

QUIET JOY  
By Michael A. Schuler  
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CONTEMPORARY WISDOM TEACHINGS

"The Life of a Day" By Tom Hennen

Like people or dogs, each day is unique and has its own personality quirks which can easily be seen if you look closely.

But there are so few days as compared to people, not to mention dogs, that it would be surprising if a day were not a hundred times more interesting than most people.

But usually they just pass, mostly unnoticed, unless they are wildly nice, like Autumn ones full of red maple trees and hazy sunlight, or if they are grimly awful ones in a winter blizzard that kills the lost traveler and bunches of cattle.

For some reason we like to see days pass, even though most of us claim we don't want to reach our last one for a long time.

We examine each day before us with barely a glance and say, no, this isn't one I've been looking for, and wait in a bored sort of way for the next, when, we are convinced, our lives will start for real.

Meanwhile, this day is going by perfectly well-adjusted, as some days are, with the right amounts of sunlight and shade, and a light breeze scented with perfume made from the mixture of fallen apples, corn stubble, dry oak leaves, and the faint odor of last night's meandering skunk.

"No Cedar Trees, No Burning Bushes" by Sylvia Boorstein

During my early meditation life, one particular passage in Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* moved me tremendously. She describes walking home through the forest to her cabin in Tinker Creek, where she was spending a year in solitude studying nature. Clearly, her mind was very steady, her attention very focused...a state of mind conducive to extraordinary realizations.

As she walked home that day, she saw a cedar tree aflame. I knew when I read it that she didn't mean the cedar tree was literally burning up. I assumed it meant that the tree had a kind of luminescence or shimmering

quality that was extraordinary...because she was seeing it with extraordinary eyes. Dillard describes the moment as a transforming one and writes that she lives for such visions.

So I wanted my own private version of a cedar tree, my own personal version of a burning bush. I had an idea that, if the mind were steady enough, it would burst out into a kind of Fourth of July fireworks celebration internally, regardless of what was outside...

As I continued my own meditation practice, from time to time lovely mind and body events did happen to me. I might feel mild raptures in all of my body...colors around me looked a little bit brighter; sometimes leaves looked a little bit sharper... But still, nothing was ablaze...and there were no fireworks of mind.

One day, after many years of practice, in the middle of a meditation retreat, I walked outside the retreat center and sat down on a bench near the back door to wait the few minutes that remained until lunchtime. It was a foggy, gray day...February in California - gloom and unremarkable. The bench was cold. In front of me stood a tree, still bare because its buds hadn't started to open yet. I thought to myself, "I wonder if this tree could be my cedar tree?"

I closed my eyes and paid attention to my breathing. I felt my body sitting on the cold bench; I felt the moist air around me; I felt very relaxed. I began to enjoy the cold bench...I enjoyed the sense of cool fog around me. I realized I felt happy... By and by the bell rang for lunch. I heard it and enjoyed the sound, but no impulse arose in me to get up from the bench and join the lunch line. I kept sitting.

Suddenly I realized this was an odd experience and that fact that no impulse arose in me to do something else was extraordinary... I was content. I thought to myself, "Far out! Contentment is the most exotic mind state of all. It is so unusual."

Then I thought to myself, "Probably this is my enlightened moment. Probably, if I open my eyes, that tree in front of me will be shimmering and shining and radiant." Slyly and shyly I opened my eyes. The tree was exactly the same, plain as ever. I was really happy.

From time to time the desire for a luminescent tree arises again...but it hasn't happened yet. Actually, I think I'm glad about that. If I saw one, it wouldn't last very long, and then it would be gone, and then I'd have to start looking for the next one, and that would be the problem.

Burning bushes are few and far between. Contented moments are the potential of every moment. Actually, all moments are contented. When they're not, it's because the mind has made a mess of them.

\*\* REFLECTIONS \*\*

I would guess that for the average person the word "joy" evokes images of energetic, high spirited activity. What probably comes to mind are revelers at Mardi Gras, newly wedded couples beaming at their reception, Pentecostal worshippers singing lustily, homesick soldiers disembarking after a long tour of duty, a student rushing to tell his parents that he has won a full scholarship to the college of his choice or perhaps a player leaping to his feet after winning the last pot in the World Series of Poker.

All of these are, to be sure, marvelous moments and they do illuminate one aspect of this most positive of human emotions. But if we limit our application of the word "joy" to overt displays of heightened sentiment, some of us may be prevented from recognizing joyfulness in our own lives, and others may never develop an appreciation for the many ways in which joy can and does express itself.

