This essay was presented as a work in progress. Please do not cite without the author's permission.

James K.A. Smith

Diagnosing our Joylessness:
Some Hypotheses

Prepared for Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation on “State of Joy,” September 5-6, 2014
Diagnosing our Joylessness:  
Some Hypotheses

James K.A. Smith, Calvin College

Defining Joy: A Phenomenological Exercise

(a) Experiences of Joy

Before assessing the “state of joy” in late modern, market-driven societies, let me try to get a handle on the phenomenon we are looking for—even if our task might be to discern why we can’t find it. For lack of a better strategy, and without a stipulated definition, I undertook a kind of first-person phenomenology (which clearly has its methodological limits), trying to plumb the features of joy in some of my own experiences.¹ Several sorts of instances—vignettes of a deep sense of joy—came to mind as “snapshots” of the phenomenon:

Some of the moments of joy were remarkable, “special,” out-of-the-ordinary experiences in which I was lifted out of daily routines and “everyday” concerns. For example, I recall a stunning day with my family snorkeling among manatees in Silver Spring, FL. Indeed, a photo from that day sits above me at my desk as I write this: All six of us are beaming with smiles in crystal clear water of a hidden lagoon surrounded by a veritable rainforest. It is not only unforgettable in hindsight; we all had a sense of something special in the happening.

Or I can recall a moment a couple of summers ago on a small lake in northern Michigan in which I had an experience of what I can only call “joy” that was almost epiphanic, but in a mode of quiet realization. I was floating on the lake in a kayak while the rest of our family was

¹ I now see that almost all of these experiences that I considered revolve around my family, which seems rather narrow. I don’t have a good account of that (it might be due to the distinct lack of experience of joy in my family of origin); in any case, I don’t mean to tie joy only to the familial.
all in view: some resting on the dock, a couple of the kids on paddleboards (one with our little
dog Daisy calmly perched on the prow). We were unhooked from our phones and wifi and the
weight of “connection;” everyone was present to the moment and to one another; the lake was
calm and quiet; and I was overwhelmed by a sense of rest and reassurance.

These moments of joy attend experiences of disembedding\(^2\) that seem to have a kind of
focusing power that enables one to see a more enduring reality.

But joy does not necessarily require such extraordinary measures. I can think of
realizations of joy very much embedded in the everyday: on afternoons where my wife and I see
all four of our (pretty much grown) children truly enjoying one another as friends, we are
recipients of a deep sense that ‘all is right with the world’—or, more specifically, all is right with
our world in such moments, and that hopes and dreams are being realized.\(^3\) Or I can recall a
more recent experience: one morning, while enjoying breakfast with my wife at a local diner—
something we’ve done dozens and dozens of times—I was struck by the revelation that this
person has chosen to love me for 24 years, despite also knowing everything about me, and I
experienced a kind of grateful astonishment, a sense of being on the receiving end of nothing
short of grace.

So as not to limit the field of concern only to my personal experience, consider also the
emergence of joy in someone like Blaise Pascal. In particular I have in mind that searing
testimonial document was know as “The Memorial,” Pascal’s hurried recounting of a mystical

\(^2\) I recognize that, to some extent, these experiences of “escape” are made possible by sufficient resources
that an upper middle class way of life provides (e.g., “vacations”). In this sense, some accomplishments and
arrangements of modernity afford an escape to joy that is at the same time an escape from other aspects of
modernity.

\(^3\) Without any illusions about how overwhelmingly subjective such a state of joy is. No matter our account
of joy, it seems that the reality of joy is not simply precluded by the reality of evil.
experience that was so dear to him he had the paper sown into his jacket so as to always have it near his heart. I cite only selectively, beginning with the opening testimony:

_Fire._
_God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob._
_Not of philosophers and scholars._
_Certainty, joy, certainty, emotion, sight, joy_
_God of Jesus Christ._
_Deum meum et Deum vestrum. …_

He goes on to simply recite “Joy, Joy, Joy and tears of joy,” and concludes:

_Total submission to Jesus Christ and my director._
_Everlasting joy for one day’s tribulation on earth._

Are there features of my experiences of joy that are shared with Pascal’s mystical experience?
Can we outline a kind of phenomenology of joy?

(b) Phenomenological Features of Joy

Trying to delineate common features of these “experiences” of joy, it seems to me that, while joy can by crystallized into discrete “experiences”—that is, joy can have episodic “highlights” that bring it to the surface of realization—nonetheless such _experiences_ of joy actually relate to a more baseline, steady-state posture of _receptivity_, bound up with gratitude, as the condition of possibility for such epiphanic moments. Such “moments” of joy tend to be revelations and recognitions of the giftedness of one’s world—which, in those moments, is recognized to be a reality _even when one doesn’t notice it_. Perhaps we could say that joy is intimately linked to a
sense of blessing, a sense of grace. (In this respect, I am reminded of Bernanos’ “country priest” who, upon dying, would attest: “Grace is everywhere…”)

It also seems that such joy is relational: it is not only shared with others, and occasioned by relationships, but wells up from a sense of having received a gift from someone (Someone?). In a relational context, joy emerges from a sense of resting on someone who gives; in such a context, having received—being a recipient—is not experienced as a debt but rather as the basis for joy. So the stance of receptivity that seems integral to joy points to a relational context of another—a giver or givers (or Giver). Perhaps one could say that joy is a mode of enjoying gratitude which, it must be said, is being in a state of enjoying being a recipient, where being on the receiving end of a gift is not a resentment of being indebted but an open welcome of such gift-ing. It presupposes recognition of one’s finitude, one’s “indebtedness” (though not experienced as “debt”) as a good feature of a “blessed” creaturely life. (One wonders, then, if only those creatures who can resent can also be joyful.)

