

SELF REFLECTIONS

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The Psychology of Joy

Joy is both a reflection of our psychological view of the world and a remedy when that view is dark and obscured.

Like a smile, it is an immediate expression of how we see the moment and how we anticipate the future. And when joy seems out of reach, when we wonder if our future holds even a glimmer, we can induce joy by mustering up a smile we know is not heartfelt, choosing uplifting music when

we feel depressed, or creating a lovely meal when the appetite does not lust for it. The psychological condition of our lives are shaped as much by how we perceive our experiences as by the experiences themselves. Perception is malleable. There is a breadth of possible ways we can give meaning to our experience and no matter how looming the obstacle or difficult the loss,

finding ways to move forward with optimism can be within our reach. We often see people who



A PERUVIAN CHILD FINDS JOY IN THE MOMENT.

move forward with devastating losses, who see great potential in a restricted array of possibilities, while others struggle under the weight of those challenges. One difference between these outcomes is in the perception of the future, of seeing what is still possible rather than what is not. Joy is an affirmation that being alive, in the midst of suffering, is a

worthwhile experience. Depression is the antithesis of this. By definition, if a person is optimistic

about the future and sees rich possibilities for himself, then he is not depressed. Joy becomes the moment by moment expression of that optimism. What riches one has, or doesn't have, has little bearing on the joy we carry; more importantly, it is perception of our fortune that determines our state of being. When someone has a brush with death, it is not unusual for them to experience great joy at simply being alive. Such moments can bring clarity in perspective, a realization that the opportunity for life is precious and wonderful, and cause for joy itself.

By committing to visualize a joyful existence we are not hiding in denial. There is no denying that life involves great suffering and unimaginable losses. Rather, we are accepting these moments as challenges along a path of joyful possibility and wonder. Recently I walked the Inca trail in Peru. It was long and

(continued on page 3)

WISDOM BITS

- ◆ Life is nothing but a dream, and if we are artists, then we can create our life with Love, and our dream becomes a masterpiece of art.
-Don Miguel Ruiz
- ◆ If we will take care of today, God will take care of the morrow.
-Gandhi
- ◆ Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.
-John Lennon



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

<i>Psychology of Joy</i>	1
<i>Catastrophe Knocks</i>	2
<i>Joy, Storefronts, cont.</i>	3
<i>Storefronts</i>	4

When Catastrophe Knocks

We expect setbacks in life, and know intellectually that along our pursuit of joy and growth there will be losses, changes and disappointments. To some degree, we can even prepare for these events, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and even financially. But preparing ourselves for a catastrophic event is impossible; such moments are beyond our imagination so there are no preparatory actions we can take. To attempt to prepare for “every contingency” in our personal life would require resources beyond what any one of us has, and given the infinite possibilities of disaster that could confront us, we would be reduced to living in fear of what might be, rather than simply living in the joy of the moment.

Catastrophic losses are marked not just by our inability to prepare for them, but also by the depth of life changes that result from such events. With most losses, there is some degree of recovery. After a period of disbelief, anger and grief we find ways to integrate the loss into our daily life. But with a catastrophic event, fundamental losses occur in our lives that are not recoverable; things are not, nor ever will be, the same as they were. Where we live, our dearest relationships, a healthy and intact body, the fruit of our life’s work, these are often the losses that require a fundamental shift in the way we live our life.

As with any trauma or loss, we will try to make sense of it and give it meaning, a necessary process that allows healing and the opportunity to move forward. But trying to make meaning out of extraordinary

events can often produce dilemmas that hinder that process even when causes for the trauma are knowable. One dilemma is that if the universe has intention, or that events



CATASTROPHE OFTEN BRINGS IRREVERSIBLE CHANGES IN OUR LIFE STRUCTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS

are pre-destined, than somehow one deserved the catastrophic loss, asked for it, or needs it for learning and development on a spiritual level. In other words, since it was *supposed to happen* it must be a good thing. At the other end is the dilemma that the catastrophic event was *not supposed to happen*. Our recovery is crippled by an overwhelming sense of injustice, and that to move forward is to allow that injustice to stand. Worse yet, if we allow ourselves to heal and move forward without “righting the wrong”, than we dishonor or diminish the value of that which we have lost.

