

# When Heaven a

MARCUS BORG

**J**OY and Christmas went together when I was a child. "Joy to the world," we sang, "the Lord is come!" From Luke's Christmas story we heard the news: "Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."

What is joy? It is an interesting question to ask of people in a small-group setting where they have a chance to think and talk about it. Most often, they distinguish it from pleasure and happiness. Pleasure (as C. S. Lewis remarked) is often in our power; joy never is. We know what activities commonly give us pleasure, and can count on them to do so, unless we are too tired or preoccupied. Happiness covers a broad spectrum, from a fairly steady state of general contentment with one's life to special moments of delight and feeling good. But joy seems different.

In my own life, there are two kinds of experiences for which I would use the word "joy." The first kind is ecstatic experiences, like those described by William James as mystical experiences, or by Abraham Maslow as peak experiences. In my case, they have all been experiences of "extravertive mysticism" – eyes-open experiences in which I saw the same world as I always see, except that it looked radically different.

They were moments (sometimes lasting for minutes) in which all of our categories (beautiful/ugly, ordinary/extraordinary, familiar/novel, interesting/boring) fell away. Everything looked exquisite. Everything looked dear. I felt like I was seeing things as they actually are, apart from the domestication and valuation generated by the grid of culture. It seemed like an experience of God. There were tears. Tears of joy, as the cliché has it – but sometimes clichés capture a truth. I wanted to stay in that place; and I felt that I knew what Augustine meant when he said that our hearts are restless until they find their home in God.

These experiences can happen anywhere. My longest and most vivid experience happened on a plane flight two years ago. My wife and I were flying from Tel Aviv to New York, on our way home after leading a pilgrimage group to Israel. About half way across the Atlantic, I became aware of the bright daylight in the cabin subtly beginning to change. Everything began to look exquisitely beautiful and precious: the fabric on the seatback in front

of me, the faces of the passengers around me (including a man whom earlier in the flight I had thought of as the ugliest man I had ever seen—even he looked beautiful), the food that was placed before me, the sunlight and clouds outside the window.

My cheeks were wet with tears. For about 45 minutes, I experienced peace, beauty and joy: everything looked so lovely and I loved everything. There were strong intimations of mortality, with some sadness, but no anxiety. I felt immense gratitude simply for the experience of being. I knew that I wanted to remember, forever, how the world looked in that state, and how I felt about being alive in those minutes.

William Butler Yeats describes one of these experiences that happened to him in a London coffee shop. In part four of his poem "Vacillations," the first five lines describe the setting and the last four the experience:

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man, in a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table top.  
While on the shop and street I gazed,  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.*

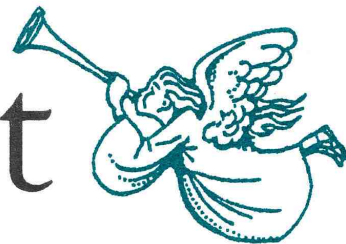
Though Yeats uses the word "happiness," he is speaking about a happiness "so great" that he "was blessed and could bless." This kind of happiness is joy.

Joy is also central to an ecstatic experience of the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal over three hundred years ago:

*In the year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November  
... from about half-past ten in the evening till  
about half an hour after midnight:  
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not  
of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude.  
Certitude. Emotion. Joy... Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears  
of Joy... My God... let me not be separated from  
thee for ever.*

Pascal carried a description of this experience with him the rest of his life, and it was found on his body when he died.

# nd Earth Meet



One more example of ecstatic joy, this one from Billy Bray in the nineteenth century, whom William James describes as "an excellent little illiterate English evangelist":

*In an instant the Lord made me so happy that I cannot express what I felt. I shouted for joy. I praised God with my whole heart. . . . Everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a new man in a new world. I can't help praising the Lord. As I go along the street, I lift up one foot, and it seems to say "Glory;" and I lift up the other, and it seems to say "Amen;" and so they keep up like that all the time I am walking.*

There is a second kind of experience for which I have found myself using the word "joy." More common than ecstatic joy, though hardly ordinary, it comes and goes and sometimes lasts for a day or more. Though somewhat like happiness and contentment, it seems subtly different. It is marked by a sense of peace, openness to experience, fullness of being, and gratitude. The boundaries of my self become soft and porous. My heart feels open.

What these two kinds of experience – ecstatic joy and the more abiding joy of the everyday – have in common is a radical openness to being. I do not know how else to describe it. **Joy involves a felt sense of connectedness to what is. It involves the union of heaven and earth, of spirit and flesh.**

Joy is what we feel in the presence of God. Indeed, it is the most certain sign of God's presence, Teilhard de Chardin said. It is also our response to God's presence: "Joy is the grace we say to God," Jean Ingelow wrote over a century ago, an affirmation echoed by Alan Watts' remark that joy is the sincerest form of thanksgiving.

In English, "joy" and "jewel" are etymologically related. Like a jewel, joy is of great value and beauty, and greatly prized. But unlike a jewel, it can neither be purchased nor possessed. It is a gift. I cannot make it happen and I cannot own it. As Paul says, it is one of the primary gifts of the Spirit. It comes from God.

It is no wonder that the hymns of Advent and Christmas, which celebrate the coming of God, the union of heaven and earth, are full of joy:

*"Rejoice, rejoice, Immanuel shall come to thee,  
O Israel."*

*"Awake Jerusalem and sing!"*

*"O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant."*

*"Joyful all ye nations rise,  
join the triumph of the skies."*

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come! . . . Let heaven and nature sing."

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**'You  
shall  
have  
joy.'**

All your fond hopes, but higher than your hearts  
Could dare to frame them; all your City of God  
Built by your faith but nobler than you planned.  
Instead of your justice, you shall have charity;  
Instead of your happiness you shall have joy;  
Instead of your peace the emulous exchange  
Of love; and I will give you the morning star.

Dorothy Sayers,  
from "...speak! speak peace, O Lord, to the City"



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