



Joy Unspeakable in an Unspeakably Joyless World • *Barbara A. Holmes*

Though now you do not see God, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Peter: 1–8).¹

What happens when you find joy unspeakable in an unspeakably joyless world? Does it change the world; does it change us or God? When I speak of joy, I refer to an exultation of body and soul that extends far beyond our ordinary pleasures.

This is the true joy of life, being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can.²

This is the first part of a pretty amazing quote from the creative Irish playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw. And although he didn't intend it to be so, it also describes the life of Esther in the phrase "my life belongs to the community." But this type of dedication doesn't just pop into existence. We may dream about greatness and glory, we may just desire a bit of joy, but ultimately the best manifestation of the individual occurs when personal desires are enconced within the embrace of shared needs. It is out of these shared needs that the theme for this lecture series arises.

Beauty Is as Beauty Does: A Cautionary Tale

Joy is the ground on which mysticism and aesthetics make connection, for both are in reference to beauty.³

It isn't every morning that you wake up and find yourself involved in Persia's version of a Top Model/Concubine contest. The theme for this lecture series comes from the Book of Esther, and although the king seems to be asking for a "beauty contest," there will be no volunteers. Instead, beautiful young women like Esther will be compelled to service the king as part of his conscripted harem.

The king needs a compliant beauty, the Hebrew people need a courageous deliverer, but can we expect all this from a pretty teen? We don't expect much from handsome men and pretty girls. We don't teach them to expect much from themselves. Old folks used to say, "Beauty is as beauty does." They had less confidence in the reflection in the mirror than they had in the strength of inner character and faithful action.

Esther will find herself in a position to reflect a different type of beauty, a beauty that emerges from selflessness, courage, and choices critical to the survival of an entire community. Ironically, although the story is purportedly about an involuntary beauty contest, it is what the beauty does and not how the beauty looks that is the focus of the narrator's interest.

This interest is encapsulated in the phrase that everyone remembers from this story, which is found in Esther 4:14. Here Mordecai says, "Who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" The verse summarizes age-old questions about purpose and destiny. But because this is a biblical story, we don't consider the critical context for Mordecai's statement.

Let's test the meaning of this famous phrase by translating the events into current times. Presume that the king is a politician, statesman, or military person. Would anyone consider Colin Powell's wife capable of "delivering her people" through her relationship with Colin? And yet Esther is given this heavy and rather odd responsibility. To further understand the weight of this responsibility, one must fully understand the nature of Esther's relationship with the king. This is a party king who has desecrated the symbols of the temple and lured faithful people to participate in the desecration.

Esther is his orphaned exiled teenage consort who is not even remembered by her given name Hadassah (which means hidden). If we didn't already know how the story ends, we would not consider her to have the potential to change history. But it is exactly those factors that become extremely important in determining how she becomes the heroine of a very problematic story.

Exile: An Opportunity for Creativity

I imagine that the royal order for a state-sanctioned kidnapping in the guise of a beauty contest comes while Esther is minding her teenage business, hanging out at the well with her friends, and doing her hair. Although rumors have it that the previous queen caught an attitude with the king and was quickly dispatched, Esther is in exile and knows how to survive under the radar. Some may think of her as hoochie-mama, a loose woman-child willing to trade her body for the comforts of the palace, but things are not always as they seem.

She is not given a choice—exiles seldom are—so she makes the best of it. The truth of the matter is that she is in survival mode when her life begins to unfold along unexpected paths. Seeking unspeakable joy in a joyless world while God is hidden and you are in exile is no easy task. Exile is an exotic word, but one that does not have much power in our lives. And yet, all of us at some point in our lives are exiles from God’s embrace and from the safety of extended families.

You can be in exile in the middle of New York City if you are homeless, or in a rich suburban school if you are poor. You can be in exile if you are alienated from the embrace of a nonresidential parent, or struggling to survive as an undocumented worker in a sweatshop. Exilic living seems to be unmoored from the common rhythms of daily life and even of the culture, but you certainly get a different perspective on things. You hear what the majority doesn’t hear, and your sense of awareness is more acute. Instead of using this new vantage point, we tend to blame others for our sense of rootlessness.

New Testament scholar and activist Ched Myers notes that the disintegration of the American family is not a result of alternative family lifestyles; rather it is the exilic, nomadic existence that capitalism requires that destroys families. We become exiles and nomads as we leave the land to follow the jobs. It happens in ways that are hardly noticeable. Myers suggests that first the husband was taken from the family farm to work in the market economy, then the wife was taken from the home to work for the market, and then only the market was left to care for the children and the elderly.⁴

And so we become exiles from the idea of landed generational connections that gave “joy” and provided the fertile base for all our human endeavors. But one cannot simply detach people from their beliefs, traditions, and connections without offering them something in return. That “something” at the

beginning of the twenty-first century seems to be the pursuit of pleasure and comfort at any cost.

