

WHAT IS JOY?

©Vicki Cohn Pollard

While on a vacation in Puerto Rico with my husband and my 14 year old son, I was brutally cut and robbed. Two men accosted me, grabbed my purse, and slashed my right arm. It was a horrific event, leaving me vulnerable and traumatized. With over 100 stitches in my arm, it was questionable whether I would ever practice acupuncture again. I was devastated.

About a month later, I attended an acupuncture seminar. My colleagues were concerned and interested in helping me heal. One good friend, Gary Dolowich, asked if I would like to throw the I Ching to see if it could shed some light on my experience. To my utter astonishment, I got what seemed the most improbable of hexagrams in my situation -- # 58, "The Joyous." This hexagram is composed of the doubling of the trigram of "The Joyous." Clear, straightforward, it totally emphasized joy. I was baffled, at a loss to interpret how its message applied to me. Now, eight years later, I am beginning to unravel the mystery.

JOY IS EXPANSIVE, THE FULLEST OUTWARD EXPRESSION OF OURSELVES

Joy, one of the 5 emotions associated with the Five Elements, reflects the energy of Fire -- an outward, expansive energy, the most Yang of all the energies. During the winter, the season of the Water Element, the seed lies quietly in the ground. Little outward activity. A hibernation into pure essence. Then comes spring and the Wood Element. In a great thrust of growth, the seed bursts through the soil and propels itself upward, establishing vital existence. Once the seed has sprouted and grown, it blossoms and flowers. In flowering, the plant fully inhabits its potentiality, its "being." It becomes who it is meant to be. This blossoming is the energy of summer and the Fire Element. This is the energy of joy.

Joy is about radiance and movement. It shines from the eyes. It moves up and out through the whole body, exuding from every pore. Joy comes from a place deep within. It is about a vitality that is alive, moving in the body. It is the flower blooming, It is the apple appleing. Each of us being fully who and what we are -- that is joy. The opposite of the cold, still, inwardness of winter, joy is like the summer warmth that encourages everything to open fully.

The tiny word “joy” holds huge feeling. Since a range of feeling falls into the category of joy, we speak of contentment, happiness, even peace. But I rarely hear people say they are joyous. Even less frequently used are the larger words about joy such as rapture” and “bliss.” It seems to be socially unacceptable to speak about or to show such a strong feeling.

When I reflect on how we express joy, two images come to mind. One is of my daughter who, for quite a long time in her childhood, had the wonderful habit of spreading her arms wide and moving around like a little fairy when she felt joy. It was such a delightful showing of her exuberance for life that her joy easily spread to those who were around her. Adults find this openness about joy acceptable in children, but such actions would tend to be seen as slightly daft if displayed by an older person.

The other image I have involves music. During a celebration of Beethoven’s birthday, I participated in a community performance of the magnificent fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony, the “Ode to Joy.” As the music swelled to the dramatic notes that begin the chorale, joy was palpable in the room ; we could feel it expanding in us, almost bursting. This music, perhaps more than any other, epitomizes joy -- and it gives listeners a place to expand into this feeling.

JOY IS BEING OURSELVES

Where else do we come to joy? We feel joy when we are congruent with ourselves, when we are being on the outside exactly who we are on the inside. A patient expressed this to me in her last treatment. This woman, Alice, has grown a great deal in her struggles to just be herself. She reported, “ I’m doing great. It’s not the great I would have thought. I have a lot of challenges, but I’m dealing with it all. I’m growing faster than I can keep up with. It’s not all wonderful stuff, but I can handle things that used to baffle me. There is a joy that comes from just loving myself no matter what’s going on, from having faith that I’m ok no matter what.” In becoming and being herself, Alice is finding joy.

I recently spent time with a Tibetan Lama who was creating a sand mandala in Portland, Maine. He was doing this not as a private religious rite, but as a healing event for a general population. People were invited to watch as he composed the mandala and then to speak with him in his resting periods. This man effused joy. He was grounded, yet he had a lightness about him . He laughed often, with such lovely mirth.

