

Joyful disciples: A study of a missing link in considering spiritual disciplines and corporate missional habits

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ABSTRACT

THIS ESSAY TAKES UP some suggestions for Christian formation found in the 'Life Model', a contemporary ecumenical project proposing attachment with God, inner healing prayer and healthy interpersonal relationships as key elements to promote psychological and spiritual change. In particular the significance of joyful relationship with God is considered, along with practices to cultivate this joyful relationship. Two practices are described which foster joyful attachment and thus provide ways in which character is shaped to enable Christian formation. However it is acknowledged that such formation also depends

for its full flourishing on other factors such as healthy ecclesial community and relational brain skills. The essay concludes by suggesting that joy-generating practices which can be developed as easily pass-on-able habits are a promising avenue by which to further enable Christian formation.

Keywords: joy, spiritual disciplines, formation, character, neuroscience

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after he penned *Celebration of Discipline* (1981) Richard Foster wrote that while the task of reviving the conversation about Christian spiritual formation had been achieved, a second task of incarnating this reality into the daily experience of individual, congregational and cultural life had not been realized. The next 30 years, he argued, need to focus on this latter task. Easier said than done. Many are dissatisfied with the level of transformation they have actualized as a Christian community and as individual Christians. And while the glossy publications, the spiritual advice and the papers(!) on following Christ more closely keep coming, it seems that for the majority there are at best modest results. Nietzsche's old sneer that "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed" points to the relevance of this for missionary discipleship, as well as the long-term nature of this challenge. How can we grow the kind of Christian character that we find in the New Testament? How can we stay our mind on God, abide in Christ, set our minds on things above, set our minds on the Spirit, bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, glorify God in our bodies, renew our minds, have Christ formed in us and the like?

Research in this area is growing, not least through advances in neuroscience and experimental psychology. Here we will explore the place of Christian joy in growing such character, triggered by some suggestions presented by the 'Life Model', a contemporary ecumenical project proposing attachment with God, inner healing prayer and healthy interpersonal relationships as key elements to promote psychological and spiritual change (see for example Wilder et al., 2020: 49–64). This approach is rooted in developing Christian character through promoting joyful affective-relational experience which is strengthened by awareness of God's presence in daily life and the cultivation of an intentional, communicative relationship much like a close supportive adult relationship. This approach is not new but finds its place in a long tradition stretching back to Wesley, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence and Pierre de Caussade and beyond, and we will utilize some of their insights accordingly.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOY

Why the privileged place of joy? First, the Christian narrative of creation, incarnation and incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. This life of the Trinity is one of joy and it is this communion of persons bound together in mutual love, peace and gladness that we are invited to share in. We are created to be caught up in this, growing into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God. If joy is God's life, a life of incomparable beauty, goodness and gladness, then to be rooted in this joy and live from it is our calling as God's creatures. Indeed, ecclesialogically Rowan Williams suggests that "the life of the Christian community has as its rationale – if not invariably its practical reality – the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy" (Williams, 1989: 3).

Moreover, as David Kelsey (2009: Vol. 1) shows, God relates to us in three interrelated but distinct ways which all elicit joy; as One who creates, grounding our reality, our value and well-being; as One who promises us eschatological consummation and draws us to it; as One who reconciles us in our multiple estrangements. Giftedness marks God's engagement with us and gift recognized as such, gratefully embraced affectively as joy.

Hopefully it will be clear from this that we are not proposing a Pelagian soteriology or elevating human agency as the means of realizing joy, which would be to lose sight of God as subject and with it the very relationship in which our joy is rooted. When the sister of Thérèse of Lisieux, Pauline, says that at the end of her life she will appear before God empty-handed, a prospect which saddens her, Thérèse responds:

you are not like me, then, though we are both in the same position. Even if I had performed all the deeds of St. Paul, I would still consider myself an unprofitable servant; I would find that my hands were empty. But that is precisely the cause of my joy; since I have nothing, I shall receive everything from the good God. (Balthasar, 1992: 255–56)

Thérèse, a Doctor of the Church, gets it right – she is so bowled over by the good God's graciousness as to see being a recipient of this graciousness as her joy, her earthly labour being of no account in comparison. And unsurprisingly, a by-product is her little way which has been a huge inspiration to countless Christians.

