

RETURN TO JOY

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Joy levels are like the temperature of an oven. We can choose our ingredients carefully, but the oven temperature will determine what our careful preparations will yield. Consider the effect of angry or joyful parents on family prayer and Bible reading. As joy increases so does the chance that transformation will go in a positive direction. Joy levels have huge effects on whether our efforts will be productive and lasting.

Why would a factor that powerful go unnoticed by most of the church?

Joy building is not usually considered a spiritual practice, and joy is rarely considered a key factor in character transformation even though Jesus gave joy as the reason for his teaching in John 15:11 and the central feature of his prayer for disciples in John 17:13. Yet, from a brain perspective, joy stimulates the growth of the brain systems involved in character formation, identity consolidation, and moral behavior. Based on brain characteristics, character change is best developed and maintained in joyful relationships.

We might not even mean the same thing when we speak of “joy.” Many definitions of joy are static descriptions of a “state” similar to what we might say for a flavor like “salty.” From the human brain perspective, joy is more of a dynamic relational experience. Joy is a “glad to be together” state amplified between two minds that are glad to be together at that moment. Joy is relational. High joy is found in smiles, play, and love. Low joy is found in depression, aggression, and shame. Joy, like any powerful internal drive, can be combined with other experiences to provide many flavors, but the signature of joy is that we are sharing the moment with someone who is glad we are there. Joy makes eyes sparkle and bonds form.

Joy is equally powerful when we are in painful states. We feel very keenly if there is anyone who is glad to be with us when we are hurting. When we settle into the arms of a friend who rushed to the emergency room while we waited to see whether a loved one would survive, we weep with relief rather than bounce with euphoria, but it is joy all the same. Someone is with us, and we are not alone. Joy then lets us “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep,”¹ for we are deeply united. Perhaps it is the lack of appreciation for the relational character of joy or our tendency to view spiritual formation as a solitary experience that has kept us from including joy building as part of our spiritual formation.

TWO REASONS FOR LOW JOY

It is rare to see Christians building joy intentionally. While low joy can be due to a lack of building joy, more often it is the result of an inability to retain joy. The joy that we build in the natural course of life is very prone to dissipate, much as heat leaves an uninsulated house with open windows and doors. It is easy to fall in love but much harder to retain that joy and avoid divorce. It is simple to attract people to church and much harder to keep them there. What concerns us here is that the relational skills needed to prevent the loss of joy are much harder to learn than the relatively simple practices needed to build joy.

Since joy is relational, the longer a disruption in our relationships lasts the lower our joy becomes. Spending more than a few seconds in very cold water can be deadly, but it does not matter how cold the water is if you do not stay in very long. The secret to staying warm is to reduce the heat loss and exposure. Swimming skill helps us get out quickly — although at first swimming skill seems unrelated to heat loss. To retain joy we need the skills to return to joy quickly.

The skills that prevent joy loss return us to joy rapidly from anything that distresses relationships. We much practice keeping our minds in a relational mode where the *relationship* is always more important than the *problem*. We must be trained to keep love in first place while we are in pain, upset, and facing problems — particularly problems caused by the people in our lives. A baby will simply scream with no thought for the relationship with others every time there is a problem. While no one blames the baby for this type of reaction, no one wants that child to grow up with no other skills for problem solving or relationship awareness than screaming. We must learn to return to joy quickly. Blessedly, the same relational brain circuits that generate joy can help us learn to return to joy if we have models. Without models who can maintain joyful relationships in the face of problems, we find that joy dissipates and becomes useless for character formation.

WHY HAVE WE NOT THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT JOY?

On the theological side, American Christianity has grown up under the influence of voluntarist

¹ Romans 12:15 NRSV

philosophy² that focused our attention on reason, will, and choice in all discussions of salvation and transformation. Simply put, voluntarism believes that the will is the highest and strongest function of the person, higher even than emotion or the intellect. The Puritans, heavily influenced by William Ames, were voluntarists, and their attention to the will and choice can still be seen in American theology. It is little wonder Billy Graham named his magazine *Decision*.