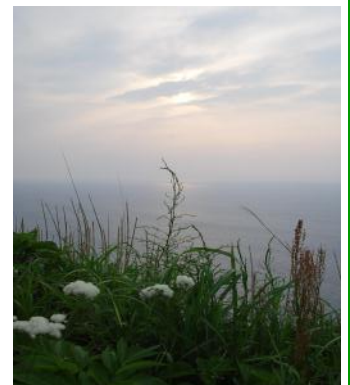
Many things happen in life that we do not desire, and I doubt that the universe desires that we suffer either. Of course it *may be true* that suffering and loss is part of a plan for

our well being, and at times this may be an acceptable explanation for what befalls us, but such things are ultimately unconfirmable. And despite our remarkable sys-

tems of justice and fairness designed into our social systems, nature, disease and the darker dimensions of the human psyche do not honor the concept of fairness. Simply put, life itself does not always appear fair, and often justice is not served. We must remember that the concepts of fairness and justice are constructs that we have brought to life, and as enlightened as they are, these ideas do not exist in nature, and from time to time that reminder is brutal.

Whether our loss was meant to be or not, or whether justice sometimes disappears through the cracks of our imperfect social agreements, these are questions that may linger a lifetime. But what is certain beyond any doubt, what we always need to say to ourselves, is that today, “*This*

is what is.” Responding directly to the situation of loss will ultimately be required, and to begin this process before ascribing meaning to the loss allows the creation of a new container, a completely new framework of living, within which meanings may be discerned after the fact. The creative process of change is often like that of a sculptor, who may labor though the construction of a new piece, never knowing in the process what the meanings are behind the developing forms. Only after the fact, by engaging the new sculpture, does understanding emerge, a richer, fuller experience of meaning not available without the new container which holds it. Catastrophic loss is not an “opportunity” for a new container. The loss *simply is*, and so requires a completely new framework from which we live. That we may rightly wish back for what we have lost, and at the same time embrace a new life that brings us joy and possibility, these two coexisting desires do not dishonor each other. Rather they are simply two containers from which we live, one which we have, and one which is gone.





"Depression is a cluster of symptoms resulting from a surrendered will...."

Joy (continued from page 1)

tiring, and I was sick from the elevation. But after four days we walked through the Sun Gate, and gazing down at the ruins of Machu Picchu I immediately forgot about my tired body and stood in wonder at what lay before me. It was a moment of awe and silent joy, as if time stopped. In many ways our lives are like this walk, lots of work and risks in the hope of encountering extraordinary joy, an affirmation that our existence is worth the labored breath.

Choosing a positive outlook and a joyful existence has immediate and measurable benefits both psychologically and physically. The belief that something good is possible creates both psychic and bodily energy, energy that is available for activity, creativity or healing. Our minds are activated at the prospect of success, and at a deeper level, survival itself, and our body chemistry responds immedi-

ately, preparing us to grasp the rewards we perceive. Conversely, when we project failure or pessimism into our future, the body likewise responds. We shut down, stop generating needed energy, and as we accept the negative belief, slide into anxiety and depression. At this point fear replaces possibility, and as we surrender to the belief that we have no control, hopelessness overwhelms us and we stop nurturing a life we erroneously believe has no future. Our body mechanisms cease to function optimally, and we are left open to disease, injury and poor health.

Depression as a "disease" is inaccurate. It is true that there are biochemical changes in our brain when depression is diagnosed, but every action, decision, and belief we form is ultimately processed via the chemistry of our brains. "Depression" is a cluster of symptoms resulting from a

surrendered will, a resignation to the belief that the future is hopeless. Watching athletes is a fitting illustration of this. When someone yields to defeat, especially prematurely, it is immediately evident. The body energy is drained, thinking is less focused, and mistakes are made, even body posture changes. Body chemistry follows the beliefs formed by unexamined thoughts and feelings, and defeat is inevitable. But if the athlete can recover the belief of winning, the body likewise responds. Energy rises up, creativity increases and thinking becomes extremely focused. Every athlete knows that the worse situation is an opponent who rallies psychologically. One success can create unstoppable momentum if the mind can visualize a positive outcome. But an athlete who has psychologically surrendered to defeat rarely wins his match. Although depression does ulti-

mately involve changes in our biochemical balances, body chemistry is usually not the cause. More frequently it is yielding to negative beliefs that produce hopeless behaviors, and as facilitator of thought, feeling and belief, our body chemistry cooperates.

We can improve positive outcomes by visualizing hope. We can experience joy by consciously choosing to find it in the conditions that surround us. If it feels contrived, it is, and that is what makes the idea so remarkable. We can construct a perspective that helps us live better, access more energy and creativity and keep our bodies healthier, simply by initiating joyful thoughts and actions. With this strength in hand we are able to more honestly acknowledge our defeats and losses, let go of them, and pursue that which makes our potential thrive, not wither.



