



Soul Matters

Opening to Joy



Small Group

December 2021

Opening to Joy

It's easy to get tricked,
taken for a ride,
convinced that joy
is a possession.

Something to be opened
just by us.
As if it's a holiday special delivery,
waiting for us to unwrap it
and keep forever.

And who can blame us,
with pain being so prevalent.
Sadness seems to stay.
Why can't joy?

But maybe it's elusive
for a reason.
Maybe it's slippery
in order to help us understand
that it was put here to fly.
Or better yet:
To be flung!
To be passed, not possessed.
To be spread
between you and me,
between the ones who received its gift
and the ones that have been looking for its treasure
for a very long time.

Maybe it's a beautiful and elegant contagion,
over which we have more control than we think.
If only we share it.
If only we notice that joy is not ours to keep,
but ours to give.

Maybe joy opens us
as much as we open to it.

Maybe that's the way light leaks into our world.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A *Plant Pennies*

The [sublime writer](#), Annie Dillard, tells this story about her childhood:

When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I've never been seized by it since. For some reason I always "hid" the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny.

Reflecting back on this as an adult, she says,

The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But — and this is the point — who gets excited by a mere penny?... It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple.

So how about this?... Let's plant some pennies! What those "pennies" will be is up to you. Maybe it will be placing flowers for someone to find. Or putting [secret notes](#) in places for your partner or kids to find. Or better yet, put some [sticky notes](#) in [public places](#), such as a [bookstore](#) or library. Speaking of books, what about leaving a few of your [favorite books](#) in a public place for a stranger to find, with a message inside it that tells them why you love the book and expresses your hope that they will pass it on. For some "planting a penny" might mean secretly placing a painting of yours on a friend's wall without telling them, leaving it there to find out how long it takes for them to notice. For others, it might be sketching a chalk arrow on the sidewalk drawing others eyes to a lovely tree that is easy to overlook. Those of you who live in 2nd or 3rd floor apartments might want to blow bubbles out your window to wake up those walking home from work. You could also double your tip at the next few places you eat. And don't forget, you can also plant pennies with your words by randomly giving out compliments to strangers you encounter during your day.

Unlike some of the other exercises that invite you to notice how you are the *recipient* of joy, this exercise is all about us remembering that we are also *givers* and *enablers* of joy.

Happy planting!

Option B

Joyspotting

Designer and author, Ingrid Fetell Lee, encourages everyone she can to intentionally look for joy every day. She adds life to this simple practice by calling it “Joyspotting.” In [an article of hers](#), she explains the impact it’s had on her:

“Whereas before I might not have looked twice at the orange traffic cones on the street, now I savored their pops of color against the gray sidewalk. Whereas before I might have ignored the man sitting next to me on the subway, now I noticed his polka dotted socks and smiled. The world seemed to be teeming with tiny, joyful surprises. All I had to do is look for them.”

This way of engaging our days is echoed in Mary Oliver’s arresting poem, [Mindful](#), in which she writes,

*“Every day, I see or hear something
that more or less kills me with delight,
that leaves me like a needle
in the haystack of light.
It was what I was born for –
to look, to listen,
to lose myself inside this soft world –
to instruct myself over and over in joy and acclamation.”*

So let’s try to do a bit of joyspotting of our own this month. And to make it more intentional, let’s add some picture taking to our efforts. Here are your instructions:

Capture at least one image of joy every day for a week!

If you don’t have a phone with a camera, you could instead keep a notebook (a “joy journal”) with you and write down what the image is, describing it in enough detail that it will pull you back to the joy you experienced when you read it later.

Whatever mechanism you use, your goal is to “capture” a handful or two of things that, as Oliver says, “kills you with delight.”

When the week is over, take some time to reflect on the images you’ve captured. Is there a common thread? What do the images say about your experience of delight? Is color key? Surprise? Silliness? Beauty? People? Nature?

And after reflecting, **consider taking it further** by doing something creative with your images and insights. For instance, turn your pictures into a slideshow with music behind it. Or maybe do a final entry in your notebook/“joy journal” that sums up your insights. Or maybe write a thank letter or love letter to your images/experiences of joy. Some may want to create a collage. Others may want to print out a picture or two and frame them for a wall in your home.