Because we are now people whose identity does not include the land or generations of wise elders, the stories of our experiences, exploits, and incongruous encounters must provide the framework for our ministries. Esther is an unlikely deliverer, and an example to youth that leaders don't always sport gray beards.

The Surprise of Unlikely Leadership

Those of us who teach and support youth tend to err in one direction or another. We either presume that young people have no power and fail to recognize the God-given role that they can play in the struggle for justice, or we presume that they are better equipped than they are, and we send them off to fight Goliath without three smooth stones and the knowledge of God.

The better path is to teach young people that they have the ability to change history, that no matter what life path they have taken so far, they can serve God, their communities, and their families in powerful ways. Neither teen pregnancy, nor drug addiction, nor alienation can deter God's calling and promise. In every circumstance, there is the opportunity to transcend the ordinary, to reclaim joy in a joyless world.

William H. Chafe, in his analysis of key figures in American public life, comes to the conclusion that it is the personal details of a person's life that give clues about the ways in which they engage history. He identifies the interplay of family circumstances, choices made when challenged, and personal crisis as determinative.⁵ But this is the point: our effectiveness as committed members of wider communities does not occur because we know how to make the right choices at the right time, or because we are married or dating the right people, but because we are known by a God who redeems our mistakes and amplifies our good.

Esther's story reminds us that it is courage and prophetic action, not age or experience, that save communities, and that youth is no impediment to greatness. David begins his path toward a God-gifted destiny as a teen, as do Mary the mother of Jesus and many others named and unnamed. Even when Esther intends for her life to reflect nothing but survival, she embarks on a path that will take her toward her destiny.

As noted by Thich Nhat Hanh, "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."⁶

Human beings respond to what life deals them in various ways, some healthy, some not. Insecurity, bitterness, ambition, overcompensation, social climbing, solitariness—these are among the many ways in which we attempt to normalize ourselves in what is in truth, a world of abnormalities.⁷

The three ideas that I want to highlight in this lecture, which foster joy unspeakable in an unspeakably joyless world, include: first, nurturing the God-potential in unlikely people in unlikely circumstances; second, having the courage to transgress false boundaries; and third, finally finding the source of our own refreshment.

Nurturing the God-Potential

God-potential doesn't have a "look" or attitude that is clearly recognizable. Instead, it emerges in the most unlikely people during the most unlikely times. Do you recognize the God-potential in yourself and others? It isn't always easy. If you didn't know how the stories end, you might miss the God-potential in the Christmas manger or even on the cross. One need not be born to save the world; one need only be willing to try when asked.

Often we miss our opportunity to serve because we are rehearsing our mistakes. When we consider our past, we can't believe that we are useful to God. But we are wrong about this. The greatest examples of moral character in the Bible come from the lives of unlikely people who are willing to trust the divine spark within.

The question is asked, "Will you go to the king?" when everything hangs in the balance. What will you risk to save others or advance their cause? The question comes from Mordecai to Esther but is also addressed to us. Would you be willing to lose your life to gain it? Will you stand in solidarity with the poor and exploited communities of the world? As it turns out, neither comfort nor survival are the greatest values in New Testament ethics. Sometimes we survive and sometimes we don't, but the only way to enhance God-potential is to risk everything on the faithfulness of God, even when God is hidden.

The one chosen to risk everything in the Book of Esther is an unlikely teenage girl. Look in the mirror: you are also an unlikely candidate for greatness, but the potential is clearly there. Our ability to serve is directly connected to our cognizance of authentic selfhood. In my recent book *Race and the Cosmos*, I say that "when we are not authentically in touch with self, we cannot

respond in any meaningful or responsible way to society.”⁸ Each of us has God-potential in us because each of us bears the image of God. The question becomes whether or not we will seek safety and ease or nurture the spark of divinity within until it becomes a splendid torch, a light to all the world.

Transgressing False Boundaries

Just when I think I understand people around me, something they do or say baffles me. The whole person exceeds those parts I comprehend.... We see the subuniverse through glimpses of its shadow, the world of our experience. At each sighting, some of it lies out of view. It unfolds only in part. What we know and will know of reality fails to exhaust it.... This inexhaustible depth of nature, its unfathomableness, opens us to the Divine’s mystery.⁹

Kevin Sharpe makes an important point. We are always more than the sum of our parts. It is this transcendence in body and in spirit that leads to the second opportunity to find joy in an unspeakably joyless world. Transgressing boundaries speaks to the invitation to break out of the boxes that so carefully contain our limited options. I want to be clear that I am not advocating the invasion of personal boundaries necessary to healthy communities. Rather, I am seeking critical engagement, discernment, and faithful action beyond expected contexts.

I use the word “transgress” for lack of a better one. But I am really talking about “becoming” who we were always meant to be. God’s conception of our options and abilities far exceeds the safe terrain that we usually inhabit. Transgressing allows us to understand ourselves as interconnected and whole, no matter what the circumstances are. For those who don’t like breaking rules, this may be a more comfortable entry point for a type of leadership that encourages us to color outside the lines.