After five days of working on the mandala, he was close to completing it. A large crowd had gathered to see the ending. Suddenly he looked up. Smiling, he announced that he had made a mistake. With both composure and enthusiasm, he carefully swept off the offending area and effortlessly reconstructed it. When he stopped working and was available for questions, I asked him (knowing that life is so full of mistakes for most of us) what that event taught him about mistakes, . He burst into a gale of laughter and announced that it taught him he was a human. He laughed and laughed. And I laughed. So did everyone else. We shared a moment of joy as we accepted our human condition.

JOY IS WHEN WE ARE IN HARMONY WITH OUR BODIES

Although people often strive to be in harmony with themselves, to allow themselves to fully be who they are truly meant to be, frequently it is difficult to know we're there. It is easy to lose touch with the inner voice that knows, or to be beset by voices that don't know. The best way I am able to know the kind of harmony that brings joy is through my body.

There is a wonderful poem, "Wild Geese," by Mary Oliver which begins with these lines:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love
what it loves.

I recently learned something about being in harmony with the "soft animal of my body" -- another example of how joy arises when we are congruent with ourselves.

A man in the town I live in on the coast of Maine has brought the music of the Caribbean to this northern climate. He has been teaching steel drum music to small children, high school children, and adults for five years. The music has caught hold. The area resounds with the music of steel drums. Three of these bands put on a concert a few weeks ago. The high-spirited performers and their music thrilled the audience. After several numbers, everyone in the auditorium was invited to get up and dance in the aisles and in front of the stage. At first only two people moved; gradually a few others joined in.

I very badly wanted to dance. My body had been vibrating since the first notes. A strong voice in my head objected harshly. “You’re a professional in this town. Everybody will be staring at you.” I asked my husband if he would go with me. His negative response resonated with the voice in my head, assuring me that I was BAD to want to go dance in such a public place. Finally, mercifully, the body overrode my overactive censor. I found myself crawling over the people in the seats near me, moving myself out to where my body wanted to go.

Then there was joy. I turned toward the musicians, allowing myself to forget the audience, merging into a circle of dancers and music. And I danced. I was a flower blooming. I was a dancer dancing. I was being fully me. I was letting the soft animal of my body loves what it loves.

JOY IN BALANCE

Joy is one of the five emotions associated with the Five Elements. The other emotions include fear, anger, sympathy, and grief. We achieve balance (good health) by continually moving around the cycle of the elements. If we get stuck in any one place, imbalance results. According to this philosophy, when balanced, we would inhabit each of these emotions about one fifth of the time, moving around our energetic/emotional cycle just as nature moves from one energy to the next in its cycle of seasons.

Our culture leads us to think we should be experiencing joy almost all of the time, a kind of pseudo-joy. Happy, happy, happy. Happy as we wash our floors, as we brush our teeth. We Hollywoodize joy. Ironically, however, it seems to me that we are remarkably joyless as a culture. We expect too much joy and, at the same time, too little. Of all these 5 emotions, the one most difficult for most of us to experience comfortably is joy. Why is this so?

JOY INVOLVES TRUST AND BEING IN THE PRESENT

The emotion of joy dwells in the Fire energy, which also holds our Heart function. This energy has to do with opening our hearts, with trust, with intimacy, with opening our innermost selves to another, . People who have been deeply hurt, whose hearts have been broken, quickly learn to protect themselves. They become armored and hyper vigilant. Joy feels like a scary and dangerous place to go, a place of no protection. This place which is meant to welcome life, becomes a territory full of risks.

Last spring I attended a meditation retreat in which participants focused on experiencing four different aspects of opening the heart. We began with loving-kindness, then moved to compassion. I had moving and powerful experiences. I watched myself go in and out of these states and generally felt myself more and more open. Then we were asked to experience a third state, an aspect of joy. As I attempted to open to joy, I hit an inner wall. Instead of feeling joy, I found myself crying. I was tense, nervous, distracted. I didn't know why -- I had no words or connections to help me understand myself.

