

JOY IN THE MYSTERY

Annie Nardone on Joy and Donegality

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*¹

What is joy? There are several ways to consider this emotion. The Bible includes 203 scripture mentions of joy. The Psalms contain 51 observations, including Psalm 30, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."² The Oxford definition states, "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness — tears of joy." Why do we cry tears when we feel intense joy? Tears are usually a sign of sorrow or anger; yet, we dab our eyes when we experience an overwhelming sense of joy, too. Perhaps our greatest joys and sorrows are deeply soul-rooted in our imaginations to uniquely form the person's identity. A movie that brings tears to the eyes of one person may not move another to the same affection, and those tears

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (1945; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 26.

² Psalm 30:5 (ESV).

most likely are connected to the memories buried in our subconscious, which give unique meaning to our lives.

One of the most descriptive and mysterious terms that C.S. Lewis uses in his writing is the word *donegality*. An essential quality in a good work of fiction, there is also a donegality of place or pivotal experience. In *Allegory of Love*, he coins the term to describe the tone of a good story:

Lovers of Romance go back and back to such stories in the same way that we go back to a fruit for its taste; to an air for . . . what? for itself; to a region for its whole atmosphere — to Donegal for its Donegality and London for its Londonness. It is notoriously difficult to put these tastes into words.³

Joy and donegality go hand-in-hand. We return to a playground from childhood or a town where we grew up and are swept back in time to particular moments of complete immersion in the place — that feeling fades and we fervently desire its return. When I visit the lake and farmland of my Minnesota ancestors and park by the cornfield, my imagination is filled with scenes from decades ago. I see the native birds, hear the trill of the redwing blackbird and the high-pitched squeak of the bald eagles perched on the lake ice. There is a particular smell to the turned earth in fields and the dry grasses in the ditch. I pick up clumps of dirt and crumble them between my hands. Then I close my eyes and soak in the donegality of that farm, the atmosphere that cannot be well-explained in words embedded in this place. When I

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; repr., Oxford: OUP, 1958), 276.

leave, I long to return for the indescribable joy that I experience each time I return. We experience joy as a deep and enduring emotion, not transitory like happiness that comes and goes like the tide. Joy is an abiding quality in your spirit that lingers in your mind, awaiting a fresh reminder.

Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.

— C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*⁴

Lewis speaks of a longing that evades description and where he found joy, defined as

that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic . . . the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again.⁵

Yes. That is joy. Personal and indescribable, it is the indwelling tide of returning desire for place, story, and moment that finds a home in your spirit.

Happiness and joy are not the same experiences. When we compare the two according to scripture, happiness is temporary according to the situation when

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (1955; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

it is felt. In Isaiah, we read "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness."⁶ Lamentations tells us that "my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is."⁷ Happiness is temporary and dependent on an outside influence. If you give someone a gift, that brings happiness to giver and receiver, but after a while, the gift grows old and loses its shine. Winning a trophy in an athletic competition is a glorious moment of pleasure, but the trophy goes on the shelf and gathers dust — the happiness fades and the winner moves on to the next temporary event. In contrast, Lewis writes that "All joy (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more amusement) emphasises our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakens desire. Our best havings are wantings."⁸ Joy is abiding.

Joy is not affected by time or outside influences, nor is it equated with happiness. Consider scripture that includes the term *joy*. James writes, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."⁹ In Hebrews, we read, "For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."¹⁰

⁶ Isaiah 52:7 (ESV).

⁷ Lamentations 3:17 (ESV).

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 289.

⁹ James 1:2 (ESV).

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:34 (ESV).

Joy must be abiding — to sense a deeper meaning to the temporary events and emotions we encounter. It is indwelling and can be reawakened.

But how do we reawaken our joy? By living with a sense of awe and wonder, cultivating the sacred in the everyday. Each day, pause and ponder just how miraculous and rare the smallest things are — a tiny spider, the bright color of a flower, how a dew drop magnifies what it rests upon. Look at the world through a numinous veil and you will meet joy. As Lewis tells us, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it."¹¹ Be amazed, always.

I wrote this sonnet as an ode to joy. We can either move through our day without noticing the beauty surrounding us, or we can choose to revel in the mystery, experienced each moment by a reverent comprehension.

Creation

Red sky is only sun's refracted light.

Green shades of plants are colored by mere chance.

White strands of clouds, just vapors in our sight.

Stars are not illumined, heavenly dance.

¹¹ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 75.

Winged flocks fly south on their appointed day,
Their season's journey starts uncued each year.
The fragrant buds come forth in bright array
To coax each bee to nectar, sweet and clear.

Each life sings of its given purpose, yet
We'll marvel at this world and call it chance.
Complexity that is so clearly set.
It was His plan to bring us to this Dance.

Creation shouts to say there's Someone else.
From cell to sea You pull us to Yourself.

Man is more himself, man is more manlike,
when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and
grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an
innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive
frame of mind; praise should be the
permanent pulsation of the soul.

— G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*¹²

¹² G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995),
180.

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