From a brain perspective, reason, will, and choice are neurologically weak factors. The will is a fickle cortical function that starts to disappear as soon as we are a little sleepy. The will is well down the brain's control hierarchy for making changes in character or identity and wired to have only a weak influence. Intentions are some of the first things to fade under strain for a low-joy brain. Under the chemical effect of drinking two beers, many people forget their intention to stop drinking after three beers. Intense emotions, fatigue, novelty, and many other factors also derail the best intentions of the low-joy brain. When people do not do what they intended, they display what we generally consider a lack of good character. The voluntarist solution is to renew the vision and intentions to do better next time.

Voluntarists took their lead from medieval notions of human nature and assumed that humans have only one will. Both Scripture and the brain suggest we have more than one will at work in us.³ For example, in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) we are told to love the Lord with both heart and soul. There would be no logic to the command if the heart and soul did not have separate wills to some extent. It is also clear that there are multiple wills in the brain. What one part of the brain wills is not necessarily also willed by other regions that may have contrary urges, motives, and choices.

The brain is designed to unify its various wills under one identity, provided joyful relationships are the norm. Mature members of the community model how to stay relational during upsetting emotions. You see, the brain systems that observe and solve external problems are mutually inhibitory with the systems that mediate our inner world and values.⁴ The brain does not like to act and reflect simultaneously; this is one of the reasons we need solitude at times. A rather mature identity is needed to adjudicate the two. This mature identity only forms in the presence of joy.

Even when our identity is strong, character change is extremely difficult to achieve from the “will” end of the brain. The will is more the result of the brain's processes than the cause of those processes. The will is where processing ends rather than begins. The values of the *identity region* lead to acts of the will, rather than the other way around. By contrast, brain processing that leads to identity and character change begins in the love and attachment regions. Even the motivation to change is birthed by love and attachment. The brain is wired to change character directly from the love and attachment end of the brain. These in turn are hard-wired to grow from joy. Joy-based character change always moves us in the direction of being more like the One we love.

LINKING BRAIN SCIENCE TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A small community of counselors, pastors, prayer ministers, teachers that included Jane Willard, and the staff of Shepherd's House began developing a model of transformation. The ensuing model, called the Life Model, focused on the need for multigenerational community, the interactive presence of God, and a cluster of essential, brain-based relational skills. The Life Model was developed by examining why highly motivated people who were offered the same spiritual and psychological help did not all achieve or sustain positive changes of character. We found that those who lacked relationships with people who were glad to be with them did poorly, while others prospered to the extent that they were bathed in joy. While we can only introduce this thought here, let me discuss how joy is the best measure of the capacity to sustain positive change using a model by Dallas Willard that is likely familiar to the *Conversations* reader.

For Dallas Willard, spiritual formation required *vision, intention, and means* (VIM).⁵ Frequent discussion between Dallas, a philosopher, and his therapist wife, Jane, focused on the difficulty emotionally wounded people experienced making the *means* of spiritual formation work for them. Dallas was always tender toward weakness, saying that spiritual disciplines were things we could do now about things we could not do now.

Spiritual formation and brain science overlap mostly in the category of *means*. Whatever *means* we choose must effectively change the way the brain

² Sources debate the extent to which William Ames himself was a voluntarist, but the influence of voluntarism in the formation of American Christian thought is unmistakable. See Andrea Knutson, *American Spaces of Conversion: The Conductive Imaginaries of Edwards, Emerson and James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19. See also the argument in James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 82.

³ Dallas Willard and I were exploring this departure from the more traditional way of thinking about the brain and the will before his death.