Second, work in neuroscience and interpersonal biology by those such as Allan Schore (Schore, 1994) have identified the centrality of joyful attachments for healthy individual and group formation and the development of character. For the brain, attachment love is central and attachment develops through joy. Joy based in the love of God is a more complex affective-relational experience than the analogues that have been the focus of secular positive psychology research (e.g. subjective well-being or optimism). Schore showed how healthy systems involving joyful attachments informally model and teach positive interpersonal relational skills which promoted the formation of stable self-representations. Such skills helped community members handle suffering and relational conflict more effectively and tended to be self-propagating in healthy families and absent from more dysfunctional families. What is more, missing skills could be acquired in adulthood through establishing healthy relationships with securely attached individuals.

Third, assumed here is the approach as outlined by Buber, Levinas and others, which argues that human persons begin with and in encounter with others or in Charles Taylor's pithy saying that "we are human only in conversation" (Carrithers, Collins & Lukes, 1985: 278). It matters greatly then what quality and nature that conversation has because the genesis of the human mind is not something we accomplish individually but dialogically. Indeed as Susan Grove Eastman points out, for a young child "the experience of being imitated communicates a sort of recognition of oneself as distinctive and worthy of attention" (Eastman, 2017: 74). If a person is primarily constituted in personal exchange, such that other-relation mediates and grounds the person's self-relation, then if that relationship is one of joy (in being created, in being redeemed, in eschatological blessing), then one can begin to see how as Christian persons we might be transformed pneumatologically by means of intimate relationships created by the Spirit with God (Abba), Jesus and fellow believers.

Of course, this joy-fuelled transformation involves deformation as well as reformation, and Paul for example demonstrates precisely this reintegration of the whole person within a new intersubjectively constituted identity in relationship to Christ when he speaks of Christ's crucifixion as his crucifixion to the cosmos and the world's crucifixion to him (Gal. 6.14) and when he regards his own circumcision and membership of the tribe of Benjamin as excrement (Phil. 3.5; 3.8). Close readings of Paul show that this transformation is primarily corporate – it is not a matter of individual ontological change but rather of participation in a relational interchange larger than the self; as Eastman puts it "the newly constituted person 'in Christ' is intersubjective all the way down, in

relationship to Christ and in relationship to others” (Eastman, 2017: 173). This is the arena in which change happens (e.g. Rom. 12).

Fourth, joy-in-relationship as a focus prevents the divine–human relationship (and associated spiritual disciplines and corporate habits) being reduced to means of addressing human failure and correlatively of God being assumed to be the One whose utility consists merely of “saving” such beings by making them morally worthy. The latter view is inconsistent with the assumption that God relates to all that is not God, including human beings, in ways grounded in God’s free, wise and generative love and not in human moral qualities. This avoids a potentially Manichean view of nature, anthropocentrism and a narrow soteriological focus on overcoming sin and making human beings acceptable.

Fifth, joy is intimately connected to mission scripturally. Mission can easily be spoken of as an additional burden to an already tired Church. Yet scripturally missionary discipleship was never a last-gasp desperate measure to prop up a dying institution, nor an exhausting corporate effort to keep Jesus’ teaching going for future generations, in fact often it’s not the disciples’ work at all really – rather it’s the fruit of a curiosity of outsiders provoked by a distinctively joyful and peaceful way of being among Jesus’ followers, rooted in lively relationship with the God of creation, reconciliation and promised consummation.

WHAT IS JOY?

