

Joy: Perspective

Vincent van Gogh was an artistic genius and pioneer. Like many artists of his day, he died before he enjoyed the profits of his labor. One story recounts a portrait he painted of a man who had helped him in some way. The recipient didn't care for it and used it to repair a chicken coop. He eventually threw it away, but was retrieved by a family member. Many years later that painting was valued at \$50M.

One of Van Gogh's most famous paintings is [*The Starry Night*](#), which inspired a 1970's song, [*Vincent*](#), by Don Mclean. The song's lyrics recount the mental health struggles the artist endured throughout his life, with most professionals believing he suffered from Bipolar disorder. His struggle ended when he died from infection from self-inflicted wounds as he tried to take his own life. The famous painting showcases his intentionally bold brush strokes which make the wind come alive.

The oversized Cyprus tree in the foreground is often associated with death – a common tree planted in cemeteries – and its shape seems to depict a reaching from earth up to heaven. The tree was thought to be one that he saw from the window through which he gazed on a daily basis when he lived in France. The serene village was from memory, recalling his Dutch homeland. Contrasting the serenity are the winds above – perhaps the tormenting mistral winds known in that region that sent Van Gogh over the edge. The painting was created while he sought help at a mental health facility after he infamously cut off his own ear after a violence-ridden argument with a fellow artist. *The Starry Night* is autobiographical for Van Gogh, and also for humanity. Serenity and anguish at the same time while we reach toward the skies with hope for help.

The human experience is rife with this tension of struggle and serenity. The Dalai Lama was forced into exile from Tibet in 1959. At 19 years old, he was smuggled out of the palace he called home to avoid the Chinese military that was bearing down on him. He has lived in India ever since. He knows what it is to suffer. Archbishop Desmond Tutu lived through Apartheid in South Africa, and then was instrumental in the healing process afterward, where racism became veiled and harder to eradicate. He survived an assassination attempt, and later battled cancer which contributed to his death in 2021. Both of these men had plenty to lament.

Speaking about joy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu noted that “discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken” (Lama, Dalai; Tutu, Desmond; Abrams, Douglas Carlton. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. Kindle Edition. 12). Changing our perspective can make an enormous difference in how we experience suffering. The Dalai Lama noted that “the suffering from a natural disaster we cannot control, but the suffering from our daily disasters we can. We create most of our suffering, so it should be logical that we also have the ability to create more joy. It simply depends on the attitudes, the perspectives, and the reactions we bring to situations and to our relationships with other people. When it comes to personal happiness there is a lot that we as individuals can do” (Ibid., 14).

“A healthy perspective really is the foundation of joy and happiness,” noted Douglas Abrams who conducted the interview, “because the way we see the world is the way we experience the world. Changing the way we see the world in turn changes the way we feel and the way we act, which changes the world itself. Or, as the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, “With our mind we create our own world” (Ibid., 194). Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl famously stated that “our perspective toward life is our final and ultimate freedom.” In agreement, The Dalai Lama explained, “We must look at any given situation or problem from the front and from the back, from the sides, and from the top and the bottom, so from at least six different angles. This allows us to take a more complete and holistic view of reality, and if we do, our response will be more constructive” (Ibid., 196). Abrams concludes saying that “a wider perspective leads to serenity and equanimity. It does not mean we don’t have the strength to confront a problem, but we can confront it with creativity and compassion rather than rigidity and reactivity” (Ibid., 201).

The bible is filled with stories of messy people in messy situations that involved suffering. Joseph’s story (Genesis 37-50) would include him being left for dead, being sold into slavery, being wrongfully accused and imprisoned in Egypt, being forgotten for the good things he did, prolonging his incarceration, to becoming the most powerful leader in Egypt below the Pharaoh. His story also includes a messy reunion with his brothers who sought help from Egypt when famine forced their hand. By that time, Joseph had lots of time to reflect and said to his brothers who were terrified of Joseph’s retribution, “You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as God’s doing today” (Genesis 50:20). A change in perspective made all the difference, reframing the situation from entirely awful to one where the pain was still acknowledged, but so was the good that was worked out along the way.

How might a change in perspective help you find joy even amidst the suck? How might simply knowing that a perspective shift could help offer some hope even while you’re in the pit? Could it be that we find what we’re looking for, and that if we turn our gaze to look for the beauty that is present, we might cultivate joy even in our anguish?

“The Uses of Sorrow” by Mary Oliver

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.