

## Serge's Newsletter: Opening to Joy



Dear friend,

I have recently completed a week-long spiritual retreat in Mallorca on the topic of *Opening to Joy*, which I shall be offering again early next year. Here is the introductory talk I gave:

## OPENING TO JOY



### What is joy?

I want to say a few words about joy because I think it is such an important human quality - when we feel joy, we feel connected to a more ebullient us, we feel real and often the best of us comes out - yet sadly, it is not nearly prevalent enough in our society, so attached are we to the dramas going on out in the world and to the belief that the reality portrayed to us by our media, is the only reality there is.

Well, folks, it ain't! There are very abundant states of being waiting for us to embrace them if only we choose to do so!

So the first thing I'll say about joy is that I don't think it can be directly sought. Certainly, it does not come by trying to live a life of avoiding pain. In fact, often, it accompanies pain or is its flip side. William Blake understood this and begun one of his little poems with the words:

*Joy and pain are woven fine/a clothing of the life divine...*

Thus, the hedonist who devotes themselves to seeking pleasure - to feeling good and

ersatz forms of it for himself!

Yes, Joy is connected to happiness - we could say, happiness is a very close relative - but it is much more. While happiness comes more from outside us - we are happy if we win the lottery, when we succeed in something - joy is more connected with the inside - with soul; it is much deeper than happiness and sometimes even emerges when there is nothing going on outwardly to make us feel happy.

## Where is joy to be found?

Many people feel joy who possess very little, as it is a quality not so much connected with *having* but with *being*, not with the events that occur for us in our life but how open we are to allowing the spirit of life to flow into us at any time. If our 'being' life or inner life has not come into expression, however many possessions we may have, however materially rich we may be, however many boxes of things we think are important to have, are ticked, while we may experience feelings of satisfaction or being powerful, true joy will probably always elude us, as it is primarily to be found in our inner life.

For me feeling joy is quite subtle and requires that other dimensions of life come into play and if our lives are not lived in such a way as to evoke them, then we won't experience it. If I look at those times in my life when I feel full of joy, they're always when I am connected to my real self and as a result, connected to the larger whole of life. In fact, the stronger our connection to the larger whole of life - to what particularly touches us, be it other people, music, the realm of ideas, nature, our work, etc - the more potential we have to feel joy, and while it is felt by us personally, it is more than 'something personal'. As an archetype, it exists within the world as a whole and therefore, metaphorically speaking, the more of the world out there we are able to hold inside us - that is, the wider our sphere of what it is about life that we include and embrace - the more potential we have for experiencing this quality.

Joy is very much connected to doing things that we love doing. Remember the great mythologist Joseph Campbell's famous remark about choosing to live a life based on 'following my bliss', that is, focussing primarily on whatever our hearts draw us towards, which in his case, was exploring and writing about the mythologies of all the different world culture? I had the privilege of studying with him, and though he was over 80, his whole being radiated profound joy, which was very contagious. In my own little case, when I am with those I love, when I play tennis, swim in the ocean, teach seminars, try in my little way to help people, I feel very connected to myself and I observe joy often springs up. A few days ago, I went very early in the morning to the beach. No one was there. I watched the sun come up and I sank into the quiet warm waters and my heart exploded in joy. To have the full experience, I observed that *my body also needed to be involved*.

I think feeling joy is associated with three main things:

- *Situations of genuineness (and what is more genuine or itself but nature)*
- *Having a quiet mind*
- *Doing our best to live simply.*

One reason why there is so little real joy in the world today is because the way many of us live is artificial, consequently, our minds are often disturbed and we make our lives too complicated.

Therefore, whether or not we experience joy is very much associated with the way we see life and choose to live it.

Which is why on this retreat, we will focus on quietening the mind and exploring what it means to live in a genuine and simple way.

## Joy and stripping away that which is not necessary

Many people talk of downsizing as if it were some terrible burden and I think this is only the case if we are overly attached - as many of us are - to our complications and dramas, which we can use to fill empty spaces inside us. We also identify with our possessions and may feel, say, that we have to have a big house or a big car or a big important project in order to hide our perceived smallness behind and that if we don't have these things,, we will be judged negatively for not having 'made it'? Make what, I ask? Our obsession with trying to prove to others than we are 'OK' or 'better than them' is one of the big reasons behind a) why we don't do much to help others less fortunate than ourselves, and b) feel joyless a lot of the time. Put simply, many of us find it hard to be content with what is; we can never be 'in the now' and so allow ourselves to rest quietly into our deeper beingness. We have to be being busy all the time, always having many appointments and being constantly on the go, as this gives us the feeling of 'being important'. I toil therefore I am, is our anthem! Yukko! The downside is that our 'space' becomes too full ever to allow room for joy, and to make up for our joylessness, we have to work even harder!

