

Joy and Gratitude

We all have tough parts of our stories, don't we? Days or seasons that have been very challenging, when all we can see is how bad things are. In those moments, joy is elusive.

Joseph had a long season of "suck." Sold into slavery by his embittered brothers and imprisoned after being wrongly accused of attempted sexual assault, I wonder just how blinded he was from despair. Despite all he experienced, he eventually was able to move away from resentment to forgiveness, finding himself grateful. His gratitude enabled him not only to find joy, but to lavishly share it with his brothers who had so terribly harmed him.

How did he overcome all the bad feelings and memories? He chose to focus more on gratitude for the good that was right in front of him than the pain of his past: God produced something good from it, in order to save the lives of many people, just as he's doing today" (Genesis 50:20 CEB). Joseph stumbled onto a way to move out of our despair toward joy: gratitude.

The Apostle Paul had the audacity to instruct his reader to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4-7 NRSVue). Why audacity? Because once he decided to follow the Way of Jesus and promote what he taught, he went from one place of heartache to another, sometimes barely escaping death, finding himself imprisoned for the final chapter of his life before he was martyred. Yet he speaks from experience. His focus on rejoicing, being grateful for what God was doing rather than being engulfed by despair gave him strength through many terrible episodes. He found the presence of God to be more faithful and worth celebrating than the powers of injustice that eventually took his life. He wrote from experience: rejoice always.

I have noticed that when I am grateful, I feel lighter. When I am really thankful, my frown turns upside down, which is not trivial. Research has suggested that smiling for twenty seconds can trigger positive emotions. Smiling can jump-start joy and happiness. Give it a try right now. Set a timer for 20 seconds and just smile. See what happens! Be careful, your smiling may give way to laughing, and you never know [what that may lead to](#).

Gratitude isn't the same as being in denial of our pain or dismissing it. People who try to pull that off don't keep the smile on for long, and if they do, their attitude and demeanor often betray the pain they are carrying. Choosing gratitude is a defiant act, a decision to no longer be led by the forces of pain of which one is fully aware but rather be led by thanksgiving for the good that is present in every moment.

While Joseph and Paul offer biblical examples of gratitude amid suffering, contemporary examples can be equally illuminating. Few embody this more powerfully than Anthony Ray Hinton:

Anthony Ray Hinton spent thirty years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He was working in a locked factory at the time of the crime that he was being accused of. When he was arrested in the state of Alabama in the United States, he was told by the police officers that he would be going to jail because he was black. He spent thirty years in a five-by-seven-foot cell in solitary confinement, allowed out only one hour a day. During his time on death row, Hinton became a counselor and friend not only to the other inmates, fifty-four of whom were put to death, but to the death row guards, many of whom begged Hinton's attorney to get him out.

When a unanimous Supreme Court ruling ordered his release, he was finally able to walk free. "One does not know the value of freedom until one has it taken away," he told me. "People run out of the rain. I run into the rain. How can anything that falls from heaven not be precious? Having missed the rain for so many years, I am so grateful for every drop. Just to feel it on my face."

When Hinton was interviewed on the American television show 60 Minutes, the interviewer asked whether he was angry at those who had put him in jail. He responded that he had forgiven all the people who had sent him to jail. The interviewer incredulously asked, “But they took thirty years of your life—how can you not be angry?”

Hinton responded, “If I’m angry and unforgiving, they will have taken the rest of my life.”

Unforgiveness robs us of our ability to enjoy and appreciate our life, because we are trapped in a past filled with anger and bitterness. Forgiveness allows us to move beyond the past and appreciate the present, including the drops of rain falling on our face.

“Whatever life gives to you,” Brother Steindl-Rast explains, “you can respond with joy. Joy is the happiness that does not depend on what happens. It is the grateful response to the opportunity that life offers you at this moment.”

Hinton is a powerful example of the ability to respond with joy despite the most horrendous circumstances. As we were driving in a taxi in New York, he told me, “The world didn’t give you your joy, and the world can’t take it away. You can let people come into your life and destroy it, but I refused to let anyone take my joy. I get up in the morning, and I don’t need anyone to make me laugh. I am going to laugh on my own, because I have been blessed to see another day, and when you are blessed to see another day that should automatically give you joy.

“I don’t walk around saying, ‘Man, I ain’t got a dollar in my pocket.’ I don’t care about having a dollar in my pocket, what I care about is that I have been blessed to see the sun rise. Do you know how many people had money but didn’t get up this morning? So, which is better—to have a billion dollars and not wake up, or to be broke and wake up? I’ll take being broke and waking up any day of the week. I told the CNN interviewer in June that I had three dollars and fifty cents in my pocket and for some reason that day I was just the happiest I have ever been. She said, ‘With three dollars and fifty cents?’ I said, ‘You know, my mom never raised us to get out there and make as much money as we can. My mom told us about true happiness. She told us that when you are happy, then when folks hang around you, they become happy.’