In **Webster's** dictionary primary synonyms include delight and gaiety, terms which again give the impression that joy is a passionate affair marked by exuberance and elation. But this raises an important concern. Some human beings do not possess particularly demonstrative temperaments. Though not repressed, they tend to be more emotionally contained, their deportment typically more reserved. The band of their emotions being considerably narrower, they are largely unfamiliar with the peaks and valleys that others experience. But does that mean that a felicitous feeling such as "joy" will never be available to the more even-tempered members of the population?

To be quite candid, I belong to that class of persons that tends to be less emotionally expressive, which is why I find the following poem by **John Tagliabue** reassuring. Entitled "Moderation is Not a Negation of Intensity, but Helps Avoid Monotony," it reads in part like this:

...No one can have poetry or dances,  
Prayers or climaxes all day;  
The ordinary blankness of little dramatic consciousness  
Is good for the health sometimes.  
Only Dostoevsky can be Dostoevskian

At such long, tumultuous stretches.  
Look at what that intensity did to poor great Van Gogh!  
Linger, lunge, scrounge and be stupid,  
That doesn't take much centering of one's forces;  
As wise Walt Whitman said, "Lounge and invite the soul."  
Get enough sleep... Be a dumb bell for a few minutes at  
least;  
We don't want Sunday church bells ringing constantly.

The fact is, some there are in the world who are transported by the bright and lively works of **John Philip Sousa** while others are more subtly moved by the quiet cadences of **Eric Satie**. Is one listener's joy any more real, more legitimate than the other's? The philosopher **James Carse** has commented that our appetite for the "big experience" - the sort of sudden insight, dazzling vision or heart-stopping ecstasy that **Sylvia Boorstein** craved - may be precisely what prevents us from tasting and savoring those daily tidbits, each of which makes a small but significant contribution to a joy-full life.

Joy doesn't have to come in big packages accompanied by clanging bells and shrill whistles. **Bertrand Russell**, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most distinguished intellectuals, insisted that "A happy life must be to a great extent a quiet life, for it is only in an atmosphere of quiet that true joy can live."

There are, then, many avenues by which joy can work its way into our lives and we have the ability to create the proper conditions for its entry. Life's rare moments of crowning success or religious ecstasy produce gleefulness, spontaneous outbursts of joy. But there is also joy to be had in, as **Mary Oliver** put it, "the ordinary, the very drab daily presentations." However, to experience joy under more ordinary circumstances we have to take our fate into our own hands and develop the same loving attention to detail as the poet possesses.

One of the first and most obvious steps we should take is to slow our pace and give our selves a little extra time to tune in to the world. While our culture has made it possible for us to "eat on the run," the habit of haste won't produce much in the way of gustatorial pleasure. And while a drive through the countryside is pleasant enough, a walk or bike ride will produce far more sensory delight. We must cultivate the art of sauntering, lingering and stopping. It helps to have a dog, as this man described by his neighbor, **Robert Fulghum**, demonstrates.

Almost every evening I see him, walking...his old dog and a recently acquired puppy... It's a common scene - an ordinary event in most neighborhoods. You can almost set your clock by his reliable rhythm - coming by at ten and going back my ten-thirty. Winter, summer, spring and fall; rain or snow, clouds or sunshine, he walks the dogs...

He said that the dogs keep him doing something important for himself. The old dog finds his leash every evening and stands by the door, waiting. The old dog is driven by his lower intestine and bladder. The young dog frolics through the house, yapping and wriggling, driven by enthusiasm for any opportunity for action and adventure.

But Sam is compelled by a need for what he tells his wife is "some fresh air." Whatever he calls it, she understands where he is going and why. While he is out of the house, she will do the dishes. For the same reasons, he goes out with the dogs. It is a sacred habit - a reflective time alone. (we might call it a "spiritual discipline").

Sam says that on these walks he settles the affairs of the day and thinks about tomorrow. He calms down from the busyness of his life, notices the weather, the seasons, the trees and the stars, and thinks about all the "big stuff."

When my neighbor walks the dogs, he performs a ritual act of "*sacer simplicitas*", to use the Latin - "sacred simplicity." Walking the dog is in truth a ritual of renewal and revival on an intimate scale - a small rebirth of well-being on a daily basis.

Walking the dog - an excellent opportunity for slowing down and capturing some quiet enjoyment.

A second factor to take into consideration as we try to interject more joy into our lives is the habit of "wanting" - a killjoy if there ever was one. The Buddhist writer **Stephen Levine** tells us that it is this near-constant desire for things to be other than they are that creates discontent and suffering. Paradoxically, the seeking of pleasure may represent the greatest barrier to joy because, as he says, once that pleasure has been obtained "...there then arises the pain of wanting to keep it, wanting nothing to mar it or to break it..." Happiness is found in the "spaciousness of not-wanting, **Levine** maintains.

"Wanting" is not, of course, something we can do away with entirely. To some degree we are all doomed to be

desirous. But the culture we've created keeps us in a state of almost constant craving. We not only want the things we genuinely need to live well, we hunger for all sorts of things that contribute little if anything to our subjective sense of happiness.