In this way, joy seems inextricably linked to both gratitude and contentment as the baseline from which joyous revelations/epiphanies emerge. Indeed, joy might be almost synonymous with peace, a kind of attendant effect (per Gal. 5:22?) such that it’s hard to imagine joy being present without peace, and vice versa.

Joy Blocks?
If joy is a receptive, relational experience or attitude\(^4\) in which I enjoy the state of being gift-ed (and hence “indebted,” in a sense), then we might also be able to consider those aspects of late modern, market-driven societies that “block” or inhibit joy.

(a) Autonomy, Independence, and Disenchantment

For example, if something like the phenomenological account above is correct, then ardent assertions of autonomy and independence would short-circuit joy precisely because such notions of autonomy and independence refuse the richly relational context required for joy and, more fundamentally, deny the indebtedness (giftedness) of creaturely dependence.\(^5\) Such micro- or individual senses of autonomy and independence are often embedded within wider macro-assertions of independence in cosmologies that deny any sort of metaphysical dependence upon a “beyond, an “Other,” a “Someone,” a Giver. If, as Charles Taylor has suggested, modern cosmologies have reconfigured our milieu as an “immanent frame,” then being ensconced in immanence already removes some of the conditions of joy—a fundamental sense of having been “blessed,” receiving a gift from an Other.\(^6\) In this sense, disenchantment is a serious hindrance to the experience of joy.\(^7\) A cosmological refusal of a state of dependence might be refusing one

---

\(^4\) In a phenomenological mode we might ask if joy is a distinct way of intending the world. However, like other modes of intentionally (particularly as explored by Jean-Luc Marion)


\(^6\) Or at least this scenario is complicated. One can see examples of reconfiguring the Earth or the Cosmos itself as a kind of Giver (I’m thinking of the poetry of Gary Snyder)—so that, in Taylor’s terms, one gets some of the existential capital of a transcendent Creator without really positing something or Someone beyond creation. Or similarly, one can extol the nation-state as the great Provider and Blesser of our existence (just watch any NFL game in the United States on Thanksgiving day and note to whom (or what) they are giving thanks: it is usually the power of the nation-state as symbolized by the presence of the military.

\(^7\) And as Taylor has suggested in *A Secular Age*, this “immanentization” of our implicit cosmologies (our “modern social imaginary,” as he puts it) is something that also impacts believers. In other words, religious communities may underestimate the extent to which they operate within a *de facto* immanent frame. As a result, even religious practices are not necessarily an antidote to assertions of autonomy and independence.
of the every conditions of joy. If peace and joy are *gifts*, then in a re-made world in which everything is a matter of *our* accomplishment, joy and peace are precluded.

In an Augustinian mode, these are individual, cosmological, and even societal expressions of *pride*. Here we might note an interesting connection attested to by Pascal who found joy in *submission* (yea, “total submission”). This is a theme that recurs throughout the *Pensées*. The anxious soul, for Pascal—which is the self who lacks true self-knowledge—is one who refuses to submit: “Be aware then, proud men,” he cautions, “what a paradox you are to yourselves. Humble yourself, powerless reason! Be silent, foolish nature! Learn that humanity infinitely transcends humanity and hear from your Master your true condition of which you are unaware” (§164). There is no joy to be found in self-assertion, and joy will elude a society bent on self-assertion.

(b) Boredom, *Angst*, and Restlessness

If joy and peace are intertwined, then the absence of joy is not necessarily or only sadness, nor merely apathy; the joyless society is *restive*. The iconic line from the opening of Augustine’s *Confessions* comes to mind: “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are *restless* until they rest in you.” The analysis here—and the narrative that follows—suggests that Augustine’s pursuit of “rest” is a pursuit of *peace*, happiness of the eudaimonistic sort. The disordered soul is not simply unhappy but *restless*, angsty, unsettled, frenetically pursuing rest from things that can never give it (“looking for love in all the wrong places,” as Johnny Lee once crooned).

Again, this restlessness seems bound up with a more fundamental posture: in Augustine’s terms, it is a matter of (wrongly) expecting aspects of the creation to return the love that can only
be given by the Creator. Nothing within the immanent frame can adequately sustain such
dependence.

Pascal, a later Augustinian, gives us further insight here: It is precisely our
disappointments and failure to satisfy this craving for peace/happiness/eudaimonia that compels
us to distract ourselves from the fact that we lack peace.