If one asks in more detail, just what “joy” is, then one could say joy is a mode of being where, contrary to Western dualisms, we appreciate that thinking is acting, being is acting and, completing the circle, thinking is also being – which is to say that to think differently is to act differently which is to be different. Joy is a mode of being which is the result of experiencing and reflecting upon a level of goodness that is unmistakable and irreducible in its unmatched ability to transform even our darkest hours. Unlike happiness which is conditional joy has the power to rise above and overwhelm any condition. This joy can be seen immanently in infants who respond with joy to being held, fed and stroked, as well as being experienced ourselves as simply as when welcomed with a smile. Joy is all the more deeply realized in relation to the fount of all goodness, that community of joy par excellence, the Trinity, in whom we find purpose, meaning and hope; so 1 Pet. 1.8-9, or again Jn 17.13.

Joy is not individualistic; rather, joy is attachment relationship, a good illustration being John the Baptist leaping in the womb at the proximity of Jesus

in Mary's womb. In infancy joyful interactions with primary caregivers shape the structure, chemistry and function of the brain, profoundly influencing our identity and relationships as we grow. Contemporary neurobiological models support loving attachment as the mechanism for maturity development and healthy interpersonal skills and the emotional energy behind loving attachment that develops both the attachment and the nervous system in the infant is joy. Few people can control this joy voluntarily and joy is amplified by the intersubjective interaction of two minds – relational joy rather than individual happiness builds attachments and emotional capacity. Neurologically, joy activates the brain's relational circuits in the middle of our identity centre, joy which can be realized in responding to the God who is with us, for us and glad to be so, interacting with our minds. God's initiating love enables us to receive his grace with appreciation and joy, generating a joyful identity. Indeed neurologically, the brain's joy centre – the right orbital prefrontal cortex – is the only section of brain which never loses its capacity to grow – so our “joy strength” can continue to expand through life.

However, observation suggests that while most Christians agree that God is a God of love who loves them, this belief is not reflected in the manifesting of relational joy or character transformation. Yet when a baby is loved by the mother, and that relationship between mother and baby is healthy, one can see the baby's character taking shape as a joyful, responsive, loving infant. Saints like Brother Lawrence echo this infant-like response to the mother in their response to God, Lawrence imploring us from his own experience to treasure the presence of God more than anything else. The consequences of such treasuring, treasuring like a baby treasures their mother's presence, like a lover treasures the beloved's presence are attested by other saints too – St Clare of Assisi for example asserting that we become what we love and who we love shapes what we become (Wilder, 2020: 74).

The issue then is cultivating the relational loving attachment. There is a difference between abstractly understanding God's love for us, and a conscious experience of a relational loving attachment fuelled by joy which shapes and re-shapes us. A focus on right belief, right doctrine and right choices, important as they all are, will not alone transform character and the rationalizations explaining this away (e.g. lack of faith) miss the point – character transformation depends on joyful attachment relationships of love. When we share joy, we become attached.

CHARACTER FORMATION

Before going further let us briefly examine the idea of “character”; a rough description might be “the settled way of being and responding that a person has developed over time that becomes *characteristic* of them” (Copan, 2016: 8). McGilchrist in his *The Master and His Emissary* points out how the right hemisphere of the brain operates faster than the left hemisphere and is responsible for producing reactions to circumstances *before* we have a chance to consider how to react; thus the right hemisphere is a leading source of our character in that our reactions reveal the “natural”, “settled” or “immediate” way of being and responding. So, Simon Peter revealed his character in the Garden of Gethsemane when he cut and ran. Jesus knew he would do this – Simon Peter had thought otherwise, or perhaps the left hemisphere of his brain had told him otherwise. The left hemisphere gets the details but not whole picture, operating like a flashlight, only seeing a bit at a time. Peter saw his virtuous fidelity to Jesus, consciously focusing his attention on such comforting possibilities while forgetting to monitor the rest of his character. (Inevitably, the hemispheres are deeply interrelated and we should not make simplistic assumptions about their respective roles – for example both hemispheres generate emotions, but analysis suggests the emotions generated primarily by the left hemisphere are caused by thoughts and beliefs whereas right hemispheric emotions include basic responses to life – thus joy and relationship can (re-)shape the latter while truth and action can (re-)shape the former.)