A recent article by **Robert Frank** in the April issue of *The American Prospect* highlights the problem. The author, a Cornell University economist, identifies the quest for "positional goods" as a major preoccupation of the typical American consumer. By "positional goods" he means products and services that people feel they need because others already have them. This culturally-conditioned ambition to match the material lifestyle of others in our peer group or of the one a notch above us is what creates a constant and insatiable state of craving. The disorder affects people all across the economic spectrum because, as **Frank** observes:

Additional spending by the rich shifts the frame of reference that defines what the near-rich consider necessary or desirable, so they too spend more. In turn, this shifts the frame of reference for those just below the near rich and so on, all the way down the income ladder.

The point is, it's very difficult for a desirous person to feel joyful, because joy presupposes the conviction that one already has enough and then some. Indeed, to be joyful, one cannot feel deprived or needy. Surveying their situation, they must feel deeply satisfied and, like **Sylvia Boorstein** on that cool bench in the moist fog, grateful. Remember the epiphany she had while sitting there? If she ever really saw a luminescent tree, once it was gone she'd immediately begin hungering for a comparable experience and nothing else would satisfy her. Far better slowly to cultivate the quiet joy of contentment - "the most exotic mind state of them all."

A third means by which we can increase the frequency of joy in our own lives is to develop a more genuine appreciation for the good fortune and accomplishments of others. It is all-too-typical for people in a competitive environment such as our own to feel envious rather than magnanimous toward one who has obtained something we deem valuable. But what if we could derive real, honest pleasure not only from our own bounty but from that of others? This is known as sympathetic or altruistic joy, a

condition in which we have developed emotional resonance with others.

It's a wonderful ability to have for, as the **Dalai Lama** has observed, if we put other people's good fortune on a par with our own, our chances of delight are immeasurably increased. Most of us are at least to some degree acquainted with this feeling, for the triumphs of our children and spouses are felt to be ours as well. But the farther we stretch the net of appreciation, the more joy we are likely to find.

**Sylvia Boorstein** offers the example of Hall of Fame wide receiver **Jerry Rice** who set numerous records for his position and won several Super Bowl rings with the San Francisco Forty-Niners. Shortly after his retirement he was asked by a sportscaster to identify the single greatest moment of his career. His response showed why **Jerry Rice** has been regarded by teammates and opponents alike as not only one of the game's greatest talents, but also as one of its true gentlemen.

"That moment would have to be in Super Bowl 23 when, with less than two minutes in the game, Joe Montana threw a pass that John Taylor caught in the end zone" - a play that clinched the game for the Forty-Niners. "When Taylor caught that pass," Rice reported, "I felt as if it were me." Here we have a marvelous example of sympathetic joy.

The emergent field of "positive psychology" has begun to examine and test these ideas to see whether empirical evidence supports the points I've been making today. In a new book entitled **Positivity**, **Barbara Frederickson** Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina argues that, for the most part, it does. She insists that we can choose to experience positive emotions and it's simply a matter of putting ourselves in the proper position to do so. Nothing novel or exciting really needs to be added to our lives because "It is out of our ordinary, daily transactions that positive emotions" - joy, contentment, appreciation, serenity - grow and gradually become more and more prevalent.

People do need guidance, however, because "wanting" has become such a prominent and pervasive part of our psychology. **Frederickson** offers some simple, self-evident suggestions which generally support what has already been said: Become less self-centered and more spacious; pay attention to kindness, she advises. Play to your strengths. Determine what it is you do best and, as much as you are able, do it. Get outside more often; few things to as much to restore or strengthen our spirits as

connecting with the natural world. And, of course, gently bring your attention back to the present moment again and again. "It is between the bread and the butter that the greatest moments of life are lived," **Steven Lewis** tells us - a sentiment shared by **Blayne Colmore**, an Episcopal priest nearing retirement.

My religion has become learning to pay attention to the endless details as they unfold and to try, as best I can, to show in my life how thrilled I am to have been here.

Happiness, **Barbara Frederickson** believes, is not a single, discreet emotion but rather an enhanced state of being produced through the gentle encouragement and faithful cultivation of many positive moments. If one wants to be happy, the secret is "focus on day-to-day feelings" - to say to yourself each morning, "Today is the day I've been looking for." Over time, this practice will produce a healthier disposition and make it possible for us to become, as **Frederickson** puts it, "the best version of ourselves."

And, isn't that ultimately what life challenges us to do: to become a cheerful, appreciative and generous rather than a cold and bitter version of ourselves? Either outcome is always a possibility, but as we gradually increase our capacity for quiet joy that "best self" will emerge quite naturally and very dependably.