

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

(Re)Discovering Joy

Mary's Perspective:

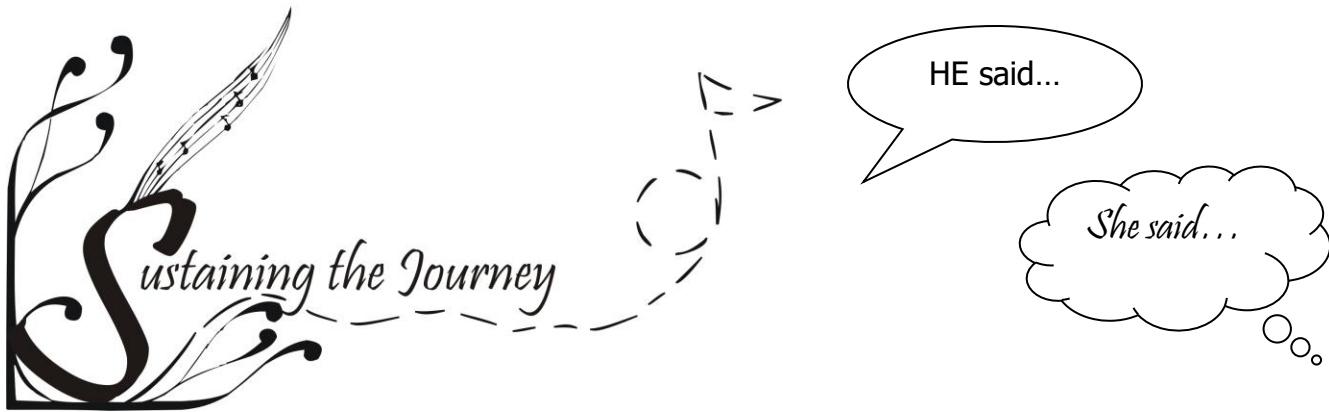
As the calendar page turns, particularly to a new year, many of us reflect on the past and make resolutions or promises or intentions for the future. Sometimes, I think of this as the “coulda/woulda/shoulda” process. As in, *“Man, if I woulda gone to the gym more often, I coulda been so ripped by now... I shoulda eaten better and maybe done intermittent fasting – then I woulda lost this spare tire around my middle... If I woulda stuck with that series of classes, I coulda been in a better job by now... I shoulda set aside 3% of every pay directly into my retirement account – then I coulda planned to retire by 65... if only...”*

It can rapidly turn into a session of beating yourself up, demolishing what was left of your good intentions, and generally throwing in the towel when it comes to future plans of positive change. As I reflect on the past two years of living in a pandemic, I find it’s easy to get drawn into a morose frame of mind. Why bother trying to improve, or working on a new idea? It’s just going to get shut down anyway.

At the beginning of last year, Bob and I recognized what we felt was a downward spiral – we called it the Covid Vortex – and tried to take a number of positive steps against that spiral. We implemented Two for Tuesdays: a weekly dose of inspiration, intended to feed our brains “the good stuff.” We focused each month or two on concepts such as Mindfulness, Surrender, Dealing with Restlessness, and Being Intentional. It felt like we were circling around something, but not quite hitting the target. Truthfully, in some ways, it still feels that way – like we are closing in on the next big step, but not quite there yet. Sometimes, you need to let life happen in order to see the next step of the journey.

This is definitely going to be a monumental year, in a number of ways. Bob will officially retire from full-time employment. My children are rapidly growing and entering the adult world at warp speed – from building a house to getting married to finishing up that college degree, to first job – and we find our house (and fridge) serve new purposes now. As a nation, we collectively are fighting “fatigue” from masks and worry and the latest virus statistics. As a diocese, we are revisioning Catholic education and finding our way in worship as we balance full, active, conscious participation with pandemic protocols. There are plenty of reasons to be thoughtful, intentional, and reflective.

I am not, nor have I ever been, one for making resolutions. First, I hate the disappointment of missing the mark when things don’t come to fruition. (Thank God for mercy, forgiveness, grace, and second/third/multiple chances.) Second, I don’t think we should wait for a calendar page turn or some other magic moment to be



intentional – every day poses a new start and a fresh beginning. But I do believe in that which I preach. The concepts that we embraced in our writing last year – mindfulness, wonder, simplicity, surrender, etc. – aren't simply talking points. They are the roadmap.