Storefronts (continued from page 4)

of music inside all beckon others to share in the relaxed and pleasurable atmosphere. In contrast, buildings that provide medical, financial, legal or psychological services do not benefit from a space that promotes high visibility of the people patronizing it. When we do not feel well or are dealing with private matters, a discreet space feels more restful and approachable. Modest signage, windows that are curtained or softly obscured and insulation from noise all promote an environment that invites concentration and introspection.

Buildings also need to reflect a separate identity and at the same time, a cohesion or integration with other buildings and the community surrounding it. The integration of diverse elements is a quality of psychological wellness, and it applies to clusters of buildings as well. Elements that provide cohesion across a variety of storefronts suggest, unconsciously, a sense of unity, cooperation, stability and shared vision. At the same time, there needs to be visual distinction among the various businesses that creates curiosity and a

desire to explore. Such cohesion needs to develop organically and can't be forced with contrived devices that feel obvious and manipulative. Buildings that develop over time "learn" what works, just as we do. That sense of learning and development resonates with our own personal growth, and experiencing those elements of successful change and "healing" endears us to the building. Like fine antiques, buildings develop wear and are shaped by use, and the marks of this can contribute to their beauty; like a delicate patina, worn buildings tell us there were

valued and served their purpose well. This is why older buildings keep a sense of aliveness when their historical roots are honored and key elements of the building are not restored or altered. We resonate with change and cherish the marks of that journey, in ourselves as well as our buildings, constantly adjusting for renewed purpose and unexpected circumstance. And at the same time we value the comfort of unity and continuity, seeking relationship with those around us and those who filled these spaces before us.



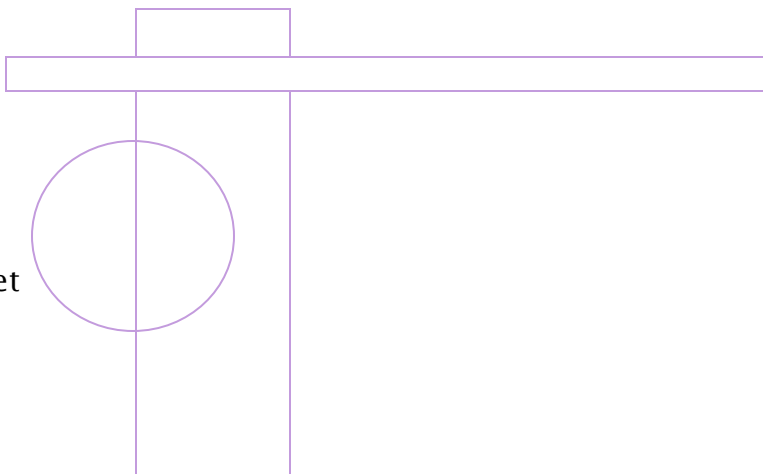
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What Our Storefronts Say

Upon approach, we may not notice that buildings tell us a lot about what we can expect to find inside, not unlike what clothes we wear reveals something about how we see the world. There is no right and wrong in how a building presents itself, but it is important that what a building projects is what is intended and desired. It is also important that a building's presentation is congruent with what activities are ongoing within it, and that it is consistent with the expectations of those who visit. Most of us know when we approach a building what services and products are likely to be found inside. We are consciously gathering information, such as what services are provided, what products are readily available, and what the costs are for what we seek. But we are also gathering information unconsciously, information about the business that may or may not be true, based on our experience of the building both inside and out. Since the information is unconscious, we would not be making immediate decisions about whether to patronize the business or not, but we would

be left with a *feeling experience* that will influence our comfort with the building, the business and our willingness



A CHEERFUL BLUE UNITES DIVERSE, WELL WORN STOREFRONTS ALONG A PARIS STREET.

to return.

Ultimately the products and services that are offered in a business will determine its success, and given superior quality we will overlook the environment to a large degree. But a negative environment can still be a deterrent, and in some cases the environment of the storefront, both inside and out, are central to the services and products being of-

fered. For example, in restaurants, pubs and coffee houses, a communal atmosphere is highly desirable. When we choose to meet others to share a meal, a lively and joyous atmosphere is usually preferred. Not so much that our immediate space is impinged upon, but enough to enjoy the experience of eating in a communal setting with others who are likewise enjoying a meal. Food quality is most important, but "atmosphere" is closely behind. Restaurants need a certain degree of privacy at each table for conversation, but the *collective* sounds of conversation and laughter are soothing and attractive to our social nature. On the other hand, restaurants that are too open don't provide enough privacy for individual conversations to begin, so the environment remains subdued and uncomfortably quiet. The storefronts of restaurants, pubs and coffee houses also benefit from entrances and windows that display its' unconscious product: *a lively communal experience*. People visible in windows, an entrance visible from the street and hints (cont. on page 3)