**Intentional Joy**

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Good morning! We are going to begin this reflection with an exercise called "shake out into stillness." Shake out into Stillness, and a second exercise called “laughing yoga,” provide wonderful opportunities for us to become more aware of what stillness and quiet are like.

Before we start, let’s practice laughing yoga for just a minute. Laughing yoga is new to me – it’s based on the premise that intentional voluntary laughter provides the same benefits as spontaneous laughter.  So let’s practice by clapping our hands together - HA-HA-HA, and then HO-HO. If you are feeling especially daring you can clap hands with your neighbor on the HO-HO, but that’s up to you.

Ready?

We begin by shaking out one hand. Just imagine that you are shaking water off your fingertips. And now you can begin to invite the movement up into the elbow and then into the shoulder. It might feel a little different – most of us don’t normally move this way.

Turn your attention to your breath – are you still breathing? This would be a great time to deepen your breath.

Now, keep the first hand going, and invite your second hand to participate - shaking out the opposite hand and then up into the elbow and up into this shoulder. This is a good time to remember that we are all friends in this room, since right about now some of us might feel that we look a bit silly. You can close your eyes if you want to. Maybe if you close your eyes no one will see you.

Now, with your eyes closed, knowing that no one can see you, be a little more energetic – let your hands flit and fly like moths around a candle flame—remember to keep breathing. Shake it out a little bit more. And now for a few seconds, let it all go. Anything you're holding on to, shake it out. Shake it out. Shake it out.

And now open your eyes as we transition into laughing yoga together. Ready?

Clap your hands together – HA-HA-HA and then HO-HO

Let’s close by bringing our hands in front of us so that they are about equal to our faces. Close your eyes again. Bring your attention into your palms, into your thumbs, into your fingers. Notice if there's any tingling, any pulse, any sensation. Focus on feeling the space between the fingers. What does that feel like? Watch your breath as it finds its way back to balance.

Now, let your hands begin an ultra-slow motion of descent down toward your lap. Let your hands float down to your lap, like a feather, like a sunset, like a mist, like leaves falling. Let them rest upon your lap as you transition to stillness. In this way, we can give thanks to movement, for helping us to understand the nature of stillness, just as stillness helps us understand the nature of movement.

**Psalm 46**[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2046&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14616a)]

**1**God is our refuge and strength,  
    an ever-present help in trouble.  
**2**Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
    and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,  
**3**though its waters roar and foam  
    and the mountains quake with their surging.[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2046&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14618c)]

**4**There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
    the holy place where the Most High dwells.  
**5**God is within her, she will not fall;  
    God will help her at break of day.  
**6**Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
    God lifts God’s voice, the earth melts.

**7**The Lord Almighty is with us;  
    the God of Jacob is our fortress.

**8**Come and see what the Lord has done,  
    the desolations God has brought on the earth.  
**9**God makes wars cease  
    to the ends of the earth.  
God breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
    God burns the shields[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2046&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14624d)] with fire.  
**10**God says, “Be still, and know that I am God;  
    I will be exalted among the nations,  
    I will be exalted in the earth.”

**11**The Lord Almighty is with us;  
    the God of Jacob is our strength.

This morning I am bringing you a reflection on intentional joy. This came about for the simple reason that I am not a person who feels spontaneous joy. In fact, I am not convinced that I feel many emotions at all. When I first learned this about myself, I began to consciously spend more time around people who I thought were good at feeling – and expressing – emotions such as joy, so I could learn from them and so I could enjoy their joy.

I’ve also spent a lot of time in inner work so I could peel back self-protective layers of anger and fear, feeling confident that this would break open into a field of joy. Instead, what I found was an ocean of grief. Grief about what is, what isn’t, what could have been, what should have been, what will be, what will not be …. and on and on.

Meditation practices have helped me swim through this ocean. Through meditation I have developed an intentional gratitude practice. In that practice ask my anger, fear and grief what lessons they have to teach me. I thank them for their service and listen to their stories.

This is a how I have been learning to work with my own shadow – I invite these parts to come out into the light so we can talk things over, and I can express gratitude for what these aspects of myself – often defense mechanisms – have done to keep me safe. I can say thank you, friend, as I break down the barriers between the me that I want to be seen and known and the me that I tend to keep out of site, as best I can. And as I engage in this personal work, I can tell you that I have had glimmerings of understanding about what joy must feel like.

