was in a conundrum. On the one hand, I felt like this was a milestone for me – a reward by nature of sorts – to feel absolute inspiration and that rush of emotion driving you to write. But on the other hand, I also felt a sudden cloud of dread and self-doubt looming over me ready to rain on my parade. So, while I count the first time, I ever wrote a poem as one of the most joyful moments of my life, I can’t help but look back and

remember the anxiety, self-doubt, and dread associated with it too, even if it was just me overthinking.

Humans are complex and have nuanced experiences. We possess a range of emotions. Joy, I believe, is also complex. For me, like all other emotions, it incorporates a wide variety. This helps us to develop a more complete, realistic, and holistic view of our experiences and helps us manage our expectations about the future.

It's interesting how full a human being's life can be. We can experience everything ranging from passion, happiness, fascination to grief, envy, rage, and terror. While these are all parts of our lives, we still choose to dwell on the 'bad' parts more than the 'good' parts. Wouldn't it be simpler if we just accepted every part as a flavor of life? A new lesson. A new opportunity. Some lessons just inherently make one feel one way or the other, but all feelings are important in the grand scheme of things. If I had not failed in English repeatedly for years during my early adolescence, then I would not have been driven to improve later. So, while those years were hard for my self-esteem, and I used to constantly feel angry and frustrated, they were needed for me to commit to improve, work on my weaknesses and grow academically. Changing my study habits allowed me to acquire self-discipline, establish routine and be productive. I could've chosen to dwell on the 'negative' feelings until I went insane. But that was beneficial to no one, least of all, me. So, I decided to work on my shortcomings. And this reflection helped me evaluate myself so I could make room for growth and improvement.

Life is not perfect and holding ourselves up to such a high standard of what to feel and what not to feel is an injustice to the inherent nuance that exists in all of us. Perhaps it is ironic, that as complex as we are, we tend to make our lives more difficult than they need to be. Balance is key. Leading life by letting things flow and accepting the good and the bad may perhaps be the

best form of living that most of us have yet to master. And this all starts with an attempt to understand ourselves and accept our capacity to feel. Perhaps it can be a reminder of our resilience – that no matter how painful or dark a memory is, on looking closely enough, we might just find traces of hope or joy in them. And that can make all the difference.

References

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