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Choosing Joy

Every day I ride my bike up Pacific Avenue to the Cathedral. At the crest of the ridge and for one block going down hill I have the chance to see the most beautiful view of the sky, the East Bay Hills, the bay, Yerba Buena Island and the Bay Bridge. What amazes me is that even during foggy August, when on the surface the days seem totally alike, that scene looks different each time and moves my heart in an entirely unique way.

So often though I miss the whole thing. In effect racing down and then trying to catapult myself up the next hill, I choose not to be joyful. That is partly why I feel so inspired by Darren's theme for the week. "How do you choose joy?"

When I was studying religion at Harvard University I had a teacher named Annemarie Schimmel. I've talked about her here before. She had a thick German accent and lectured with her eyes closed. She was a world expert on the Sufi mystical poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273).

Rumi lived in Anatolia Turkey in a community where he was friends with Muslims, Christians and Jews. Across eight centuries and massive cultural and technological change we still recognize the way he constantly chose joy.

What I love about Rumi is his openness to every source of religious wisdom and his sense of playfulness. He feels a shocking closeness and intimacy to God who he calls "the Beloved." God does crazy things to get our attention and to be with us.

God exists beyond our judgments. Rumi writes, "Beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, / there is a field. I'll meet you there. / When the soul lies down in that grass, / the world is too full to talk about. / Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' / doesn't make sense any more."¹

Rumi writes about "aching" for joy, for the Beloved. We are like people going from room to room looking for a beautiful diamond necklace without realizing that it is hanging around our own neck. He writes, "In truth everything and everyone / Is a shadow of the Beloved, / And our seeking is His seeking / And our words are His words... / We search for Him here and there, / while looking right at Him. / Sitting by His side, we ask: / 'O Beloved, where is the Beloved?'"

Rumi's vivid, crazy, inspired experience of joy is an essential part of my spiritual life. It has led me to some unexpected places. After a long day of interviews, and a celebratory dinner the search committee from Grace Cathedral asked me if I had any questions.

I said, "Is Grace Cathedral a joyful place?" From the look on everyone's faces and a protracted silence I could see that I had asked an embarrassing question. Finally, one of them said, "We're not joyful yet but we want to be."

Every time I practice yoga here you'll smile or you won't, you'll just be yourself and I see the image of the divine in you. Some of us are professional dancers with perfect balance and sculpted bodies, others have incredible expertise from years of yoga practice, still others of us are completely new to yoga or older with more broken bodies – but there is something incredibly beautiful about what we do together.

Quite simply you are making Grace Cathedral more joyful. Thank you for choosing joy.

Darren's Theme: Choosing Joy

From joy springs all creation.
By Joy it is sustained.
Toward Joy it proceeds
And To Joy it must return.
—Mundaka Upanishad

Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow.
—Rumi

¹ Coleman Banks, *The Essential Rumi* (HarperSF: San Francisco, 1995) 36.