

In the Absence of Fear

By Sheila Johnson

In retrospect, I am happy to report that in the midst of some of the most turbulent storms that life has presented to me, I have found more than my share of happy places. For instance, I find happiness in eating out at nice restaurants now and then; I find happiness in discovering a great shoe sale; I am happy spending time with my grandchildren; I am more than happy to teach math and science and Biblical accounts. But eventually the food is consumed, the shoes wear out, the grandchildren grow into contentiousness (every day spent with them is not euphoric), and students cannot retain 100 percent of what they have been taught. Happy is a temporary state of mind. Therefore, I've chosen to reserve "happy" for Mahogany, American, and Hallmark greeting card companies. They are happy with the revenue generated for special occasion well wishes. Our happiness is their responsibility and certainly their gain!

As a pastor, chaplain, and teacher, people often ask me to explain the difference between "happy" and "joy". I will usually respond with, "Everyone can put on a happy face, but we cannot fake joy—it comes from within. Believers in most faith traditions will admit that joy is found in knowing that their God or gods have their back—that no matter how deep or dark the transgression may be, forgiveness and grace will be granted by their higher power."

There is something eternal about joy. Joy is usually associated with words like peace, communion with others, safe havens, and the absence of fear. Yet joy, as opposed to happiness, carries a heavier burden, a deeper commitment, and a higher price. So should we all be seeking happiness or joy?

I have a story about joy. Layton, my grandson, was born with a genetic disorder that is identified by its abbreviated name as dup15q. On his DNA strand the fifteenth chromosome is duplicated. This duplication confuses chromosomes sixteen through twenty-three. The physiological and biological characteristics of this disorder present themselves differently in each person in the dup15q spectrum. In my experience with the children with dup15q in our local support group, I observed that they all smile and laugh a lot. Most are non-verbal, but they have created their own method of communication. Most will never be potty trained, they love to run free, they absolutely love water, they are not afraid of loud noises, barking dogs, lightening, or thunder. They are easily tickled and are immune to outside distractions. Imagine not having any fears, creating your own language, smiling and laughing all the time, running without boundaries, feeling safe in any storm, and having the ability to block out all distractions! Sounds like pure joy to me!

This may not sound like joy to most, and it is certainly challenging to parents, custodians, or caretakers, but these little ones are filled with joy! They don't know hate, racism, sadness, or fear. They may march to the beat of a different drum, but they never cease to march on for life. They may be non-verbal, but they sing their own melodies while creating their own words. Although they may never live independently, they will always be unaware of the burden they present. Should we be seeking happiness or joy?