Our joy is tied to our freedom, and our freedom is seeded in a God-given liberation that has nothing to do with socially constructed ideas about our race, gender, sexuality, or class. Once we see ourselves as children of the universe, all else is a matter of alignment. In this cosmological view, one need not exhaust oneself in ongoing scrimmages with discrimination and oppression. These are false constructs, paper tigers in a living system that we call earth.

When we resist oppression from the broader perspective of cosmological consciousness, it fades without a battle.

The story of Esther ends with the embattled Jewish people rising to defend themselves and then going beyond defense to slaughter. To battle evil is to be drawn into the mythology that violence is a viable tool. It is not.

All that is needed is that we speak truth to power, live lives that fly low under the main paradigm¹⁰ (living simply in a culture of excess), and treat the earth as if it is a viable member of a living and interconnected socio-spiritual system.

Our task is to align body, mind, and soul with the God of the universe. All else will follow. Activist and prolific cultural critic bell hooks offers this:

My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness. As teachers we believe that learning is possible, that nothing can keep an open mind from seeking after knowledge and finding a way to know.¹¹

What keeps us from being the best that we can be? What limits, false or real, hinder our sense of fulfillment? Only the prisons in our minds can accomplish that task. For those who are marginalized as Esther was, the first task is to envision your own wholeness. The first act of resistance is the reconfiguration of your own self-esteem. People who are conscious of their connections to the cosmos will not be deterred from full exploration of their gifts, because true liberation includes the ability to conceptualize freedom beyond social configurations.

The restoration of a social order gone awry begins with the vision of self and community as embedded in and vital to the continuance of a universe that is intelligent and intelligible. Restoration comes when we remember that we are articulated stardust, bearing in our bodies the story of the universe and engaging the mysteries of the Creator.

Finding the Source of Our Own Refreshment

The third and final category requires that we pause to drink living water from deep wells. The joy spoken of in Holy Scripture requires deep connections to spiritual power that is always beyond our reach. African American

gospel music speaks of the intrinsic “beyondness” of this joy by saying, “The world didn’t give it and the world didn’t take it away.” The refreshment of the human spirit occurs during moments of amazement, bliss, and communion with God. Dorothee Soelle says it best:

The soul needs amazement, the repeated liberation from customs, viewpoints, and convictions, which, like layers of fat that make us untouchable and insensitive, accumulate around us. What appears obvious is that we need to be touched by the spirit of life and that without amazement and enthusiasm nothing new can begin.¹²

Because our attention spans are short, a world within our reach would bore us to death. We are refreshed by the things that amaze us. Materialism and consumerism are poor substitutes for the refreshment of spiritual joy. If we teach young people nothing else, we must certainly get this message to them.

A few years back, when Bill Cosby was asked about how he would keep teens from killing other teens for their sneakers, he said, “Change the object of their desires.” He was calling for a panoramic vision of the world that necessarily takes a person beyond the neighborhood, beyond familiarity, and beyond the shoes on their own feet.

The source of our refreshment or our joy will come as we search and journey, stopping along the way to give aid and to listen for the whisper of the Holy Spirit as it leads into all truth. When we reach the end of the journey, I am confident that we will have joy. Here is the last part of the George Bernard Shaw quote that began this lecture:

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me, it’s a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.¹³

When we have finally found joy in service, in commitment to community, in the restoration of the earth, we won’t have to shout from the rooftops that we have found joy. All who care to look will be able to see our splendid torches, as a sign of grace and unspeakable joy to an unspeakably joyless world.

Notes

1. I am quoting the King James Version of the Bible to capture the unique expression “unspeakable joy.” The NRSV used by many scholars uses the phrase “indescribable and glorious joy.”
2. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, in *Epistle Dedicatory*, (NY Penguin Books, 1903), 32.
3. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 175.
4. Ched Myers, ethics class discussion, Spring 2000, Memphis Theological Seminary, Memphis, Tennessee.
5. William H. Chafe, *Private Lives/Public Consequences: Personality and Politics in Modern America* (Harvard University Press, 2005).
6. Thich Nhat Hanh (pronounced Tick-Naught-Han) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. During the war in Vietnam, he worked tirelessly for reconciliation between North and South Vietnam. He has conducted many mindfulness retreats in Europe and North America helping veterans, children, environmentalists, psychotherapists, artists, and many thousands of individuals seeking peace in their hearts and in their world.
7. Jonathan Yardley, “A Distinguished Historian Examines Why Pivotal Personalities Make Crucial Choices,” *Washington Post Book World* (November 27–December 3 2005), 2.
8. Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 45.
9. Kevin Sharpe, *Sleuthing the Divine: The Nexus of Science and Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 76.
10. A frequently used phrase of Old Testament scholar Walter F. Brueggeman, when he was teaching in 1993 at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. This interpretation of the phrase is mine but is one that comports with his intent.
11. bell hooks, “Teaching Community.” *A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xiv.
12. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 90.
13. Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 32.