In spite of these wretchednesses he [the human person] wants to be happy, he
only wants to be happy, and cannot not want to be happy. But how will he set
about it? The only way would be to become immortal. But he cannot, so has
decided to stop himself from thinking about it (Pensées, §166).

In other words, our diversions and distractions are not attempts to satisfy this baseline longing
(which, I would argue, requires owning up to our dependence and then gladly receiving a gift);
the distractions are our way of trying to forget that they can’t. It’s “why we prefer the hunt to
the kill” (§168).

In such a frantic, frenetic self—expanded, one might suggested, into a frantic, frenetic
society in late modernity—the instinct to seek repose and quiet quickly slides into the experience
of boredom (ibid.) in which the world returns nothing, “all is vanity,” and we are compelled back
to distraction in order to escape the nihil of a world that bores us.  

The corpus of novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace provides a lot of insight into
how these aspects of distraction, boredom, and a return to distraction now suffuse late modern
culture, particularly in its “entertainments” (that Wallace did so before the ubiquity of the
internet only deepens his insight). As he commented to journalist David Lipsky,

we’re absolutely dying to give ourselves away to something. To run, to escape,
somehow. And there’s some kinds of escapes—in a sort of Flannery
O’Connorish way—that end up, in a twist, make you confront yourself even
more. And then there are other kinds that say, “Give me seven dollars, and in

8 Cp. also Jean-Luc Marion, God Without Being, pp. 115ff.
return I will make you forget your name is David Wallace, that you have a pimple on your cheek, and that your gas bill is due.” And that’s fine, in low doses. But there’s something about the machinery of our relationship to [entertainment] that makes low doses—we don’t stop at low doses.\(^9\)

This sense of giving oneself away is related to my earlier point about dependence, refusing autonomy, and hence not being receptive to the giftedness of creaturehood. While we want to give ourselves away—which, I think, is a condition of hope—insofar as we give ourselves over to “immanent” sources and distractions, we are hindered from experience joy.

(c) Self-consciousness

This brings me to a final aspect of late modern culture that I think hinders joy: self-consciousness. Both Charles Taylor and David Foster Wallace have astutely diagnoses the extent to which late modern society is one of “mutual display”: where being is bound up with being seen. In a somewhat neglected essay, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (written long before the advent of social media), Wallace pointed out how he and his generation of writers (the “conspicuously young”) emerged in the echo chamber of self-consciousness. And this inevitably influenced American fiction.

In particular, Wallace points out that the conspicuously young (Wallace, Jay McInerney, Brett Ellis, and others) were the first generation of writers to grow up with the ubiquity of television. “The American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom television is something to be lived with, not just looked at.”\(^{10}\) Here lies an important difference between Roth, Updike and Bellow vs. Wallace, Franzen, and Zadie Smith: “We quite literally cannot

---

\(^9\) Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*, p. 81.

‘imagine’ life without [television]. As it does for so much of today’s developed world, it presents and so defines our common experience; but we, unlike any elders, have no memory of a world without such electronic definition. It’s built in.”

It may seem quaint to carp on television today (“So analog!”), but Wallace’s analysis is prescient. For it is already with television that we see a reconfiguration of social space as a space of mutual display:

A mysterious beast like television begins, the more sophisticated it gets, to produce and live by an antinomy, a phenomenon whose strength lies in its contradiction: aimed ever and always at groups, masses, markets, collectivities, it’s nevertheless true that the most powerful and lasting changes are wrought by TV on individual persons, each one of whom is forced every day to understand himself in relation to the Groups by virtue of which he seems to exist at all.11

The gaze of the camera on some becomes the ubiquitous gaze under which we all constantly live. “Prolonged exposure to broadcast drama,” Wallace notes, “makes each one of us at once more self-conscious and less reflective.” When all of us are constituted as an audience, then all the world becomes a TV. “We, the audience, receive unconscious reinforcement of the thesis that the most significant feature of persons is watchableness, and that contemporary human worth is not just isomorphic with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching.” Here is that unique and distorted mode of “being-with” observed by Taylor: to be is to be seen. It is Wallace who situates this in a philosophical heritage: “Imagine a Berkleyan esse-est-percipi universe in which God is named Nielsen.”12

One could argue that this dynamic of being watched, of having a sense of always being on display, is a significant “block” to joy since joy is found in an experience of losing oneself, of being caught up in something bigger, something beyond. Such experiences of joy do not require

11 Ibid., 6.
12 Ibid., 7.
the dissolution of consciousness, but they do seem to require a release from self-consciousness. Joy is a mode of receptivity wherein one is most aware of others, of an Other, even a Giver. It might include awareness of the “blessings” one enjoys, of a reality that one re-appreciates. But that recognition and awareness seems linked with a welcome look away from self-focus and narcissistic fixation. Insofar as our society seems bent on fostering (if not fomenting) the latter, it seems we shouldn’t be surprised by the absence of the former, i.e., joy.