

# JOY - BRIEF

## Soujourna Howfree on Joy Through Pain

True joy is not some fleeting temporal thing contingent on circumstance. Abiding joy is a gift from God, and I found it over the course of the most painful event of my existence. Eleven years ago, I woke up to discover my 10-year-old son dead. Rigor mortis had set in, and I was, now in these waking hours, living out, quite literally, my most horrific nightmare. Today, more than a decade later, I can honestly say God is still God and within the safe harbors of the joy and tenderness of his care, and comfort of his love, is my strength.

To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love.

— A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*<sup>1</sup>

It is a remarkable and peculiar phenomenon, to yearn for something you already have. I have the love of Christ, yet the refracted light that I have located here in my startling sundrenched southern land is a mere facet of a far greater diadem that I cannot yet access in the fullness of its glory. I yearn for the light of his great love, although I have it, because in this yearning place I am more than I ever ought to have been. All the laws of my natural state are overturned, and I am loved like

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), chap. 1, digital edition.

Shulamite by a wise and eloquent King Solomon whose poetry is dripping with honey. He calls to me: “. . . come away with me my love.”<sup>2</sup> And I am intoxicated by him, the need is unquenchable and being filled only leads to greater hunger. This is Joy.

Within the context of another yearning, different to that for the lover of my soul, is also a peculiar joy found in hope — joy that is sustenance in a landscape that would otherwise be despair and desolation. This great chasm that cannot yet be breached is the yearning for my first-born son. It is a kind of desperate homesickness for a land you know is behind you and somehow up ahead and the only way to reach it now is to grasp in the depths of the cosmos of memories whilst the vault of the future remains firmly guarded shut, until it is time.

Feasting and togetherness was a source of great joy, and now, I understand it was also the table of sacred significance. That last meal Jesus spent with his friends, serving them food, loving them, was also amidst the company of betrayal. We shared our last meal with Zeke on a mountain top. Our little family of four, had a palatial home that capitalized on the majestic views across a remote section of the Australian Blue Mountains. The sky lines were magnificent, and September is springtime. The air was thick with Jasmine scent from the garden and the native eucalyptus was juxtaposed with the pungent smack of male Koala urine (apparently this is their most noble and romantic effort to attract a mate.)

We had no idea at that time that the great betrayer of love (that was never meant to be put asunder in the

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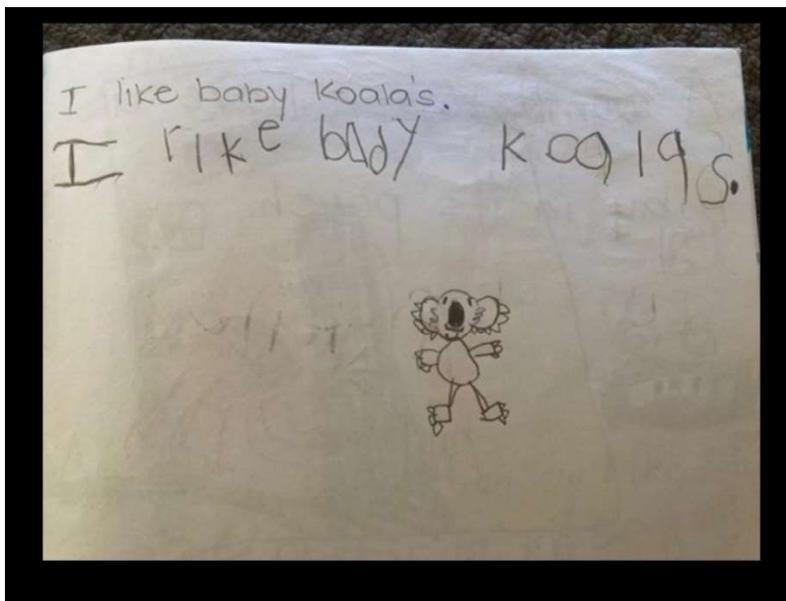
<sup>2</sup> Song of Solomon 2:10 (KJV).

original blueprint), death, was waiting just hours from our hearts to crush us.