Come to your group ready to “show your work” and share how noticing joy changed your days.

p.s. Here’s another great poem to guide you on your way: Welcome Morning, by Anne Sexton:
<http://mondaypoem.blogspot.com/2013/06/welcome-morning-by-anne-sexton.html>

Option C

Joyify Your Home

This exercise invites you to bring joy inside. Especially during Covid time, it's important to take stock of our homes. We work hard to make sure they are clean, organized and comfortable. But rarely do we think about making them "joy-filled." Check out these two resources and let them inspire you:

- 10 Ways to Make Your Home Feel More Joyful
<https://www.houzz.com/magazine/10-ways-to-make-your-home-feel-more-joyful-stsetivw-vs~108690393>
- 13 Tiny Changes That Will Make Your Home Instantly Happier
<https://www.rd.com/list/be-happier-at-home/>

Option D

Identify Your "Heavy Joy"

Complex instructions are not needed for this one. Just watch this video and allow it to help you get in touch with the "heavy joy" you've encountered or been carrying for the last difficult year and a half:

My Joy is Heavy! by The Bengsons
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMTBaFm5ibc>

Extra mile idea: Consider creating something in response to your reflection. The Bengsons captured their heavy joy in song and video. That may be above your skill level, but all of us can write a poem, make a painting or do a collage.

Option E

Explore the Joy in Resistance

Writer and activist, adrienne maree brown, reminds us that "Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom." As many of us work to dismantle and heal from the racism around us, this vision that joy is and can be an act of resistance is indispensable. So spend some time this month learning from or being held by some of those clarifying and lifting up this vision:

- Joy Is The Justice We Give Ourselves, J. Drew Lanham
<https://emergencemagazine.org/poem/joy-is-the-justice-we-give-ourselves/>
- Joy As Resistance, and joy that my dignity demands, Austin Channing Brown
<https://austinchanning.substack.com/p/joy-as-resistance>
- Pleasure Activism, interview with adrienne maree brown
<https://repeller.com/what-is-pleasure-activism/>

Option F

Which Quote is Yours?

In the Companion Pieces section below, there are many quotes about the practice of opening to joy. Engaging these quotes and finding *the one* that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, as your spiritual exercise this month, reflect on those quotes until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of opening to joy. After you've found it, consider writing it out on a small piece of paper and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Who helps you see the joy in front of you?
2. What were you first taught about "deserving joy"?
3. How has joy surprised you during Covid?
4. How has your definition of joy changed as you've grown older?
5. Did you grow up in a "happy family"?
6. Are you mostly a creator of joy, receiver of joy, notice-er of joy or spreader of joy?
7. Is it time to choose joy?
8. What needs removed from your life in order for joy to expand, or return?
9. Are you too responsible to let joy in?
10. Have you mistaken pleasure for joy?
11. When was the last time you did something "useless"? Might joy be waiting for you there?
12. When was the last time you told your partner that they delight you?
13. What if joy comes from joining our sorrows?
14. What work do you need to do in advance so you can enjoy your relatives when you see them this holiday season?
15. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the spiritual practice of opening to joy.

Word Roots & Definitions

The Hebrew root for "joy," *ranan*, means "to shout, to cry out" and to "overcome." It's a reminder of the often-overlooked connection between joy and resistance.

Enjoy: Its etymology is to GIVE or MAKE joy. In Old French *enjoir* is "to give joy" from *en-* "make" + *joie* "enjoy." This is a creative challenge to our usual understanding of joy as something [we receive not create](#).

Wise Words

Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.

[Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

We're a nation hungry for more joy: Because we're starving from a lack of gratitude.

[Brené Brown](#)

We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have.

[Frederick Keonig](#)

The high value put upon every minute of time, the idea of hurry-hurry as the most important objective of living, is unquestionably the most dangerous enemy of joy... I would simply like to reclaim an old and, alas, quite unfashionable private formula: Moderate enjoyment is double enjoyment.

[Hermann Hesse](#)

Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments – often ordinary moments. Sometimes we miss out on the bursts of joy because we're too busy chasing down extraordinary moments. Other times we're so afraid of the dark that we don't dare let ourselves enjoy the light.

[Brené Brown](#)

I dreamed a few years back that I was in a supermarket checking out when I had the stark and luminous and devastating realization—in that clear way, not that oh yeah way—that my life would end. I wept in line watching people go by with their carts, watching the cashier move items over the scanner, feeling such an absolute love for this life. And the mundane fact of buying groceries with other people whom I do not know, like all the banalities, would be no more so soon.

