

The Importance of Joy

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May 26, 2017

Working in the educational system can be as challenging and exhausting as it can be meaningful and rewarding. For those engaged in teaching children and youth, finding ways to nourish ourselves is essential.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite places to spend time was in the limbs of a great, old White Pine near my grandmother's house. I'd climb high into the tree's arms—as high as her branches would support me. Near the top, I would wrap one arm around her trunk and rest there, looking out over the landscape. When the wind picked up, the great old tree would sway gently from side to side, rocking me in her arms. Her sticky sap would often remain glued to my skin for a few days, an indelible imprint of having touched that quiet, vast space near the sky.

As human beings, we need more than food, air, water and shelter. In each of us lies a powerful need for the heart to be nourished. Just as a plant will wither without adequate water, so too our hearts can lose a certain quality of buoyancy, moisture, and brightness without adequate nourishment.

To do any kind of work—and especially the demanding work of education and service—requires both external and internal resources. We need resilience and strength to persevere through challenges. And there's nothing quite like joy to bring resilience and strength to the heart.

The Entrance to Joy

There are countless ways to access and experience joy. It's one of the gifts of being alive that we can take delight in so many different ways! Yet all of them seem to rest on one basic capacity: the ability to receive. To feel joy, we must be willing to let things in, to allow ourselves to be touched by life. (Even the joy we feel in an act of giving depends on our ability to receive the beauty of contributing, the gratitude of the recipient, or the kindness in our own heart).

This receiving is characterized by qualities of openness and connection. It's not so much something we *do* as something that happens naturally when we slow down and give ourselves time and space to *be*—like looking across the land from high up in that old, great pine tree. It's the quality that emerges when you stop and close your eyes to feel the sun on your face; or the inner quiet that comes as you gently shut your eyes and lean in close to smell the fragrance of a flower. It's the feeling of ease we experience when spending time with a good friend.

How many gifts and moments of joy do we miss in life because we're moving too quickly, too busy to actually receive and allow joy to arise? How often do we slow down enough to linger and allow ourselves to receive the goodness of our lives?

Mindfulness as Receiving

The way it's often taught, mindfulness can become overly associated with a tremendous amount of "doing." Yet the practice includes both active and receptive elements. The *proactive aspect* of mindfulness is the part that helps us to direct our attention and connect with the object of our meditation (the breath, the body, etc.) The *receptive aspect* of mindfulness is about lingering and tasting the flavor of that experience. We sustain our attention by sensing, with a spirit of curiosity, "How's this feel?"

More often than not, this receptive quality can become overshadowed by the focus of directed attention. The part that says "*What* is this?" overpowers and crowds out the part that listens and receives, "*How* is this?"

And it's that receiving, that listening, that opens the heart to joy. The more we learn to sustain a felt connection to what's happening, the more deeply we can experience joy.

The great strength of this joy is that it isn't dependent on getting what we want or experiencing pleasant things. It's an inner happiness that comes from simply being connected to our experience, be it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. It's an innate quality of joyful interest that arises when the heart/mind touches felt experience directly. When sustained, this can give way to a deep and pervasive satisfaction.

Reconnecting with Joy

It takes practice to find the good, to let things in, and to remember joy. I have a dear friend and fellow teacher with whom I take a walk through one of the local parks every few weeks. We always begin our walk by taking turns sharing "celebrations"—bits of our lives that are going well, small successes that we appreciate or want to celebrate. It's a wonderful practice to train the attention to notice and drink in the good.

These days, I find joy in many things. My partner and I often take walks in the evening together after work, holding hands and talking about our days. I enjoy sitting quietly and practicing mindfulness, breathing in and breathing out.

What brings you joy?

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