In my own personal case, I downsized about six years ago and it was a huge blessing, helping me see that so many of the things I thought I needed, I really didn't! It also felt as if this was what the planet was asking of me - indeed, may be asking of many of us! As such, at a being level, it was really upsizing, and inwardly I have felt all the richer for it. My heart feels so much fuller and has so much more space to sing. And curiously, I find I get more things done as I am operating out of a different, less anxious, space! I also observe how simple little things like a sunset, the smile of a friend, taking my dog for a walk - all things which before in my days of feeling important because I was 'so busy', I used to be blind to, now give me so much pleasure.

Why is this so? Why do little things give me more pleasure now? I think it is because something in me has shifted. I am more open to life, I can savour its many blessings more easily; I have become more of a friend of the earth, and so life on earth is more open to me, is more willing to befriend me, to reveal more of its beautiful mysteries and hidden splendours to me. I guess too, that there are different levels of joy. I remember when I was much younger, I was drawn very much to the whole world of glamour - glamorous ladies, ritzy restaurants, exciting occasions. I'd feel I was missing out if I couldn't attend the latest party - and I guess I needed my joy when it came, to take the form more of strong sensations giving me zing and pazzazz. Yet in comparison to how I may sometimes experience joy today, it felt a rather pale or watered down version of something which now is much gentler yet far more fulfilling.

Today, when I access joy, not only does it fill me more but it fills more of me more (as there is more me available to be filled!) I could say I am perhaps a wee bit more substantial than I was as a young man and so when joy comes my way, it is a more substantial experience. I think in the past, I used to get very little out of a lot, and today I seem to get a lot out of very little because I seem more capable of venturing much deeper into whatever experience may be wending its way towards me at any time, be it a person, a new idea, some sensation or a beautiful landscape. Perhaps it is simply that my diet has changed. Tiny things which before I'd never notice, like the smile of someone I pass in the street, or some idea I'd never thought of before, now feed me a lot. Or perhaps as I just said, I am simply a bit better at savouring life. Applying this analogy to food, I think if given a great meal in the past, I'd just wolf it down without tasting or appreciating it properly and today I eat it slowly and more contemplatively allowing my taste buds to operate more fully.

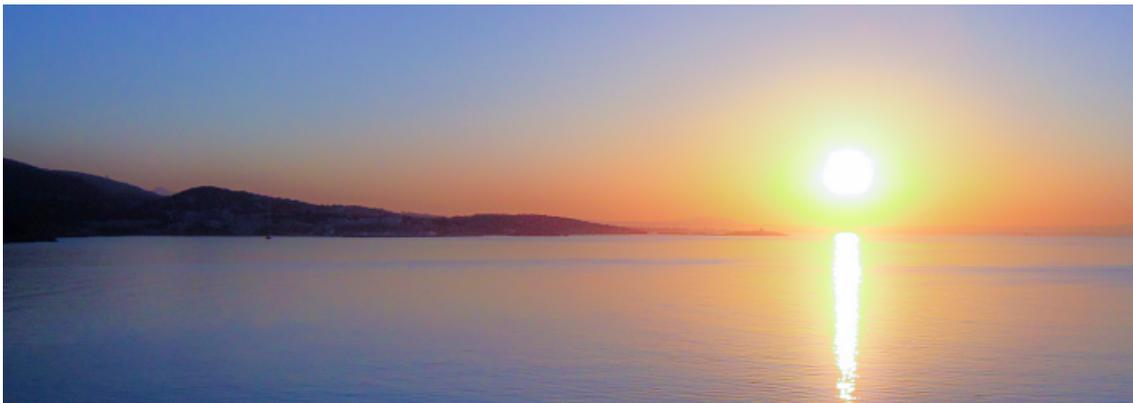
## Preparation

Whereas happiness is more on the surface and as I said, comes more from outside of us, and does not need any great preparation, this is not the same with joy which *does*

aware if we are projecting our negativity onto others, being aware if our lifestyle is healthy and sustainable, being aware of how we might react around certain people, being aware of who we are and our various virtues and vices - we start living a life that is more appropriate and sustainable, and so is much more likely to align us with the archetype of joy. People who are more susceptible to experiencing joy, also tend not only to be connected to their depths, but to their imagination and their creativity; they know why they are here in the world. They are aware that life has a purpose and that in some small way, they are part of the unfurling of that purpose.

A few days ago, I went for a long walk with a good friend and we climbed up to a high point on a cliff and sat looking at the sea and the mountainous terrain around us for an hour. It was a truly magical hour. Joy crept into my heart and expanded it. I felt the power of the earth, the strength of the wind, the warmth of the sun and the softness of the ocean and I felt huge gratitude for being alive and part of this awesome purpose. I also felt I didn't have to prove I was good enough; I didn't have somehow to 'justify' my existence. Just being little me with all my many flaws was sufficient - it was both awesome and humbling - and this felt such a blessing.