The trouble is that what we are utilizing right now as we think about this is by-and-large our left hemisphere, and getting at the right hemisphere by analytical thinking is a bit like trying to talk to a French child in Swahili. So what is the mechanism for building and changing our character in the highly influential right hemisphere? Sullivant suggests that

because the right brain operates at a supra-conscious speed, the only way to engage with it and build it up is by relational/experiential/emotional/spiritual means. This is why many of the personal, physical, and relational practices seem very simple – even remedial – to many when they first begin to employ them. (Sullivant, 2018: 86–7)

So for example writers such as Brother Lawrence suggest with disarming simplicity the transformational significance of a conversational relationship with our Lord:

the most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion and even faithlessness and sin. (Lawrence, 2009: 59)

One way of realizing Brother Lawrence's recommendations concerning practising the presence of God is, following "neurotheologians" such as Jim Wilder, to develop "mutual mind". Technically these states occur when dyadic resonance permits the intercoordination of affective brain states in the context of relationship, awareness and interest. (Note here Eph 2.10 with its description of human beings as God's *poiema*, where poetry in scripture does not rhyme sounds but thoughts – as God's poetry our thoughts can rhyme with those of our heavenly Father.)

More prosaically, consider the experience of knowing what someone is thinking. People you know well in your family – you can tell when they are amused, irritated, touched or bored stiff – you don't need them to tell you. Of course sometimes they will deny it, but that's the left hemisphere trying to hide what the right hemisphere, always moving at a faster pace, has already disclosed by body language and other signals. This experience some call "mindsight". Now when two people tune their mindsight on each other it creates a state of "mutual mind" – an intersubjectivity (as Schore describes it) – an example being that synchronicity with another's mind that we can see in a son and daughter as they glance at one another across the bed of their dying mother and don't need to say, or even consciously think, anything more at that moment. Experience shows that this kind of mind sharing is generally limited to people in a bonded relationship when they are face-to-face and open to emotional exchanges. (Indeed visual cues and voice tone are much more important than words for fostering such mind sharing.) Mutual mind state synchronizes brain activity and chemistry in a matter of seconds and runs too rapidly to be controlled by conscious thought or choice (which is why trying to hide your irritation with your beloved is usually futile). Although mutual mind states are mutually produced, the influence of the stronger brain can hold sway. Take the storm on the lake – the disciples had a mutual mind state together that they were about to be drowned so they woke Jesus. But he was relaxed and over time mutual mind with Jesus, a stronger mind, began to have an effect on the disciples. So

the next storm story, Peter could (briefly!) walk on the waves when he had his eyes on Jesus.

This mutual mind state is reserved only for those with whom we have a deep bond – and we cannot always tell in this state if it is our thought or theirs. In these states new aspects of our identity can be activated and shaped. It is a useful model for explaining how God acts without over-riding our freedom, as well as a way of responding to the apostolic injunction “let the same mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2.2, 2.5). It is a deeply relational state which is reserved for “my people” – the people with whom I identify and to whom I am close. This sense of our group identity can be hugely influential and identity-forming with the power to change character because it operates in the fast track on the right spot in the brain. “My people” could be one’s family, church or other group, though given how our face to face interaction has been massively reduced in recent decades, the opportunity for mutual mind states has also reduced.

Applying this to Christian character transformation, the idea is that we are to enter into a mutual mind state with God if we are to realize the kind of character transformation we aspire to as disciples. There is a big difference between thinking about God and thinking with God about reality – the latter is mutual mind state – and thinking with God might just change even our initial reactions – thus changing our character.

