

Ode to Joy!

Robert A. Rees

*“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”
—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.*

Note: Robert A. Rees delivered this devotional at the 2013 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, Utah, August 3, 2013.

One of the joys of being married to my late wife Ruth is that she opened the world of sacred music to me. I had grown up in a culturally deprived home, with no inkling of another world with such creatures in it as Bach, Mozart, Byrd, Beethoven, Hayden, and Handel. Shortly after we were married, Ruth took me to hear Bach’s great *Passion According to St. Matthew* at the First Congregational Church in Madison, Wisconsin. My feeling was like that of a man I once saw in a film. After being institutionalized for some years, he had gone to a performance of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. He said simply, “I went to hear the music and I came alive!” I did indeed come alive that day. What I experienced hearing Bach’s musical rendering of St. Matthew’s gospel was overwhelming joy. I can remember it as a sensation that I felt all over my body and all inside it at the same time—somehow my entire being seemed bathed in that sublime, heightened emotion. At the memorial service we held for Ruth a few weeks after her passing, I said the following, “I had never known such music existed. As I listened that day to the arias, choruses and chorales, Bach’s exquisite melding of truth and beauty resonated so deeply in my soul that I was transformed. My life has not been the same since.”

Because I was blessed to be married to one of the truly gifted choral conductors in the Church, I had many opportunities to sing and hear such music. Ruth and I celebrated Christmas and

especially Holy Week by listening to these great sacred musical expressions. In the eighteen months since Ruth's passing, I have often recaptured the sweet, yet profound emotional intimacy we shared by listening to the masses, requiems, oratorios, passions, motets and other modes of "thought-felt" sacred expressions. Nothing puts me in a holy place more quickly and in a more sustained way than listening to such music, perhaps especially to Bach's great *Mass in B-Minor*, which many consider the greatest work of sacred choral music in the world.

What I felt that day in Madison and have felt many times since was joy, pure joy. It is a supreme, even sublime emotion, one which we share with divine beings and is, I am convinced, one of the great gifts our Heavenly Parents have created to tempt us back to their presence. According to modern revelation, out of love, our Heavenly Father and Mother designed the world and the plan of salvation in order that their children might, from the beginning, have opportunities to experience this elevated emotion—and experience it in abundance. Paraphrasing Nephi, "Adam and Eve fell that we might become mortal and we are—i.e., have being—so that we might experience joy." If Nephi is correct, then part of the object and design of our existence—of both our mortal and immortal/eternal lives—is that we might have some measure of joy in this life and a full measure of it in the eternal worlds.

That is, if we are created in their physical and intellectual images, as we believe we are, then it makes sense that we are also created in their emotional and spiritual images—male and female. Our enlightened Latter-day Saint doctrine of exaltation promises that through our faithfulness we can inherit all that God has and enjoys. From our pre-existent perch observing the laying of the foundation of our earthly habitation and the placement of the cornerstone (Christ, offering to make it possible for us to return to our mansions on high), as Job says, not only the cosmos ("the morning stars sang together") but all of us, the sons and daughters of God, "shouted for joy" (38:6–7). Our joy was not spoken nor sung, but shouted—a full-hearted, full-spirited exultation at this bright promise. We sang for joy knowing that joy would be our earthly and heavily inheritance.

Another way to put this is that the experience of joy may be

one of the ways the gods have designed for us to have a taste of the possible heightened emotional experiences that characterize their lives and our promised life with them. As Terryl and Fiona Givens state, “It is as if God’s own nature spills over, and His goodness multiplies through a progeny that will share in His own capacity for joyful activity and love-filled relationships.”¹ As David sang, knowing that ultimately God would free him from his own self-created hell: “In thy presence is fullness of joy” (Psalm 16:11), or, as Isaiah says, “The redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy” (51:11).