So, wrapping together the concepts of morose fatigue and this roadmap, I feel like we are impelled to rediscover joy. I don't know about you, but it seems like being gloomy has become commonplace. It's like we are perpetually waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop. What restaurant will be the next casualty? Now who is in the unemployment line? What supplies will be scarce at the grocery store this month? Oh no, who is sick or in the hospital? We can succumb to the sadness, or we can be purposeful about seeking joy.

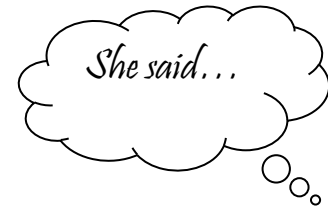
I read an article that said the more you find about which to be grateful, the more gratitude you will experience – and the happier you'll be. Mother Teresa said, "where there is love, there is joy." Perhaps we take it for granted, but we all are blessed with love in our lives. Parents, spouses, siblings, offspring, friends, church buddies – perhaps you might feel impatient with them (especially after lots of holiday time together), maybe you take it for granted, and perhaps you are seeking a special level of depth that you feel is missing – but we all have experiences of love in our lives DAILY. There is a source of joy.

Take it a step further. I have a daughter who absolutely loves snow. Now, I may not relish the cold (or how it makes my joints feel), but there is definitely beauty in a barren tree with crystal snow on its branches. I find joy in seeing the snowman that the neighbors made. I certainly find joy in the crackling fireplace, hot cup of coffee, or my husband's flannel shirt keeping me cozy. Recognize joy in the little things, besides the big ones.

We have become so accustomed to the sadness. Particularly as liturgical ministers with funerals a regular part of life, we often feel surrounded by death, but even in the sad times there is much beauty, grace, and joy. Moments of mercy bring joy. A kind word from a stranger brings joy. Getting a close parking spot or finding your favorite brand of coffee creamer on sale, or working up a good sweat at the gym can all bring joy. We need to look past the coulda/woulda/shoulda and see those moments of joy. It can lower blood pressure, alleviate stress, lift our moods, and generally make this world a better place. Maybe it's time to look more intentionally.

Then, once we rediscover joy, we can spread it. Again, think small. Holding the door for someone, paying for the person behind you in the drive-thru, shoveling the neighbor's walk, cooking something delightfully satisfying, volunteering a few hours for a good cause – none of those are monumental nor expensive, yet all will spread joy to others. A wise friend observed about the pandemic, "the nice people have gotten nicer, and the mean ones have gotten meaner." Who wouldn't prefer to be surrounded by nice people? Tired of being overwhelmed by the morose? Be the change you want to see!

I'm not saying give up on intentional living, and if resolutions help motivate you, then go for it. I'm just saying that it's time we stop beating ourselves up when life doesn't look like the Courier and Ives picture. Rather, take a small step today and seek joy.



Bob's Perspective:

(Re)Discovering joy needs to be a way of life. I personally find joy in being a pessimist. At one point in my life I was an optimist, but I found with that I was always depressed. No matter what I planned, it never seemed to work out perfectly – and that was depressing. As a pessimist, I'm always happy because by and large things always go better than I thought they would.

