A Consensus about Joy

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**Defining joy**

There seems to be a great difficulty in coming up with a good definition of joy. It is one of those “I know it when I feel it” feelings that are curiously hard to put into words. After scouring the internet for the paltry few articles about joy and feeling dissatisfied with what I found, I put the question of defining joy up to the participants in an Osher Lifetime Learning Class at the University of Fairbanks in Fairbanks, Alaska in October 2016.

Here is my take on their comments, representing about 3500 years of accumulated life experience and wisdom. I thank everyone in the class for their excellent insights and discussion on this topic, but take full responsibility for throwing my own spin onto the following exploration of the meaning and functions of joy.

**Starting points**

Here are some of the results of the discussion:

1. JOY is a reaction to something that happens, not something we create spontaneously.
2. Joy may be a hoped-for result but it is never a certainty – there is always risk, and it often comes unexpectedly
3. Joy is a highly pleasurable feeling of your personal situation coming into alignment or “rightness” with larger outside-of-you universal, cosmic, spiritual, natural or other powerful forces

OR

It is a feeling of these forces being revealed to you in a positive way that often involves a sense of perfection or ultimate “rightness” – “it doesn’t get any better than this.”

1. Joy evokes a whole-person reaction; it is body as well as mind
2. Joy is sometimes created when you have taken a great risk and either succeeded or avoided the extreme negative that was feared, but it is more than just a sense of success or relief – it is more a sense of larger outside forces acting to give a sense of their affirming your endeavors or of their protecting or forgiving you from harmful consequences.
3. Joy is overwhelming; it is one of those feelings that totally grips you when it happens, sometimes into feeling an almost altered state of consciousness. It is comprehensive and exclusionary, pushing everything else temporarily aside.
4. Joy often feels transformative and/or enlightening, and is life-affirming.
5. Joy is transitory, but creates strong memories that allow you to re-experience it to a substantial degree for a long time after. It lays down some of the most powerful memories we have.
6. We may also feel joy when our own sense of what is “right,” fair or just seems to be validated by these strong outside forces or the universe, as when a bitter enemy is defeated or a long-lasting wrong is finally made right.

**Taking the above thoughts further**

There are a couple of important questions to resolve regarding joy. One is whether it is a separate emotion or just a label we attach to the most extreme kind of happiness. Are joy and happiness inseparable? I’d like to address that later and tackle another question first. That question is: what is joy for?

In exploring the other emotions I’ve always found that they provided us with some useful purpose: they direct us to focus in on things, provide guidance or useful validation of our actions, empower us to take specific actions, or alert us that we need to make a conscious decision about something rather than just react automatically to it. What is the purpose served by feeling joy?

**Exploring joy**

I think it is important to recognize that joy seems to come about in two different but similar ways. The first is when outside events seem to allow us to feel a rightness and connection with a powerful outside reality. The outer “rightness” seems to accept and validate us as a part of itself, or as an honored witness to it.

Often these are the awe-inspiring moments that deal with vast creative or aesthetic forces: the birth of a child, a remarkable sunset, an ecstasy of music, the power and majesty in a storm, the moment when you find you have created something new and extraordinary. But they are also smaller things as well: the teenager being accepted into the group she wants to belong to, the star athlete who stops to give his autograph to you or otherwise singles you out, the publication that accepts your manuscript, the dog that jumps with love and anticipation at seeing you. These are also potential moments of joy, just far less cosmic.

The other way we experience joy also involves powerful outside forces connecting with us, but in these cases we are not so much invited to join in as we are acknowledged for already have earned the connection: the “rightness” already within us is being validated.

Most often this comes by our inner sense of rightness being powerfully confirmed by these strong outside forces after we had experienced uncertainty whether they would in fact do so. When a thing of questionable outcome comes out “as it should” we may well experience joy. Rather than saying to ourselves “This powerful thing is accepting me into its rightness” we say “Yes! These powerful forces are agreeing with me about what is right or the right outcome in this matter.”

Again, this may be regarding something universal, cosmic, spiritual, etc. or about something much smaller. I feel joy when the dictator who has long oppressed his people is finally overthrown; I feel joy when the team I support miraculously comes through to win the game. I feel joy when “fate” conspires to expose the cheat and the liar; I feel joy when my place of worship is spared from the wrath of a big storm.