We could not experience joy if we didn’t also know sorrow, but we are promised in the same scripture from Isaiah that our “sorrow and mourning shall flee away” (Psalm 51:11). This is the promise Jesus made to his disciples as he was about to leave them: “You shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. . . . I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you” (John 16: 20, 22). Perhaps that what “re-joyce” means—to feel joy again. As Paul says to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (4:4, NIV). The joy we feel in Christ here, we will feel again there. Peter uses both words when he tells us: “Rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

In attempting to understand the depth and breadth of our joyful feelings, I find a clue in Peter’s words. To begin with, he calls it “unspeakable,”—suggesting that had we all the power of heart and tongue, we would still not be able adequately to describe this experience, perhaps partly because it is more than an emotion—at least in the way we normally think of emotions. The dictionary suggests one added dimension when it says that some emotions are “usually accompanied by certain physiological changes.” This appears true of joy in that we seem to feel it all over and throughout our entire being—in our brain, our heart, along the surface of our skin, in our bones and, somehow, deep in our gut and in our souls. Earlier, I suggested that we may experience it on the cellular and perhaps even the genetic level. Some scholars consider that joy is one of the emotions which “combine physical, psychological, private, public, conceptual, and cultural dimensions.”² The Free Dictionary says it is “an intense and especially an ecstatic or exultant happiness.”

The reason why we are unable to fully articulate what we expe-

rience when we feel joy might be suggested by King Benjamin's reminding us that such inarticulateness may be a direct result of God wanting us to simply experience this emotion, not talk about it. King Benjamin says, God has "poured out his spirit upon you and has caused that your hearts should be filled with joy, and has caused that your mouths should be stopped that ye could not find utterance, so exceedingly great was your joy" (Mosiah 4:20). Perhaps the reason this is so is that as soon as we try to describe joy, we move away from the clarity and purity of its emotional resonance. We turn our attention away from our hearts, which God fills with joy, to our minds that we fill with linguistic and cognitive queries—or, in other, clearer terms, words or the search for words—which unfortunately we feel compelled to do, even as I am doing at present.

The other clue to unraveling the mystery of joy is found in Peter's phrase, "Rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." What is a joy "full of glory"? Elsewhere, I have suggested that the kingdoms we are promised in the next world are essentially kingdoms of love and light and that we choose our kingdom and its glory based on the level of light and love we desire and embrace here. Thus, as I speculate, "The celestial kingdom is reserved for those who have learned to love themselves, others, and God; the terrestrial kingdom for those who have learned to love themselves and others; and the telestial kingdom for those who chose to love only themselves. The love of the first will be as bright and as warm as the sun, while the love of the second and third will be comparable, respectively, to the light and warmth of the moon and stars. Outer darkness is reserved for those who, in spite of all the opportunities given them in mortality, are unable to give or receive love of any kind. . . . Thus, outer darkness is merely the reflection of inner darkness, the heart of darkness in which there is no love and therefore no light."³

As I have continued to probe the meaning of joy, I have come to the conclusion that joy, love, and light are somehow deeply, inextricably interconnected and, further, that such a combination creates glory. This seems inherent in Peter's speaking of joy which is "full of glory" and of Psalms 16:9, which associates joy with glory: "Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth."

The dictionary defines glory as “a state of absolute happiness,”⁴ which comes close to definitions of joy as a “deeper form of happiness” or “an abiding sense of happiness,” although none of these seems adequate to describe what I have earlier called an indescribable feeling. In relation to “glory,” another dictionary uses words like “magnificence,” “resplendence,” and “gratification” and calls it “the splendor and beatific happiness of heaven,”⁵ which may come closer to describing joy. Joy is feeling of fullness, abundance, and plentitude.

Christ’s prayer to His Father, in which He gives an accounting of his mission (John 17:1–26) includes some insight into the relationship between his teachings and joy: “And now I am coming to thee; but while I am still in the world I speak these words, so that they may have my joy within them in full measure” (17:13, NEB). Earlier, He had given a similar message to his followers: “I have spoken this to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete” (John 15:11, NEB). Thus, Christ is not only the Lord of love and light, but also the Lord of joy. Those of us who have taken Him into our hearts experience that joy—his joy.

The “good tidings of great joy” of which the angels (that is, all of us!) spoke to the shepherds on that star-blessed night were inextricably bound to the cross, for as Paul wrote to the Hebrews, “For the joy that was set before him [Christ] endured the cross” (12:2). That is, his joy in redeeming us makes possible our joy in being redeemed by him. This is beautifully expressed both in words and music in the last movement of Bach’s Cantata 147, “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”:

Jesu, joy of man’s desiring,
 Holy wisdom, Love most bright,
 Drawn by thee, our souls aspiring
 Soar to uncreated light. . . .
 Thou dost ever lead Thine own
 In the love of joys unknown.