Joy is like the wriggling of a little puppy on your lap, trying desperately to lick your face.

Joy smells like cinnamon rolls right out of the oven and tastes like hot cocoa (especially when you are singing carols in front of the Festival Center, even when it’s cold).

Joy is when I cook breakfast with my grandson Jerimiah while he is chattering on about all the things that are important in his 14-year-old life.

Joy is listening to a cat purr herself to sleep in the sunshine.

Joy is watching my son Benjamin serenade his wife Adryen loudly in public.

Joy is when someone says thank you and you know they really mean it.

This Advent seems especially hard to feel spontaneous joy for a lot of people, I suspect, given everything that’s going on in the world right now. It’s just overwhelming and, for many of us, triggers our instinctive survival strategies of collapsing, shrinking, shutting down, holding back and closing ourselves off. From my own experience, I can say that what I need to do to address this instinctive response, is to welcome this feeling of overwhelm to our Advent celebrations, to listen to its stories and learn from its truths. This is how darkness becomes light.

This is what I think Rev. Kaely McEvoy was saying in the article Julia recently circulated on the listserve entitled “This Year I Am Lighting a New Advent Candle.” This new candle is the candle of grief.

People often confuse grief as the opposite of love, but they are companions and co-conspirators. Grief stands alone as a unique human experience that comes alongside the more pleasant feelings of hope, peace, joy, and love. But grief is guaranteed. If you love anything, as Jesus loved, you will experience grief.”

That feels real to me right not, not just because of my own personal struggles, but also because of the heart-breaking social circumstances that surround us in our city, our country, our world. I’m with Rev. McEvoy: we need to bring grief out of the shadows and welcome grief to the Advent table, not only to make space to hear its important truths, but also to be *changed* by those truths. This is one aspect of the metanoia process that Susie wrote about in her reflection of the scriptures for the 2nd Sunday in Advent. Welcoming grief to the table helps us move from an old life to a new life, turning around and going in the opposite direction, if that’s what’s needed.

In her book *Dare to Lead*, Brene Brown writes that joy is the most vulnerable of emotions, and she shares a reflection from C.S. Lewis that I think is relevant. CS Lewis says:

’To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.’ To love is to be vulnerable. (page 22).

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

Through the birth the Christ Child, God revealed God’s own willingness to be vulnerable and open, and to risk heart-break, for the chance of loving relationship with us, and all of creation.

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

It all sounds so breathtaking to me, especially knowing that God knew all that would transpire, knowing that God’s understanding of the intimate intertwining of movement and stillness, of life and death, of joy and grief is so much more profound than mine. Even so, God reached out to us – to me -- in joy and in love.

In my own search for joy, I have taken on the practice of gratitude, which I have begun to think of “intentional joy”, similar to the intentional laughter that we just practiced a few minutes ago. Embodying and practicing gratitude changes everything. By practicing gratitude, I feel safe enough to be honest with myself about the complexity of the world and my own experiences, while remaining open, vulnerable and ready for relationship with both the Divine and creation. Gratitude, the practice of intentional joy, is a life-giving discipline that allows me to celebrate the beauty of God’s promises while mourning the sorrows and afflictions of this weary world we live in. And most importantly, practicing gratitude connects me to the Divine, and gives me the strength to engage in that transformative work, to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to comfort those who mourn.

Isaiah 61:1-4

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
    because the Lord has anointed me  
    to proclaim good news to the poor.  
The Lord has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
    to proclaim freedom for the captives  
    and release from darkness for the prisoners,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2061%3A1-4%2CIsaiah%2061%3A8-11&version=NIV#fen-NIV-18845a)]  
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor  
    and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
3     and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
    instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
    instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
    instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
    a planting of the Lord  
    for the display of the Lord’s splendor.

4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
    and restore the places long devastated;  
they will renew the ruined cities  
    that have been devastated for generations.

Let us align ourselves with God’s purpose today and forever. Let us joyfully and intentionally live as an expression of gratitude for all that God is and has done as the Divine Creator of this magnificent universe.

And now, I invite us all to end this reflection with individual expressions of gratitude – intentional joy – which Emily can help us to transition into community prayers. I’ll begin ….

I am so grateful for this community and for how you all have accompanied me all these years as I seek out a closer relationship with God and I try to become a better expression of God’s joy in the world.