[Ross Gay](#)

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

[Jack Gilbert](#), from [A Brief for the Defense](#)

The existence of broccoli does not, in any way, affect the taste of chocolate.

John Green

Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow. It only saps today of its joy.

Leo Buscalgia

I always just thought if you see somebody without a smile, give 'em yours!

Dolly Parton

Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.

Thich Nhat Hanh

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

[Kahlil Gibran](#)

The following quote came to me “Find a place inside where there’s joy, and the joy will burn out the pain.” (Joseph Campbell). I don’t know whether this will resonate with you at all, but there’s something about that invitation, to constantly come back to the place inside us which can (and does) feel the tender (and sometimes exuberant!) pulse of joy – and recognition of a far vaster picture – that feels very compelling to me.

[Sairse Mcclory](#)

Ultimately, love for the self is the deepest pleasure we deny ourselves. I work daily to be courageous enough to indulge in the purest pleasure of self-love.

[adrienne maree brown](#)

Pleasure reminds us to enjoy being alive and on purpose... Pleasure—embodied, connected pleasure—is one of the ways we know when we are free. That we are always free. That we always have the power to co-create the world. Pleasure helps us move through the times that are unfair, through

grief and loneliness, through the terror of genocide, or days when the demands are just overwhelming. Pleasure heals the places where our hearts and spirit get wounded. Pleasure reminds us that even in the dark, we are alive. Pleasure is a medicine for the suffering that is absolutely promised in life... Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom.

[adrienne maree brown](#)

Joy Is The Justice We Give Ourselves

J. Drew Lanham

Full piece at

<https://emergencemagazine.org/poem/joy-is-the-justice-we-give-ourselves/>

Joy is the justice,
we give ourselves.
It is Maya’s caged bird
sung free past the prison bars
holding spirits bound—
without due process
without just cause...

I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.

Rabindranath Tagore

What if we joined our sorrows, I’m saying. I’m saying: What if that is joy?

[Ross Gay](#)

Music

Two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. They are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlists as musical meditations.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Opening to Joy](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Opening to Joy](#)

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

My Joy is Heavy! by The Bengsons

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMTBaFm5ibc>

Every minute of this is worth it! Not to be missed!

Tending Joy and Practicing Delight, OnBeing podcast interview with Ross Gay

<https://onbeing.org/programs/ross-gay-tending-joy-and-practicing-delight>

Tomato On Board

Ross Gay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcLEwL4WQnc>

Where Joy Hides and How to Find It - TED Talk

https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid_fetell_lee_where_joy_hides_and_how_to_find_it?language=en#t-19711

On Finding Joy through Absurdity - TED presentation

https://www.ted.com/talks/charlie_todd_the_shared_experience_of_absurdity?referrer=playlist-how_to_notice_and_build_joy_into_your_life#t-528608

Enacting the vision:

- The Mute Button:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BZi1wN6Nbc>
- Reverse Times Square:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huJpdolLjH0>
- Where's Rob:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVAvF0IQgxY>
- The Magical Porta Potty:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jbgnJOpI2Q>

The Joy of Letters (for the fun of it)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjAI9NFeSRo>

Be More Dog (amen!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExnWRuniooY>

Articles

Joy Is Such a Human Madness

Ross Gay

<https://onbeing.org/blog/joy-is-such-a-human-madness/>

Joy As Resistance, and joy that my dignity demands

Austin Channing Brown

<https://austinchanning.substack.com/p/joy-as-resistance>

Broken Sestina Reaching For Black Joy, the Atlantic

Tiana Clark

Article [here](#)

Books

Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good, adrienne maree brown

"...draws from Black feminist luminaries to teach us how embracing what brings us joy is central in organizing against oppression... She also highlights the many ways that people of color, sex workers, disabled people and queer, trans and nonbinary people have been denied joy—and why we must center their pleasure as an organizing principle. "Feeling good is not frivolous," brown writes. "It is freedom."" - [review](#)

Related Essay: <https://fortelabs.co/blog/pleasure-as-an-organizing-principle/>

Movies

[Chocolat](#)

[Babette's Feast](#)

[Lover's Rock](#)

[Shadowlands](#)

[Shall We Dance?](#)

[After Life](#)

[Happy-Go-Lucky](#)

[Inside Out](#)

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).

Find support for bringing the
monthly themes home and into your family life with

Soulful Home: A Guide for Families:

<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/soulful-home.html>



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