Finally after a particularly painful meditation period, I fled the place. I dashed out into the privacy and solace of the huge woods surrounding the retreat center. I walked and walked, trying to comfort the unknown and nameless pain I was in. Mirroring my emotional floundering and pain, I wandered off the beaten path and got very lost. Suddenly realizing how lost I was, I was forced to put all my attention on finding my way back. By the time I found a road -- so far from the meditation center that I had to ask my way -- the sun was starting to set. My legs were sore; the woods were not easy to walk in. But I had moved into a place of joy.

In the safety of the retreat, when I was invited to open myself deeply to joy, I came face to face with my own armoring. I filled myself with unspecified fears, with self--chastising thoughts and fantasies. I saw how frightened I was of allowing myself truly to feel joy.

When I was lost in the woods, I had to move out of my head, out of worrying about the past or being scared about the future, and come into the present. I had to pay very close attention to exactly where I was. Right now, this moment. I had to be in my body.

I also had to move towards trust. Trust in myself, that I could actually find my way out of the woods, and trust in the benevolence of the universe. Being in the present and accepting that everything was really just fine, I brought safety to myself. Just as nature moves through cycles, so did I. Having felt my pain, now I was able to feel my joy. When I returned to the meditation center, my heart was more open. I wasn't so frightened of feeling deep joy. The wall was down, and I could move on.

ORDINARY JOY

Practitioners question patients to learn more about how the Fire energy is moving in them, for example, "What do you do for fun?" So often people are baffled by this question and can't come up with answers.

While preparing this article, I asked several folks what gives them joy. Some people told me joy is about childhood, about playfulness and innocence, implying that adults would be fools to indulge in joy. Others talked about the joy of momentous occasions, such as falling in love or having a baby. Not many people talked about “ordinary” joys, the joy that remain hidden in daily life unless we know how to find them.

The poet, Rumi, speaks about this daily joy in his poem, “The Ground.”

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and scared.
Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down the dulcimer.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Joy is a large emotion, yet we can experience it in small ways. Taking the time to look deeply at a flower, realizing that all of life is reflected here, can bring waves of this upward and outward-moving energy .

JOY IS IMPERMANENT -- AND RECURRING

Expanding into joy -- it's something few people do on a regular basis. One reason we haven't cultivated the “habit of joy is that by the time we are grownups, we know that what goes up also comes down. So we begin to protect ourselves (often unconsciously) from going up at all, for we know all too well what must follow. Some people even experience the descent from joy as punishment.

There is, however, another way to view the constant movement of the energies. Change is inevitable. Everything is impermanent. If instead of resisting change, we rest in the view that after rain comes sun, that after sorrow comes joy, then we can more easily surrender to our inner process. In my years of practicing acupuncture, I do keep seeing the cycles at work in nature and in people's lives. In myself I have the experience that the more I am able to feel and accept my pain, the more I am able to discover and expand into my joy -- which is exactly what happened to me on my retreat.

So what have I learned from the time of being slashed and then being given the gift of “The Joyous” in the *I Ching*? I have been pushed to know more about both my pain and my joy, and about my fears and resistances to experiencing them. As I've become more conscious in my life, I've come face to face with how I keep myself from expanding into joy. I've learned

that when I accept the changing cycles of my life, then I can be fully in my joy, just as I must be, at times, in my pain.

About “The Joyous,” the Wilhelm/Baynes edition of the *I Ching* says :
“True joy rests on firmness and strength within, manifesting itself outwardly as yielding and gentle.... The joyous mood is infectious and therefore brings success. But joy must be based on steadfastness if it is not to degenerate into uncontrolled mirth. Truth and strength must dwell in the heart, while gentleness reveals itself in social intercourse.”

It takes firmness and strength within to open the heart to joy, courage to accept the insecurity of life. This energy, which is so Yang, so expansive, must be grounded in steadfastness. When we experience the energies of each of the Five Elements, when we let ourselves do our harvesting with Earth, let go with Metal, go inward with Water, grow with Wood, then it is natural to expand into joy.

OPENING OURSELVES TO JOY

I want more joy in my life -- an abundance of joy. I want to open to the innocence of adulthood, to feel the buoyant uplift of my heart opening. I want to pay attention, to notice when joy goes skipping past my window. And I want more joy in your life. I want your heart to open and be willing to sing.

The joyous mood is infectious and therefore brings success. May we all open our hearts to joy.