These mutual mind states are established between us and our beloved, so to begin with we need to ensure loving attachments. How do loving relationships grow? Well if we observe how a baby’s loving attachment grows, it does so from joyful and thankful, appreciative interactions. (Notice again Brother Lawrence wrote of the practice of the presence of God as one that is to “find joy in his divine company”.) So if we are serious about character transformation in Christ, the place we need to start and strengthen is these high-joy, loving relational interactions with Christ. Many of the saints understood this, as in Teresa of Avila’s words (Ladinsky, 2002: 76);

*Just these two words He spoke
Changed my life,
“Enjoy me”.
What a burden I thought I was to carry –
A crucifix, as did He.
Love once said to me “I know a song,
Would you like to hear it?”
And laughter came from every brick in the street*

*And from every pore
In the sky,
After a night of prayer, He
Changed my life when
He sang
“Enjoy me”.*

One easy practice that can assist here is interactive gratitude (see Wilder et al. 2020 for more detail on this and the next practice of Immanuel journaling).

Practice 1: Interactive gratitude

1. Start by recognizing God’s presence at this moment. Find something specific for which to give thanks to God, write it down and stay with the appreciation for 2 minutes or so, describing it in detail to God. Notice how your body responds to thankfulness.
2. Ask God what he would say to you and write this down. Be open to thoughts, images and sensing.
3. Read it to a (perhaps weekly) group you consider safe and trustworthy (and the number one rule for the group is to treat every weakness tenderly).

The interaction between God and us in this exercise is the defining difference between interactive gratitude and what we commonly consider as appreciation or giving thanks. It is part of building a mutual mind state with God – think of the analogy of taking a ball of yarn, holding one end and throwing it to someone who throws it back, repeatedly. As the ball goes back and forth the connection grows thicker and stronger. Furthermore, a handy tip to ensure the right brain stays involved is to be aware of body sensations and to feel some sort of connection with God in one’s memory. Increasing joy through effective gratitude practices can actually help us reset our default state more to joy over time – for example try repeated exposure to a state of gratitude three times a day for five minutes recalling gratitude memories and observe the results.

This practice is purposely simple and modest. And, as with the next practices, there will be some nervousness about this exercise that we are putting words and thoughts in God’s mouth and indeed sometimes we are, and it is important to check our impressions against scripture and Jesus’ teaching and character, whether it brings good fruit (Mt. 7.20), whether it results in shalom and/or gratitude (Col. 3.15). Other checks could be listed and while we are

always fallible, the possibility of misunderstandings should not deter us from seeking joyful conversational interaction.

Sharing with others is crucial, encouraging others and tutoring one another in recognizing God's voice. Hearing oneself articulating gratitude also increases the likelihood of future recognition of gift. Furthermore, articulating gratitude completes the process with positive relational interaction and it builds memories of God's goodness that convey a sense of being loved.

Our working assumption here is that our identities are formed primarily not by choices but the relational bonds we experience and reflect upon – so that who we share mutual mind states with will shape our choices much more than the other way round – think for example of anyone in love and how they will be ready to change schools, politics, friends, religion – the brain is much more concerned with what we love than our freedom of choice. It seems that the right hemisphere, the major domain of attachment relationships, can have a much more direct control and influence on our identities and character than the left hemisphere – and that our identities and emotions are only indirectly influenced by the thoughts and choices generated by the left hemisphere. Rather what really shapes character and identity is it seems in the right hemisphere, the appreciation, joy and shalom (or lack of them) that grow from attachments and relationships, those to whom we are attached shaping our character and identity as a result.

The habit of interactive gratitude strengthens our relational bond with the divine and this issues in joy and joy builds our loving attachments, which attachments arguably influence our character development more than anything else.

A second practice here which further strengthens the attachment relationship with God is Immanuel journalling. Critical here is how we are assuming God sees us; this approach presumes God is present, is truly good and perseveres in seeking good for us, just as for example when God tells Moses that he sees, hears, cares and is with his people and will do something for them (Exod. 3.7-8).

