

CHAPTER 2

WHERE DID YOUR JOY GO?

A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five.

-- Groucho Marx

I read somewhere once that there was a point in my life when I was completely joyous about everything in my world. Sure, there was the issue of needing a change and being hungry, but otherwise I felt loved and admired by nearly everyone I came in contact with.

Like me, you probably don't remember this sense of unbridled joy, because back in those days you didn't have words for what you were experiencing. So you gurgled and shrieked and giggled and made up sounds that tried to convey your sense of delight. Unfortunately, no one could understand you.

But joyous you were. Most likely your parents beamed with pride as you tried to explain the wonders you were discovering in the incredible world around you. You rambled on in your private language but your parents, grandparents and even strangers in the supermarket knew how delighted you were to be alive.

So the question is, what happened? Where did that joy go?

As an infant you believed you were loved and that everyone around you had your best interests at heart.

If you saw something you wanted you simply went for it. You never

asked yourself, "Do I deserve this? Is it okay for me to have this? What happens if I reach for it and fall from my high chair?"

No, you simply thought, "That cookie looks good. It is probably delicious and will bring me joy." So you crawled, reached, cried, and did anything you could to get that cookie. If you weren't able to get your parents' attention, the family dog could easily distract you. If you never got the cookie that was okay because by the time you awoke from your nap you no longer remembered the cookie. You simply went forward in life.

Isn't it amazing that you didn't need any self-confidence to do those things? The reason you don't is because you're not even aware of yourself as a separate being. You are one with everyone because you believe that everyone is there to act in your best interest.

Even though society didn't measure your intelligence as especially potent or your ability to reason as developed, you had a level of confidence that allowed you to remain joyous regardless of what people thought of you. Whether one attributes that freedom to lack of experience or lack of cynicism, the end result was simply that people adored your ability to enjoy life and embrace whatever came.

But as the years went by you were taught that sometimes your desires would conflict with those of others. You stopped being welcomed into your parents' bedroom; your grandparents wanted you to be able to use the toilet by yourself; your mother exchanged her breast for a smelly plastic bottle; and your teachers required you to sit still and speak when spoken to. By then your entire worldview had been turned around. The party was over.

In those first five years you lived a life of incredible joy, boundless freedom and marvelous experience as you gazed at the world from your distinctive point of view. Everything from the clouds in the sky to the gooey ooze of a snail on the ground was incredibly interesting and fascinating.

It would have been so delightful to talk about all of those things in school without having to raise your hand or wait your turn. But, unfortunately, the educational system is not designed for you to share your impressions of the universe. It is designed to teach you someone else's.

Very quickly you are taught that your joy, delight, knowledge, opinions and even your tastes are pretty much of zero value to society at large.

By ignoring the free and joyous person you were, society declared your delightful inner world null and void. To your teachers, your parents, and your peers you simply were an empty vessel they could fill with whatever they considered worth knowing. No more bursting out with joy when you saw the first flowers of spring. No more singing unless you could sing on key. Joy became reserved for special occasions and you soon forgot that every day is special.

On top of that, you started learning about all of the things you needed to worry about and fear.

Soon thereafter you learned that acceptance from the group depended on polishing the social skills of gossiping, criticizing and complaining, instead of how to enjoy the moment.

You learned Murphy's Law, Catch-22 and what the word "snafu" originally meant.

Then you are told you will have to struggle and suffer for the majority of your life in order to achieve an amorphous thing labeled "success."

As Jane Nelson puts it, "Where did we get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse? Think of the last time you felt humiliated or treated unfairly. Did you feel like cooperating or doing better?"

Yet so it goes. By the time you're a teenager you have a profound case of Joy Amnesia. You can't remember your joyous infancy, those flashes of delight you still found when you were six, or even how to trust yourself, let alone anyone else.

How sad that is.