The skein of joy connecting Christ’s birth to his crucifixion is made most explicit in Nephi’s vision which he had sought after hearing his father speak of a tree whose fruit “filled [his] soul with exceeding great joy” (1 Nephi 8:12). When the angel asks Nephi the

meaning of the scene in which he sees Mary bearing the Christ child in her arms, Nephi recognizes it as a manifestation of “the love of God which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” which he exclaims is “most desirable above all things.” To which the angel, echoing Lehi’s words, adds, “Yea, and the most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:20–23). Immediately following this scene, Nephi is shown a vision of the tree which his father saw, which is a representation not only of the Tree of Life but of the broken tree on which Christ will be crucified and which Nephi recognizes as also “a representation of the love of God” (26:25) whose fruit “is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits; yea, and it is the greatest of all the gifts of “God” (26:36).

Not only does Christ find joy in his suffering and sacrifice on our behalf, he promises us that we too will find joy in our trials and tribulations. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “We also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance” (5:2, NEB). Or, as James says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). Perhaps this is what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ—or, as with Enoch—to weep with God. Joseph Campbell admonishes us to “find a place inside where there’s joy, and the joy will burn out the pain.”⁶

The key to Christ finding joy even in the face of His great suffering is that in serving others with love (even when it involves suffering and sacrifice) both He and we find joy in bringing joy to others. As Rabindranath Tagore says, “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”⁷ This gives new meaning to the line we sing in “More Holiness Give me”: “More joy in his service” and makes concrete the welcoming Jesus promises to those who take care of “the least of these”: “His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

If joy is such a desired human experience, one is tempted to ask why we don’t experience it more often and in greater measure? I’m no expert and certainly not a guru on this subject, but my limited experience leads me to conclude the following:

- Essentially, experiencing joy is a choice—or at least it is a

choice to put ourselves within the space where joy is more likely to occur. Joy seems related to giving of ourselves in service to God and to others.

- According to what Paul tells the Galatians, joy is one of the gifts of the Spirit (5:22) and therefore, one of the gifts we are invited to seek.
- Sin does not produce joy, nor does violence, hatred, unkindness, or any other behavior that attacks, diminishes or shames another. True joy is not possible for someone who is selfish or self-centered.
- We can find joy in reading the scriptures. As we read in Ecclesiastes, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (3:12).
- Joy seems to be closely associated with music, the kind of music that resonates in our souls. Suzanne Langer says that “The tonal structures we call ‘music’ bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling— . . . not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either and both—the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt. . . . Music is a tonal analogue of the emotive life.”⁸ Langer would make a distinction between music itself, which is not a “language of feeling” because it “lacks one of the basic characteristics of language—fixed association,” but music combined with words which can have a greater impact on our emotive life than either alone. This may be particularly true if the compositional expression comes from a great composer and is on a great or sublime subject. Any of the arts, but perhaps particularly poetry, may have a similar effect. When I think of a metaphor for joy, I think of Emily Dickinson’s words about poetry: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

At this time of year, joy and light and love are captured for me

in listening to the “Gloria” from the B-Minor Mass. The text is “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men and women”—again, the song we all sang the night Jesus was born.

Perhaps it is another piece, or another kind of music altogether that resonates in your soul. I encourage you to find those things that make your heart open joyfully and to compose your own Ode to Joy—and sing it as fully and as often as you can.

Be joyful!

And, being so, do what Emerson says, “Scatter joy.”

Editor’s note: *Links to performances of several of the pieces mentioned in this talk can be found at dialoguejournal.com. We encourage you to listen!*

Notes

1. *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Peak, 2012), 34.

2. Anna Despotopoulou, Elly Ifantidou, and Chryssoula Lascaratou, “Tracking Pain and Joy: Breaching Boundaries, Bridging Fields,” *Introduction to Reconstructing Pain and Joy: Linguistic, Literary, and Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 1. See also, Maria Theodoropoulou, “Metaphor-metonymies of Joy and Happiness in Greek: Towards an Interdisciplinary Perspective,” *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 10, vol. 1 (2012): 156–83.

3. Robert A. Rees, “Forgiving the Church and Loving the Saints: Spiritual Evolution and the Kingdom of God,” *Sunstone* (February 1992): 18–27.

4. <http://www.ask.com/dictionary?q=glory&qsrc=999&o=2801>; accessed 6 July 2013.

5. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glory>; accessed 6 July 2013.

6. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/joy.html#FemaQIWb8gbvVjpe.99>; accessed July 7, 2013.

7. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1953), 27.

8. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1953), 27.