Practice 2: Immanuel journalling

Begin writing as God simply says back to you what God *sees and hears* from your speech and actions (e.g. I hear you crying quietly, unsure about what to do, doubting me).

Continue with God *recognizing* unspoken words (e.g. I hear you judging yourself, your quiet resolution).

Write as God *understands* how big (hard) this is (e.g. I can see how sad you are about this).

Write as God *is glad* to be with you and treats you tenderly (e.g. I am with you, for you and glad to be here in this with you; indeed, we grasp that God is “as-glad-as-glad-can-get” to be with us, joy grows).

Write as God saying we *can do* something together about this (e.g. I am with you and know we can move forward in this together).

(This is all about ‘thought rhyming’ with God where God restores our relational circuits using the sequence I see you, I hear you, I understand how hard this is, I am glad to be with you, I can do something about what you’re going through. There is attention, validation, comfort and peace).

The final step is sharing such a journal entry within a small group setting. The aspiration is that when we share stories of appreciation and God moments in journalling we move into a deeper group identity. By telling others what we appreciate about God’s presence we are keeping our relational circuits on, tutoring and being tutored on God’s presence and sharing joy which builds group identity. Of course, there needs to be group guidelines to such sharing, the number one ground rule being to treat every weakness tenderly, our own and that of others.

One way of discerning God at work here is by considering whether the fruit is shalom. We have all had stories told us that have drained our joy, failed to bless us and not been helpful. One way of weighing a journal entry’s readiness for group sharing is via a shalom check. Testing for peace might include looking for (a) a shift in perspective that ‘feels’ closer to God’s reality, (b) what is written matches scriptural principles c. consideration of a simple question such as “when I think of Jesus in this moment do I feel an authentic sense of his love for me and a growing desire to serve others?”

This second practice is about both joy and peace. Along with high-energy joy there is joy’s sister, peace. We cannot sustain a high-energy state for long and neurologically experiences of joy call for a time of rest to follow – joy followed by shalom. Shalom is that powerful rest that comes when we know everything “fits”; there is nothing to worry about, shalom in God’s active presence to us in Jesus through the Spirit. Neurologically joy is a high energy state that builds our strength and stimulates growth, while shalom is a low energy state that quiets us when everything is just right and we can rest (Mt. 11.28-30). Joy gets things done. Shalom lets us be still and it entails flourishing and wholeness. Shalom

is where everything is in right relation, the way things ought to be, and God is pleased. Indeed, the sharing in this practice is akin to passing the peace – a sharing which ideally involves the three ingredients of gratitude, noticing what God wants me to know and describing what’s changed.

This practice suggests we do not come by shalom by believing the right things or by solving problems so much as by sharing God’s mindsight. An outstanding example is the martyr Stephen as he was being killed. When we look at Stephen, Paul or a host of other Christian witnesses we find certain elements of this approach, not least (a) God is always with us; (b) God actively interacts in our lives; (c) connecting with God comes before focusing on upsetting experiences (in our case) or traumatic experiences (in Paul and Stephen’s case such as imprisonment or martyrdom); (d) full processing of such experience requires upset *and* relationship with God to be active in mind at same time, the latter reshaping the former.

This is of course not easy; to be asked in the middle of our strop, sulk or spite to recall God’s presence, closeness and what God had done for you till you become thankful – that’s tough. One hint for cultivating shalom here is going slow; as Brother Lawrence puts it,

we must do all that we do with thoughtfulness and consideration, without impetuosity or haste, both of which show an undisciplined spirit; we must work quietly, placidly and lovingly before God, and pray him to approve our toil, and by this continual attention to God we shall break the Demon’s head, and make his weapons fall from his hands. (Lawrence, 2009: 59)

Peace of course does not mean we will not suffer, only that no suffering will separate us from the love of God (Rom 8.35-9).