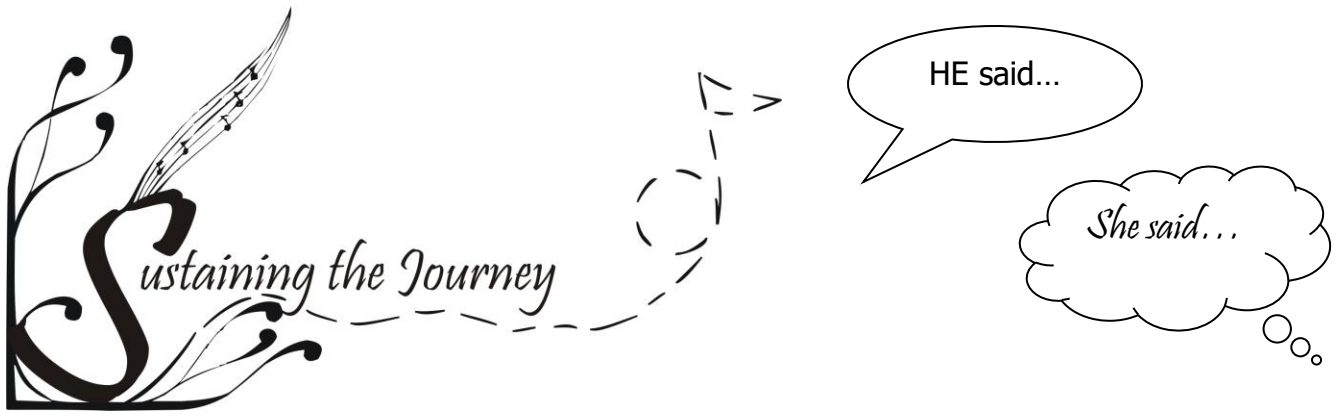
Ho-hum...if only all that was true!

The one thing that's absolutely true is that being joyful really does need to be a way of life. Recall, if you will, the old adage about the glass being half empty or half full. This can take a bit of work in the beginning (especially if the glass contains prune juice), but looking at life through the eyes of positivity helps to change attitudes – not only our own attitude – but that of others as well. Misery breeds misery and joy breeds joy.

Case in point, over the last several months I've been in the process of cleaning out my office. The office has been my home-away-from-home for the last twenty-two years – so a lot of stuff was accumulated. Although my retirement is self-imposed, it's still a bittersweet affair. In the aforementioned months, I've carted a grand total of twenty-seven bags of stuff to the dumpster, four big boxes of recyclables to the bin, and an assortment of framed pictures and boxes to my home. Contained within all those vessels were loads of memories (both happy and not-so-happy). At times it would have been easy to slip into a funk. But as it's been said time and time again, happiness (being joyful) is a matter of choice. And choosing to be joyful (or happy) becomes habit-forming with a little practice.

To look at my office a few months ago, one might have been able to say that the cleaning out project was an overwhelming prospect – lacking any hope of a joyful experience. However, taking just a little corner of the room at a time, I worked hard to find joyful moments in the memories I rediscovered – and it worked (at least somewhat). I looked to find joy in the headway that I accomplished each day – and that helped. Now as I write this blog (with only a few weeks left in full time employment), my office is pretty bare – devoid of most decorations, personality, etc. However, I'm joyful in looking forward to new adventures and experiences.

Way back when I was in Catholic parochial school, we were required to go to Mass every day of the school year (at that age, not usually the most joyful of events). In my years of 7th and 8th grade (1968-70), liturgical (I use this term loosely) music began to trend toward a more contemporary style – much of which could have easily been led by the New Christy Minstrels or Peter, Paul and Mary. As part of our school faculty, we were deemed fortunate to have a "young modern teacher" (as my parents referred to her) who played the guitar and directed our morning musical worship experience. At LEAST once a week, we sang a particular song that drove me bonkers. It was a song about joy that I couldn't wait to stop singing (and God help us if we didn't sing). The song was even used at our "Graduation Mass."



I haven't thought about that song for years. But the funny thing is that, in the context of my recent experience, the melody began to roll around in my head. As I started to remember the lyrics, I realized that the sentiment wasn't half bad. It was sung during a time when we were at war in Viet Nam, while there was much civil unrest here at home. While I would highly question its use in a liturgical setting, I have to admit that I especially like what the last verse has to say: "I saw raindrops on the river. Joy is like the rain. Bit by bit the river grows, till all at once it overflows. Joy is like the rain." (*Written by Sister Miriam Therese Winter*).

Given the current state of affairs in our society – all of the negativity, racial unrest, COVID, _____ (you fill in the blank), etc., it seems that we could all stand to work a little harder to (RE)Discover Joy and pass it along. Maybe this simple message isn't such a bad place to start.

To hear the song in its entirety go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PiE8gwCYKg>