Zeke had spent much of the day on his motorbike, and Pip, his younger sister, was playing with the chooks.

I was just going over some ancient family archives today, actually. Epiphany (Pip) is now 16, and

I found her little journal from when she was 5:





There was joy that night. My husband, who has a very masculine visage, broad shoulders, long black hair and a full beard, had been selected by a local casting agency to play a minor role in a television program about "Bushrangers." These are criminals who would hold up carriages of wealthy colonists in the 1700s. Brandishing their guns, they would hide their faces, demanding loot. Somehow, over the course of modern history they have been rebranded as national icons for their anti-establishment sentiments. They are now considered heroes.

It is strange how hegemonic cultural voices in a given epoch make strident efforts to reinvent the facts of history. Trying to make the rock of truth malleable. Truth is a fixed mark, despite the wicked efforts to say otherwise. Philosophical nonsense in some academic fraternities, using deceptive semantics to attempt to erode the cornerstone of truth, have had far greater reach and outworkings in the lives of the multitudes than I suspect they ever contemplated. The word is still God's. He will always be the author of truth. How refreshing is the joy to sip from the crystal clarity of that cup's flow.

Truth is a fixed mark, and as such, I will never doubt my Maker's love. The joy of that knowledge is my strength. Those who steal, kill, and destroy can be redeemed, but the truth must still be told. The thief on the cross understood he was not to shift the truth and make himself the hero. The messianic figure was beside him, always, but without the truth he had nothing; with truth, paradise.

"Bushrangers" aired that night on the television, so we all settled in to watch Bill in period costume from last century have a staged arm wrestle. He was to lose the

match as scripted. Ezekiel (Zeke) was a little baffled: Daddy was clearly bigger than his opponent, and it really didn't make much sense to a 10-year-old boy. The children concluded that if Daddy could pretend to lose like that, he was now a film star and obviously destined for Hollywood!

Weeks earlier, we had told Zeke that if he started to do his homework with more frequency, he would earn a \$100 bonus on his pocket money. He never really liked scholastics. His grades were fine; he just tired easily and loved to be outdoors playing or being with people far more. He met the challenge and with his hard-earned reward, he told his father he wanted to go to the local hardware store, Bunnings.

I was surprised; I thought a toy shop would be the arrival point. No, this was the preference. Out Ezekiel came to the car park from his shopping escapade with a BBQ. "I want to be your master chef!" He declared proudly. So, after the evening's television entertainment, Zeke went out on the back deck to BBQ the family snags.<sup>3</sup> The wind was howling up the gully on the side of the mountain and then meeting the house with such force the glass in the window panes quaked. As a result of the tremendous winds, trying to light his little gas ignition on his two burner BBQ was proving a challenge. Bill sat out on the deck and provided a human shield against the unseasonal winds that were heralding the seismic change that was imminent. The little fire sparked, and my boy made us his last supper.

Sausages and mashed potatoes. We told him he was our master chef and scored him 10/10. The final

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<sup>3</sup> *Snags*: Australian colloquialism for beef sausages.

exchange of his life “I love you mum.” “I love ya too mate.” My little boy. Our meal. Final words.

There is joy in those memories, words, moments. I will cleave to those promises of joy, that I will feast at a table with him again, soon.

Those memories of our last supper are a sacred joy, and I have volumes of others like them, in the treasury of my soul.

What a seeming paradox and an oddity it is, that joy is found despite the wrought furnaces of agony. In that conflagration when the shared goal of my husband and I was to simply inhale the next breath and maintain a will to live. And we did.

Somewhere beyond the black ether of the infinite and unknowable night of September 11, 2011, my ten-year-old son went home to Jesus.

I awoke the next morning in horror to find Ezekiel's body cold and lifeless and stiff already riddled with rigor mortis. Well beyond my ken for recovery.

Time moved very differently that day compared to the usual ebb and flow I had known all my life up until that point. It slowed, slowed right down, down spirals of the helix strand that connect my blood to my child's blood unravelling like Fibonacci sequences in my own internal dialogue. This reverse algorithm was converting my usually swift deliberate rational interior monologues into long drawn-out syllabic drawls. “Thhhiiisss wiiiiiii beee a haaard daaaay.” I heard my own, weird, interior voice trying so tremendously, laboriously to rationalize to self, as I went to the toilet like some living automaton. I had just moments earlier been screaming down the emergency telephone line only to establish what I already knew.