THE WIDER CONTEXT

The two modest practices mentioned here are not stand-alone; their effectiveness depends on considerable maturity among the members of groups in which they are practised and healthy ecclesial community. Space does not permit further exploration but in environments where people are heavily defended, self-justifying and wearing masks to protect weaknesses, a low-joy environment beckons. Weakness is essential in joyful, ecclesial community because mutual joyful bonds require vulnerability. Self-protection is rooted in fear, not joy, and

it does not grow joyful community. Character grows when, for example, we build joy with one another in weakness. Low-joy communities are usually those where weaknesses are hidden, disguised and indeed despised. Furthermore, in Christian community it's not "weakness is bad and with God we can be strong" but that God's power makes it safe to be weak while God is strong. Other roots of low-joy include a lack of development around the "big" emotions such as fear, anger and shame, unresolved trauma and lack of face-to-face interaction.

Another key element to the effective working of the practices mentioned is what might be termed relational brain skills. Again, space does not allow much further discussion but take for example the skill of "sharing joy".

We learn "sharing joy" from people who are glad to be with us, whose eyes shine as they look at us – their body language, tone of voice and words all convey "it's a delight to engage with you". Relational joy empowers, motivates and fuels us. We feel a reward with this joy – the neurotransmitter dopamine playing a part in this. The brain's reward circuitry releases this dopamine also when we eat, exercise, have sex and give generously. And the same dopamine tells us we then need a breather, to rest and recover. And after we catch our breath it is time for the serotonin to recharge us for joy. You may say this skill is "easy" but it's not that apparent that our Christian communities are filled with this skill of sharing joy. Very often when our joy levels drop we don't employ this skill but instead substitute behaviours, experiences, events, people and substances that hijack the joy mechanism of the brain and artificially regulate our feelings, stimulating the dopamine etc. You can tell the difference because this dopamine leaves us restless and empty. We can substitute joy with activities, sports, films, laptops, busyness and endless distractions. Surely many of these things aren't bad but good, but we should realise we are missing out in not developing this skill.

It is also embarrassingly easy to enhance this skill. One minister decided to introduce this skill together with the returning to quiet skill by training welcomers to express joy with their face and voice, and also to recognize when people felt overwhelmed. So welcomers could provide joy or shalom as needed. The results were remarked upon after just a few Sundays, people speaking of services being "life-giving" and refreshing (Wilder et al., 2014: 116).

Another skill is "returning to joy", restoring our desire and ability to be with others when things go wrong and we are suffering or in pain. Returning to joy comes from strong attachments to others and a deep sense of who we are that will not get lost when we are in pain. While we are still distressed and not "joyful" there is a sense of quieting distress and being with caring other(s).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God,” wrote Léon Bloy (1937: 57), a French Catholic philosopher. Fostering the mode of being that is joy through habits of relational attachment is arguably one of the missing pieces in enabling our formation as Christ followers. It is not a stand-alone element however – shallow relational attachments, weak ecclesial community, lack of brain skills and low joy rooted in upbringing and bad habits are all obstacles to realizing God’s gracious invitation to joy. The two practices mentioned here focused on joyful interactive conversational relationship are stimulated by engagement with Wilder et al.’s Life Model and they are suggestions to provoke discussion – what joy-generating practices can we shape and communicate as easily pass-on-able habits which can be undertaken together in ways which are genuinely transformative?

The joy we speak of is not primarily a psychological competency whose mastery is a necessary stage in our self-actualising project, neither is it some evolving product of a Hegelian historical-cosmic process, or any of a number of other modern possibilities rooted in voluntaristic human agency or natural dynamics. Rather joy’s possibility is rooted in the God of joy who relates to us in creating, redeeming and drawing to eschatological consummation in ways which generate joy-in-relationship which can manifest even in situations which hold few possibilities for well-being in community, as demonstrated by Paul, Francis of Assisi and others.

What is more, this joy suggests participation in the joy of the triune God, the shaping of Christian community and character as the New Testament advocates, and promising missiological effectiveness through such a distinctive way of being together in God’s presence.

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