

Feeling Joy in Difficult Times

By Joyce Vissell

Experiencing joy in life is essential to our health and well being. Joy is as important as eating, sleeping and exercise. Joy can open our hearts to our love and spirituality, giving us a valuable perspective on a troubling situation. Joy is essential to relationships. It is easy to experience joy when everything is going well. But it is even more important in the difficult times.

I knew this past Christmas would be a harder time for me. This was the first Christmas in my life that I would not be with my mother, who passed from this world four months before. Following advice from Hospice, I let go of certain tasks and events that would add extra stress. I planned a 'stress-free' Christmas with just our immediate family of five. We were all looking forward to our son coming home from his first year of college. For the first time ever, our three children would cook Christmas dinner for us while we relaxed. The presents were all bought months before. This looked like it could be a simple, joyful time with my family. We were going to honor my mom by each lighting a candle and saying what we most treasured about Grandma.

We can plan and plan our lives into neat packages, and then life seems to throw us a curve. The curve came in the form of a tragic accident on December 15th. I have a very dear friend of 33 years, Nancy Grace, who also was the musician for all of my women's retreat for the past 28 years, and many of our couple's retreats. She was hit by a speeding car while out walking her dog. She was airlifted to a major trauma center in San Jose, and even now, one and a half months later, she is semi-comatose and we don't know the extent of her brain injuries.

Of course I prayed like never before for her healing. But in between my times of prayer, I felt so sad. What would life possibly be like without Nancy? I was already facing a Christmas without my beloved mother and now this. After several days of being in a very sad place, I had to have a talk with myself. Nancy was such a joyous and grateful person, she was able to find joy in even the smallest ways. She loved to laugh with reckless abandon, even to the point of snorting, and even in her sorrows she was able to find something to be joyful about. I realized I must honor her by also finding joy.

Gratitude is often a doorway into a joyful feeling. I began to look for ways to be grateful in every part of my life. As I practiced gratitude every day, I also began to feel joy once again, which led to a deeper connection with Nancy spiritually. Before, I was praying from a desperate place. Now with the essential ingredient of joy back in my life, I was praying from a much deeper place of trust. Everyday there are still many sad moments around my friend's accident, but having the discipline to look for joyful moments also gave strength to my life. It is sad to see my dear friend in such an extreme

medical condition, but I try to bring as much joy to these hospital visits as possible. She cannot speak yet, but her one open eye sparkles at some of the joyful memories. Joy is a good medicine.

I remember that even when I was caring for my dying mother this past year, it was so important to feel joy. Without that ingredient, her care seemed like a burden at times. Rather than focusing on her steady decline, helpless condition, and all that must be done to care for her, I tried to focus on my gratitude and joy to have such a wonderful mother. Toward the very end I was able to find joy in knowing that she was excited to go to her new heaven home. I still cried and had all the natural human emotions when a loved one dies, but I also had joy and gratitude.

Sometimes Barry and I face difficult challenges in our work or personal lives. We find that if we talk about it too much, it can actually seem worse than it is; we feel down and we walk around dragging our feet. We have learned that when this happens we need to take a 'joy walk.' While we are walking our dogs in the fields and woods around our property, we agree to talk only about that which brings us joy. At first it can be rather silent between us, because our minds are still busy thinking about the challenge or particular sadness. But then one of us starts mentioning something that brings us joy and soon the conversation is flowing with wonderful parts of our lives. The last ten minutes of the walk we usually revisit the challenge. We find that the time away in a joyful space has brought fresh new perspective and understanding. What once had seemed overwhelming to us, now seems solvable.

Few of us can imagine not eating, drinking or sleeping. Well, joy needs to be part of that essential life survival kit. Experiencing joy brings us closer to our spirituality, the essential part of who we are. Joy needs to be part of even the most difficult situations in life. Allowing our hearts to feel joy and gratitude brings forth the spiritual power within us, and allows us to be more effective in the difficult times that we all face.

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