⁴ James Fallon, *The Psychopath Inside* (New York: Current, 2013), 124-25.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 85.

operates to such a degree that what the brain considers its normal first response changes substantially. To avoid habitual worry, fear, and stress, the brain must change deeply wired patterns. Spiritual formation sustains deeper peace and joy to the degree it changes brain patterns. Since the One who formed the human brain also formed the human spirit, what is best for the spirit should also be best for the brain — but we have not usually looked at spiritual formation as teaching our brain a better way to function.

Dallas possessed a great *vision* of life in the kingdom of God, and his *vision* made him an award-winning Christian author. Dallas also had a strong *intention*; his will to follow God was intense. It is my observation that for people of great vision and a strong will, even the most humble of *means* will accomplish transformation. But what of the rest of us with blurry *vision* and wobbly *intention*? Could it be that for us the *means* needs to be as elaborate as the *vision* that Dallas saw? Must the strength of relational joy sustain the weak with the same force as the intention Dallas maintained toward the disciplines? What we can be sure of is that whatever reduces our joyful relationship capacity will increase the need for the *means* of transformation to be joyful and tender with the weaknesses of the brain.

THE LIFE MODEL MAKES SPIRITUAL FORMATION “BRAIN FRIENDLY”

In the Life Model, emotional maturity is a subset of spiritual wholeness rather than a separate phenomenon. Our joy-based relational model for spiritual formation and emotional character development is built around exercises that propagate and strengthen relational brain skills.⁶ Joy activates the brain’s social engagement system and prepares us to engage with God and others. Because the brain’s development is relational, relational activities are best suited for spiritual formation that transforms the mind.

We already know that improper relational experiences create barriers to spiritual formation, but now we can add that joyful relationships have positive implications for spiritual character formation as well as the development of

fundamental relational abilities. The mature physical brain is created through a functional sculpting of shape, ability, and chemistry. Intimate interaction in our primary relationships transfers the brain’s core-self-functions from one generation to the next through joyful, face-to-face interactions.⁷ This “mother core” is a cluster of relational skills that we take for granted when we have them and often condemn as lack of character in those who lack one or more. This sculpting is the basis for character development and the motivation to change malformed character when necessary.

The following edited excerpt from *Joy Starts Here* will help us understand why these joyful relational skills are suddenly becoming much harder to find. To be effective as a means for transformation, joy and the relational skills need to be intentionally introduced so that we can maintain joy for transformation that will last in a low-joy world.⁸

FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS ARE BECOMING RARE

Every child entering the world starts with a near-total absence of relational ability. Where even sixty years ago children spent virtually all of their time interacting with others, playing, and comparing abilities, they now spend the majority of their time focused on machines that have no relational skills or awareness of the child’s presence. Babies are watching television; they have movies in preschool, day care, church, at home, and with baby-sitters.⁹

Brain requirements for successful transmission of joy skills are quite strict. Television, computers, movies, books, or video games cannot spread relational skills. Joy skills do not propagate through media, Internet, webcams, or even telecommunications. We cannot raise babies into human beings by Internet or television any more than we can make babies that way.

RETURNING TO JOY

Located above our eyes, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex has the very important relational skill of figuring out the least harmful solution to every

⁶ Relational brain skills are the mental abilities that allow us to know both what we ourselves are thinking and feeling and what others are experiencing while updating the interactions accurately in real time in a manner that creates properly focused mutual experiences. Very minor examples would include knowing what someone is thinking by looking at their face, communicating our amusement with a glance, or sensing when we have said too much.

⁷ Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁸ E. James Wilder, Edward M. Khouri, Chris M. Coursey, and Shelia Sutton, *Joy Starts Here: The Transformation Zone* (East Peoria, IL: Shepherd’s House, 2013), 205-14. Edited and reprinted by permission.