“I just look at all the people who have so much, but they are not happy. Yes, I did thirty long years, day for day, in a five by seven, and you have got some people that have never been to prison, never spent one day or one hour or one minute, but they are not happy. I ask myself, ‘Why is that?’ I can’t tell you why they are not happy, but I can tell you that I’m happy because I choose to be happy.” (244-246)

What about Hinton’s story impacts you?

It has been said that nothing unites people like a common enemy, which is a truism every politician employs every election cycle to frighten people to vote for them. There is a much more positive option. As the author of the book notes, “gratitude connects us all. When we are grateful for a meal, we can be grateful for the food that we are eating and for all of those who have made the meal possible—the farmers, the grocers, and the cooks. When the Archbishop gives thanks, we are often taken on a journey of Ubuntu, acknowledging all of the connections that bind us together and on which we are all dependent. The Eucharist that the Archbishop gave to the Dalai Lama literally comes from the Greek word thanksgiving, and saying grace or giving thanks for what we have been given is an important practice in the Judeo-Christian tradition. (246)

All of the above quotes make a good case for why integrating gratitude is worthwhile should we be seeking more joy in our lives. Taken together with the other pillars, however, helps make gratitude a sort of secret sauce, especially as we approach the final two pillars of compassion and generosity.

In our most important relationships that are often recognized as claiming close proximity to us, significant time and importance, gratitude has the capacity to work wonders. It should be expected that in some, most, or all of these most significant relationships we may struggle with the unflattering humanity on display among these key players in our storyline. Captain Obvious reminds us that we are more likely to see the “real, unvarnished” person in those with whom we spend the most time. Those who only have limited time with these same people may only see them at their best, shielded from their full humanity. Those with greater access know much more about a person – the good, of course, but

also the bland and perhaps unlovely aspects as well. People closer to the action know how the person when they are grumpy, angry, bland, eating, sleeping, tired, etc. This is why the truism exists, “familiarity breeds contempt.”

Harvard Business School learned that while we assume that getting to know people more will increase our liking of them, the opposite is actually true. The more we know, the more we may not like compared to our initial view of a person. This rings true in relationships, affairs, jobs – in everything we may have relationship with. How have you experienced this reality? How has the enamor of someone worn off the longer you’ve known them? With your parents? Friends? Lovers? Coworkers? Employers? Idols?

What do we do with people once their shine has worn off? Will we ever get back that loving feeling?

In my experience, our way forward and toward a more graceful view of our closest companions begins with sobering perspective. It is not a bad thing to simply be honest about the unpleasant, frustrating realities we see in those with whom we spend significant time. Growing up Christian, there was something in me that went over this step much too quickly, dismissing aggravating attitudes and behaviors because I felt like the right thing to do was to “get to graceful” as quickly as possible, minimizing the impact of a person’s real humanity on my life. Rushing to grace, as odd as it may sound, hijacks the process and hijacks our own journey of being human.

A better approach regarding the people who matter to us (whether or not we like it)? Accept reality. Name it. It can be sobering and affirming and freeing all at once. It can also potentially lead to loathing and contempt. That’s where the secret sauce comes in.

Gratitude puts things into perspective when it comes to those significant people. In healthier relationships, gratitude pulls us back into reality, acknowledging the good qualities of those same people. They aren’t all bad after all! We are more apt to have this experience if we hold ourselves to reality as well. When we are honest and accepting of our own foibles and also recognize our inherent value and gifts we bring the world, we are more likely to find ourselves in balance with the world, more graceful with ourselves and others.

Of course, sometimes there are relationships that need to cease because the accepted reality is that a healthy relationship isn’t really possible. With those painful experiences, sometimes the best we can do is be grateful for *whatever* we can muster and be grateful that the person isn’t in the inner circle anymore. For some adult children of a terrible example of a father, for instance, perhaps the only modicum of gratitude is for their part in giving you life and whatever good genes they may have offered.

This approach is counter cultural, taking us away from the binary approach which limits people to being good or bad. With this acceptance and gratitude approach, we can accept a person’s full, sometimes not pretty humanity, and at the same time be grateful for whatever good there is to claim. The same works for ourselves.

Gratitude does not erase suffering, excuse injustice, or remove disappointment. What it does is help us recognize that pain is not the whole story. It reminds us that even in difficult seasons, goodness remains present and available to us. Gratitude widens our vision enough to see it.

How will you choose gratitude going forward this week?

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the book, [*The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*](#), Kindle Edition.