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 Arlington Street Church
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Shared Joy

“Shared joy is double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.” It’s a Swedish proverb, true everywhere. In Pali, the language of the Buddha, “shared joy,” *mudita*, translates as “sympathetic” or “altruistic” or “vicarious” joy, the joy that “arises in the shared delight of other people’s good fortune.”¹ It is considered one of the highest states of being; the so-called “divine abodes of the mind” or “heavenly abodes.”

The Pali word for the heavenly abodes is *brahmavihāras*; there are four of them. In addition to shared joy, can you imagine what mind-states are considered divine? They are lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity. Note that three of them – lovingkindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy – three of the four highest, most profoundly liberated frames of mind have to do with our relationships to others. The fourth – equanimity – is the spaciousness and peace we cultivate and experience in response to our hearts being moved by holding the whole earth in our hearts. Shared joy is traditionally regarded as the most difficult of the four to cultivate.

Knowing this makes it easier to understand one of my favorite stories about the Dalai Lama. “In 1990, [His Holiness] met with a group of Western researchers and Buddhist teachers at the third Mind and Life Conference in Dharamsala, India. Sharon Salzberg, [co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts], asked him how to help her students with their feelings of worthlessness and shame. The other Western participants eagerly awaited His Holiness’ response, because [they’d] all encountered this issue among their ... students.

“The Dalai Lama, [who speaks excellent English,] turned to his translator for an explanation of this question [about low self-esteem]. They began a lengthy, increasingly rapid conversation in Tibetan. Finally, it seemed the translator was successful. When [His Holiness] understood the question, [he] was surprised; he had never heard of such a condition. He asked the participants if they were certain their students and their

1 Sylvia Boorstein, *It’s Easier Than You Think*, p. 127

patients really suffered from this problem. They assured him ... they did. They saw it in the people [with whom] they worked ..., and even in themselves. Incredulous, he pointed to each one and asked, 'Do you experience this? You? And you?' They all nodded yes. He seemed genuinely shocked. Why, [he asked,] would you dislike your *self*?'²

In other words, the Dalai Lama couldn't grok it, because there is no Tibetan word for self-esteem, let alone a Tibetan experience of what we in the west know so well as low self-esteem.

His Holiness exhorts us to share others' joy, perhaps if for no other reason than the chances of increasing our own – multiplying our chances of joy by that of the entire population of the earth: approximately six billion, eight-hundred and ninety-six million, five hundred thousand ... to one. Good odds!³

Shall we reconsider low self-esteem?

T. Wyatt Watkins is the author of *What Our Kids Teach Us About Prayer*. He tells this story:

“Our son has lately taken up a new prayer. At first, I found it jarring... Seth has been regularly thanking G*d for himself.

“Such a prayer,” he continues, “is unprecedented in my experience. At the end of a long litany of thanksgiving for everything from soccer to cinnamon rolls, [Seth] will conclude, simply, '... and thank you, G*d, for me!'”

“Nothing fancy,” T. Wyatt Watkins concludes. “Just a straightforward expression of satisfaction at his own existence. And yet I've come to view it as nothing short of revolutionary. What possesses my son to thank G*d each night for himself? Where does he get the nerve? Until Seth uttered those words, it had never occurred to me that anyone could – or should!”⁴ *Imagine!*

This problem with love of self is why shared joy is more complex than it appears

2 Susan Piver, “Out of Fear,” in *Shambhala Sun*, May, 2007, p. 72

3 Sylvia Boorstein, *op cit*, p. 139

4 T. Wyatt Watkins, “Unfettered Wonder: Rediscovering Prayer Through the Inspired Voiced of Children, pp. 141-142 (see Chapter 8), in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives and Best Practices*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen

at first blush, more complicated for those of us in the west than it might be for other good people. Here's Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein to give us the view:

Years ago, she writes, “Jerry Rice, the San Francisco wide receiver, was interviewed by Al Michaels during the halftime of the Forty-Niners versus Saints game on Monday Night Football. They talked about the various league records Rice already held. Al asked, 'Which other records would you like before you retire?' Jerry smiled and said, 'I'd like them all.' Then Al asked, 'Of all the great moments of your career, which stands out for you as the greatest?'

“It was when we won Super Bowl XXIII,” Jerry replied. 'It was my first Super Bowl, and in the last two minutes of the game, Joe Montana threw a pass to John Taylor, who was in the end zone. John Taylor caught that pass, *but I felt as if [I'd caught it!]*”

That's shared joy – sympathetic, altruistic, shared joy. There was more than enough joy to go around; in that moment, who caught the ball was actually a little bit beside the point. *Everyone* was ecstatic.

But, writes Sylvia Boorstein, “I think we often feel almost-altruistic joy. Something wonderful happens to someone else. We feel genuine delight. And then into the mind ... [sneaks] the thought, 'I'd like a little of that particular good fortune myself.'

Someone wins the lottery. There it is on the news, or even in a commercial: a woman opens her door, and is presented with a check for ten million dollars. Sylvia writes, “I have some moments of genuine pleasure as I see the amazed winner laughing and crying with happiness. Then I think something [such as], 'I wonder what I would do if that happened to me.'

“Of course,' I remind myself immediately, 'I would give most of it away. At least seventy-five percent of it. Maybe fifty percent. Then I'd give the rest to my children. They could pay off their mortgages.' Then I remember, 'They are doing fine on their mortgages. I'll put it into trust funds for my grandchildren's college education.' Then I think, 'Hey, it's a least ten years before [the oldest] starts college, and who knows what [Collin] will be like at that time, or [how] colleges will be... Maybe Seymour and I could take one of those three-month freighter trips around the world. Can't do that, though; [he hates boats.] ...”

In a matter of seconds, Sylvia's mind is “filled with schemes for personal pleasure

– all out of nowhere.” And the truth is, “before the person on television appeared with her check, [she] was feeling quite [happy]....”

“I begin to feel envy,” she continues. “I reprimand myself by thinking, 'What's the matter with you, Sylvia? Your cup runneth over...!’

And then, here's the most beautiful thing Sylvia Boorstein has to say about all this: “It's not a question of whether [or not] the cup runs over.... The world is so full of wonderful things, there is no end of things to put into the cup. ...[But] when we see clearly, we see that *there is only one cup*.”

“In Super Bowl XXIII,” she concludes, “when Joe Montana threw that touchdown pass, John Taylor was in the right place. Jerry Rice's mind was also in the right place.”⁵

Here's a beautiful poem to go on. I'll read it twice. It was written by Polish poet and Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz.⁶ It's called *Love*.

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.

And whoever sees that way heals [their] heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills.
A bird and a tree say to [you]: Friend.
Then [you want] to use [yourself] and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether [you know] what [you serve]:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.

*

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5 Sylvia Boorstein, *op cit*, pp. 139-141

6 Pronounced CHESS-weff ME-woe-sh (sort of!)

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Beloved spiritual companions, let's get our minds in the right place ... and our hearts, and our hands: open minds, open hearts, open hands. Cultivating shared joy – double joy – offers us the opportunity to make of earth a heavenly abode. May we reconsider the meanings of self-esteem, and seek to live with lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity, and shared joy. Whoever sees that way – whoever serves that way – heals their heart. *Thank you, g*d, for you.*