**Joy is not always regarding good things**

Joy is about the relationship between yourself and external forces. As such it is NOT always the blissfully pure, moral, and positive state that we often ascribe to it. Simply put, I can easily experience joy about things that are morally bad or unhealthy to myself or others.

A jihadist killing innocent people can experience joy. Being invited into a powerful gang or criminal organization can bring joy. Seeing people you dislike cruelly punished by circumstances can bring joy. Getting vengeance can bring joy.

Joy is an emotion, and like all the emotions it can be appropriate or inappropriate, “good” or “bad,” helpful or unhelpful, and healthy or unhealthy.

**Joy and happiness**

Let’s return to other question we raised earlier – is joy simply a part of happiness, not something separate from it? Can I have joy but NOT have happiness?

I think we can. I think happiness is an emotion that has to do with us in our inner reality, whether that connects to an outer reality or not. Happiness is thus more under my control and less reliant on what outside forces do.

The true test here is whether I can experience joy and unhappiness together. I think I can. The Christian religion describes the crucifixion of Jesus as a profoundly joyful and profoundly unhappy/terrible event – simultaneously. Many other situations involving elements of sacrifice have combinations of joy and unhappiness. Sometimes the outside force or entity “proves me right” when something bad or unhappy happens; sometimes my being accepted by the outside force or entity acts to also exclude me from something else that makes me happy. Although joy and happiness often come together, they don’t always do so. Joy is not just a label for extreme moments of happiness.

**Does it always have to be a connection with powerful outside forces?**

A question meriting further exploration is whether joy always involves some sort of connection or validation by POWERFUL outside sources. Can we have joy by feeling that we have somehow “beaten the odds” or otherwise been favored by a possible but by no means certain connection/validation by ANY outside force/forceful entity regardless of how powerful it is? For example, when playing blackjack does turning up the ace that gives you a “blackjack” constitute a small moment of joy?

I believe that it does, that this also is joy. Thus our definition of JOY now becomes:

**JOY is the emotion we experience when we are doing something – taking a stand, making a choice, engaging in an action – and a force or entity outside of ourselves either includes us into its group, domain, or values OR we perceive the force or entity as acting in a way which validates our internal sense of what is just or right when we felt uncertain whether that validation would occur.**

Stated another way:

**The essential components of JOY are that:**

1. **we are an active participant, even if just an observer ( i.e., there is a personal quality to it);**
2. **it involves an entity or force outside of ourselves; and**
3. **there is an uncertain or unexpected outcome that resolves in our favor (to our benefit or in accord with our values) which results in a sense of inclusion and/or validation caused by the perceived action/decision of the outside force or entity.**

This feels a bit cumbersome, but I offer it as a good first draft – and a better definition that right now seems to be otherwise available. And my thanks again to everyone who provided the input that set the ball rolling towards this definition.

**Does this definition cover the joy of creativity and other such joys?**

What about the creative aspects side of joy? Sometimes we experience joy when something we create seems to take on a larger meaning or value than we expected – as if somehow we have unwittingly been able to tap into something larger (some larger connection), whether it is one that we might have hoped for but not been certain we could achieve, or one that we simply did not anticipate.

Does our definition of joy encompass this type of joy? I think it does – we are an active part of this, there is an outside force of some sort involved, the desired outcome is uncertain or unexpected, it turns out in our favor and we feel a validation of our choices and/or an inclusion in a larger outside entity.

Joy that sometimes comes with love or sex also seem to fit within this framework.

**Last thoughts for now**

The big challenge it seems to me is that of is recognizing and accepting the small joys as joy – the roll of the dice or turn of a card in a game, the lucky find of a pretty seashell when beachcombing, the radio playing a favorite song just at a moment when you were primed to hear it. We want to think of joy as transformative, spiritual, and big – and in so doing may inadvertently deprive ourselves of noticing and appreciating the small joys that are more common.

***Do you have thoughts about joy that this paper didn’t go into, didn’t explain well, or are “riffs on this theme”? I’d love to hear them. You can reach me at*** [***uncommon.alaska@gmail.com***](mailto:uncommon.alaska@gmail.com)***. Let’s give joy the attention it deserves.***

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