⁹ The average person in the United States in 2014 spends five hours a day watching television and another five hours engaged with other digital screens, according to Steve Tobak in “America’s User Engagement Crisis,” foxbusiness.com/business-leaders/2014/02/27/americas-user-engagement-crisis/.

situation.¹⁰ This damage-control system in our brain needs to be trained with the full range of joy skills. Part of damage control is our ability to return to joy. Returning to joy is how we go about saving our relationships when others are not glad to be with us. Our brain's identity center here in the prefrontal cortex considers the examples we have seen and tries to figure out the least painful solution. This control system is nonverbal, so it does not consider what our parents told us or what they said in church; it considers examples it has known and observed.

If God is always here with us, an interactive awareness of God's presence that we call an "Immanuel experience" will help us acquire a new response. We can acquire these skills from God because Jesus will redemptively bypass the gaps left by our families, schools, and churches and teach us the way back to joy so that we can then practice this skill with others.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT AS RELATIONAL SKILLS DISAPPEAR?

As relational joy skills decrease globally we can expect a long series of shifts in how people relate. These shifts will remain fairly invisible to the generation where the shift happens. For them, "this is just how people are." Lower joy skills will always mean increased violence and predatory behavior.

Here is what we may expect with lower joy-skill levels:

- *functionality replaces relationship*
- *managing problems replaces restoring joy*
- *schools manage problems rather than raise human children*
- *self-justified behavior is the norm*
- *pseudo-identity becomes the ideal*
- *narcissism increases*
- *unresolved conflicts increase*
- *addictions increase*
- *churches lack relational skills*

Churches implode in one of three ways when return-to-joy skills are missing. First, the inability to return to joy means leaders lack the skills to manage what they feel and still stay relational while they recover from upset. Emotions quickly become amplified, and problems spiral out of control. Second, without relational skills people set up rules instead of exploring useful, relational, joyful solutions to solve problems. During times of crisis and transition, those who make and follow the rules best will win, but at the expense of having large numbers of people leave the church. Third, fear propagates under the guise of spiritual guidance, service, and ministry. An inability to return to joy shows up as a lack of consistency and may even appear as a lack of integrity. In the end, the church will neutralize itself

trying to keep everyone happy and comfortable. This church will stay in its comfort zone until it dies.

JOY AND TRANSFORMATION

During his last few months, Dallas and I talked about how the brain is more deeply changed by whom it loves (who brings me joy) than by what it thinks. Perhaps this is the real reason we have not seen the connection between spiritual formation and brain science. Transformation is more about right love toward God than right thinking. Is one saved (transformed) by right choice of right attachment? Too often we forget that the deepest brain change comes from our loves and not our thoughts. I am not suggesting that we abandon right thinking, much less right *vision* or *intention*, but rather that we consider adding joy to the *vision*, *intention*, and *means*.

Spiritual formation practices will be very different depending on whether the mind grows into the image of Christ primarily because of *what one believes* or because of *whom one loves*. The first approach exercises the will and corrects throughs. The second approach focuses on removing barriers to love. If transformation is about forming a new attachment with God built on love, joy, and shalom, then who becomes our joy will determine who forms our character — perhaps even whether we will change character at all.

The lower the joy level, the more specific the means must be. In low-joy environments the strength of the method would outweigh the strength of the vision. Think about the Wesleyan revival in low-joy England. The transformation was set around a clear method, hence the mocking name "Methodists," that brought people into genuine, joyful relationships. Where joy is low, the means of transformation must produce a rapid increase in joy as we become more eager to be together with God and others. In fact, our eagerness must extend beyond those who are being transformed with us to include those in need of transformation. Joy spreads. In his book *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis seems to believe that joy is the way the gospel should be spread. I think we will agree with our Lord that our joy should be the fullest possible joy.

¹⁰ For more detail see Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WHAT'S YOUR JOY LEVEL?

Perhaps you might reflect on the place relational joy has played in your enduring transformations. Consider what a higher level of relational joy would do for the *means* we use to help others transform. You can continue this conversation by checking your joy levels and those of your church, school, or group with the JoyQ test that is in development. The JoyQ looks at ten factors that build, impersonate, or poison joy. Check your joy level often at joyq.joystartshere.com.