

Over a decade ago, I got involved with an organization called Radical Joy for Hard Times. RadJoy, as we call it, is dedicated to finding and making beauty in wounded places.

There a lot of wounded places in the world. Strip mines. Trashed vacant lots. Brownfields and abandoned factories. Falling down houses. Clear cut tracts of forest. Arroyos and riversides filled with the rusting carcasses of automobiles and appliances. Just to name a few. These are the kinds of used up and cast off places we forsake because they remind us of the true cost of our lifestyles. They are the orphaned children of our civilization.

The idea of RadJoy was that instead of turning our eyes away from these places because of their ugliness and damage, we'd go to these places and make beauty there. Sing, read poetry, drum, play guitar, create ceremonies, make art from what we find on the site. And in doing so, we would bring the wounded and deserted places back into the family, so to speak, and give them some recognition and respect as our children too. To come back into relationship with them instead of turning away. To remember the beauty that once was and see the beauty that can be again.

And begin to heal the wounds, in spirit if nothing else.

These days, the whole world seems wounded. The woods you played in as a child have been bulldozed to make way for a strip mall. The microplastic particles in our blood and lungs. The smoke in the air from forest fires. The loss of species that is nothing less than criminal. The night is no longer dark, and the silence of the ocean deeps has become a cacophony of engine noises.

And we are wounded too. We see the increasing numbers of the homeless begging on street corners. We feel the terror of school children as the gunman enters the classroom. Our social fabric is fraying, and the old order of things no longer meets the demands of the present. Our understanding of our shared humanity has been usurped by crude tribalism. There doesn't seem to be much middle ground, according to the news channels and social media. And in our woundedness, many of us either withdraw from the world, or lash out.

Although understandable, neither of those responses is helpful. But that's what feeling powerless does. It's easy to feel powerless when faced with problems and situations on such a scale. So I kind of understand why people lash out, but it just makes for more wounding.

In the face of danger, our limbic systems give us two choices, fight or flee. And if we can't do either, we freeze. For most of us, when we freeze, the energy that should go to fighting or getting away from danger turns inward and builds until it

either messes us up, or it turns on others. That's not really a healthy choice.

We can't control the world, but we can choose how to respond. It's not always easy to override the limbic system and make conscious choices about how we act, but that is a crucial life skill we all need.

Let's reframe the fight or flight thing as action vs avoidance. Avoidance may work when you are confronted by a tiger, but you can't really run away from the world. And you can't freeze, hoping that change won't find you, because it will. But we can act. There are a lot of ways to do that, even under adverse circumstances.

A lot of current thinking advises that we start any planning and action with gratitude. That seems to work... there's always something to be grateful for, even if that may be hard to see when your life is one of hardship and misery and pain and you are in the depths of despair.

What about starting from joy? The clinical definition of joy is a feeling of extreme gladness, delight, or exultation of the spirit arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction. I like the exultation of the spirit part, but the rest seems rather weak tea to me.

So I want to bring in another take on it from the work of Dr. Pamela King, who is a Presbyterian minister with a PhD in Psychology. She believes joy is a core human experience that is more than a feeling.

*“I have observed that many people have an enduring and underlying sense of something that is deeper than the emotion of happiness, and I have come to describe this as joy. In my study of joy, I have also noticed that joy is more complex than a feeling or an emotion. It is something one can practice, cultivate, or make a habit. Consequently, I suggest that joy is most fully understood as a virtue that involves our thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to what matters most in our lives. Thus, joy is an enduring, deep delight in what holds the most significance.*

*Joy is really complex! This work helped me realize how joy and sorrow are deeply connected. Both are a response to those things that matter most. Joy is our delight when we experience, celebrate, and anticipate the manifestation of those things we hold with the most significance—like a birth or graduation. Sorrow is our response to the violation, destruction, or deterioration of such sacred things. This perspective helps us understand why the loss of human life due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the devaluing of human life evident in structural racism leave many grieving and in such profound sorrow. However, this complexity also informs how we can experience joy and sorrow at the same time, how true joy that is tied to our potential to grow as an individual and relate and give to others, and how our*

*values can endure in the face of loss and suffering. The trick is to stay connected to those things that deeply matter in the face of adversity and loss.*

How do we pull off that trick?

Radical Joy is the deliberate fostering of - and elevation of - joy as connection to beauty and meaning. It is a spiritual act of resistance that cannot be taken away from us, because it comes from within. It is not dependent on external events.

I think of Norbert Capek, who held Flower Communion in Dachau using the flowers from weeds. I think of the Bird Man of Alcatraz. I think of prisoners of all kinds who sing songs and tell stories to keep their spirits up. I think of everyone who creates beauty, no matter how small in scale, to make their lives and the lives of those around them a little better.

Radical Joy is key to our self-care. It provides sanctuary and healing for the ongoing hard work that needs to be done. It is the purposeful practice of actively seeking and embodying joy and making beauty to create the room in our hearts that allows us to cope with burnout and despair.

Radical Joy provides space for our sorrow to coexist with that joy. So we may grieve for the clearcut trees, and still delight in the beauty of the new growth rising up. So we may feel deep anger at the overturning of Roe, and yet still notice and feel joy at the touch of the rain and the sun and the wind.

This is a power and ability we need to nurture. We need to identify when even tiny stirrings of joy are there and be just present with them. We need to seek out things that bring us joy, especially when our days are busy and we think we don't have the time. Whatever brings you joy, make it a priority. And embody that joy in the physical world. Create something out of trash. Take a walk with a friend, go to a play, make some music or art, whatever lights you up. Laugh at yourself when you can. Laughter reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. Too much seriousness is an impediment to joy.

Practice staying in the present moment with wonder and awe. The very fact that we are here, seeing and hearing and feeling the world, is a miracle. And the existence of everything around us is one too. It's an incredible gift that we take for granted. Exult in this miracle every chance you get.

Yeah, times are hard and strange and kind of ugly right now. Lots of change is in the air. But as the Buddha taught us, clinging to what was is a recipe for suffering. Everything rises, and everything falls away.

The journey never ends. It's how we travel that makes the difference. Let us travel with joy, radical joy, making beauty as we go.