It was too late.

There is the rub-  
no man can undo what is done-  
no human put asunder  
what God has joined to Himself

Still his Shulamite woman,  
he calls me too, in other directions for now,  
the joy is in knowing that soon  
I will be with my beloved.

I will hold my little lamb.  
His little lamb.

I am beaten in the city.  
Begging for his rescue.  
Knowing in time he will bring justice.  
Oh, gracious he is, to look past my quarrel.

A rage with fervour,  
against the only one,  
who can breach the chasm,  
overturn the curse.

Anguished weeping  
with vitriolic rage,  
ache, and writhe,  
at injustice, depraved.

Then an unexpected radiance

Joy in the knowledge that he will do what he promised.

Justice.

And he will do it.

Victorious banner of my beloved  
Restores rest to my soul.

The assurances of God emerged in the depths of my pain. Joy, the paradox, the joy in the agony. He answered my anguished demands: "Why!" "To draw the people to me." I have watched many people come to the throne room of grace as a result and that knowledge brings me joy.

Yet it is in the deep abiding knowledge that the joy of the Lord is the source of true strength, that the will can conform to the spiritual directives. I, with utmost disrespect for the King of Kings, I who am dust, yelled and raged and was Job's wife in my own space and time, was held in the comfort of his wings. A strange joy.

He never left me. And as I prayed on the stairs of the City Coronial Court for justice for my son, God was there.

When I realized like a mad Hamlet that "something [was] rotten in the state of Denmark."<sup>4</sup> That my son's cardiac medical records had been deleted, that the autopsy failed to take a key cardiac measurement, and that physicians would instruct us on cardiac care for our living child but claim to know nothing in legal arenas. When the Chief Health Advisor of the entire state

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<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.4.90.

purchased a pediatric cardiac defibrillator for our little girl but went to the national media to make a statement that the deletion of the cardiac medical record was of no clinical significance, then her collect, crafting an alternate narrative of the possibility of a condition he was gene negative for. I stood cheated, aghast. Yet reminded that my God had the government upon his shoulders. I should not be surprised to find an enemy within the state. I just did not anticipate the true stature of Goliath, my nation's government. In time, a stone will be cast. There is joy too in that hope.

So, I am there, at the foot of the stairwell to the court late at night. Praying, begging for justice and truth. Suddenly, the unmistakable fragrance of frankincense. I know it. I had taught Senior School English at an Orthodox Coptic College, in their church services the priests would burn this incense. Yet here I am, on the side of a main arterial road into the city with cars burning fuel flying past. I know God is with me. This gift that was his at birth is now here with me. I know my prayer is heard. So, I wait. There will be truth on my son's death certificate one day. It is a human right, and the truth must always come to light. This year, my son would be 21; a significant rite of passage year in Australia, the year of Manhood. I will wait on the Lord, because it is in the deep abiding knowledge -- that he will do as he has promised, that he hears our prayers -- that the joy of the Lord is found. He is the source of true strength that my will can conform to, these are spiritual directives of perseverance and righteousness. That fruit will be mine.

How is suffering joy? It is in the pain of immeasurable suffering I know in a refracted light

something of Christ, who suffered. To know God, and be known by him, is joy.

In the interim between now and meeting my Maker face to face, in the space between now and the reunion with my child, there is so much joy to be had in truly being present and attentive to God.

Over the last 11 years there has been so much joy amidst the agony. God told me during a devotion time in his word: "This time next year, you will hold a son in your arms." So I did. My little Silas Ezekiel was born. Then another son, Judah William, for I praise God. The Lord had given me a double portion for what the locusts had taken away from me. I am grateful for such remarkable wealth. The joy rings out from the laughter of my children in a home of boisterous fart jokes, and the promises of my God, the joy of the Lord, is my strength.

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Joy - Brief

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