Put another way, I felt connected to joy because I also felt connected to what I can only describe as a 'higher power'. I felt the intelligence of life flowing through me. I felt conscious of great purposes working themselves out and I was a tiny part of them. I, like the rocks and bushes around me, was growing out of the earth and I felt big changes coming and I was part in my little way of these big changes, in relation to which my own personal niggles that we can often make so huge when there is nothing more substantial going on for us, were nothing. Teilhard de Chardin once said that 'Joy is a sign of the presence of God' and I fully agree. I felt God's presence very strongly on that cliff. I felt in a holy space; I felt whole. I felt very strongly that life is given us to be enjoyed and celebrated and that feeling remains with me.



Simply put, if our hearts are open and we can see, feel, intuit, sense, embrace, hear, touch life through our hearts, joy is always potentially available to us. If, for whatever reason, our hearts are closed, and we become shut off from that which connects us to the being or the essence of the world around us, we can't be a space for it to show up in our lives. Thus, if we are full of fear, resentment or regret, if we feel uneasy around certain people or have negative beliefs or feel we are not good enough or if we are plagued with hatred, obsession or loneliness, joy will also find it that much harder to peek through. In other words, if we are living in a world where we feel separate from ourselves, from those around us, from nature and from our planet as a whole - for separation equals impoverishment and disconnection - joy, which, I believe, is also

## Need to confront what obscures our joy

Joy, then, is a natural state inside each of us when our psyches are not being grunged up by our various neuroses, fears, grudges and angsts, but if they are there, then we will need to examine them. The way of evasion or avoidance never works. 'If a way to the better there be, it lies in our taking a full look at the worst', says a character in a Thomas Mann novel and I fully agree. So if there is a lot about many of us that is joyless - there is a state called anhedonia which means 'a fear of joy' - and if we find ourselves particularly attached to our suffering, then we will need to get to the bottom of it. A lot of our joylessness is due to our having been brought up by joyless parents in a joyless culture. If, when we were growing up, having heart or being connected to soul, was never properly mirrored for us, we will not feel it necessary to make a connection to these most important dimensions of ourselves. It is surprising how many of us develop identities around being miserable and then become overly attached to them and if joy ever wishes to come our way, we do our best to push it away!

Therefore this week will be about our exploring together what we can do to open our hearts more and live more and more as a space for joy to seek us out. It is so important as this quality is so healing. I am sure we would not have the amount of cancers and heart problems in our society if people had more joy in their lives. However, we will not go out greedily hunting for joy for it doesn't come to us that way. Rather, we will softly prepare ourselves and hope that we will be recognised by this quality and it may rise up inside our hearts. Our camaraderie as a group engaged in this quest will also be a key factor. The more we all take delight in each other's company, the more open we potentially become to experiencing joy.

## Confronting joyless aspects of traditional religion

Part of our journey may well lead us to confront the inherently joyless mind set of 'conventional' Christianity as it has been handed down to us over the years and which still lives inside many of our heads even if we have not been to church for years. It is very sad how many of Jesus' true teachings have been distorted over the years - 'churchified' is the word I like to use, by cold hearted and stern theologians who took the words of the bible literally. For example, theologians like St Augustine did a huge amount of damage by mixing up notions of original sin with sexuality - sex was 'bad' because one lost control - thereby opening the way for junk sex with no sacredness in it, and pornography.

The true Jesus was a healer and shaman (a master of ecstasy) who loved women and felt connected with the earth and recognised its aliveness and intelligence and sacredness and who preached love and compassion and being of service to life, a theme followed up by great beings like St Francis of Assisi or Thomas Aquinas who told us that 'Every human person is capable of the universe'! Sadly, the Christianity we have today is a very watered down affair. Full of piousness, sin and crucifixion, not blessing and joy. Mystics are often viewed as psychopaths. (If God talks to us, put on the straight jacket!) Man's creativity and imagination is discounted. Indeed, the theologian Matthew Fox who was excommunicated for writing a book on the true mystical tradition of Christianity as expressed through people like Hildegarde of Bingen and Aquinas, wrote that *'the greatest tragedy in theology over the last three centuries has been its divorce from poetry, dancing, music, painting and now movie-making, all things that potentially bring joy into our lives.'* The notion of us as blessed and divine has long gone together with the idea of a Great Mother from whose womb all of life emerges. All we are left with is a rigid, punishing patriarchal God, forever judging us for not being perfect, for being 'fallen' and

Thus, we create surplus misery for ourselves because we feel we don't deserve better and shouldn't love ourselves! We also shouldn't enjoy our work. It should be done via the sweat of our brow and we can't "*put down our sword until we've built Jerusalem on England's green and pleasant land*" to quote from William Blake's great poem. In other words, no rest for the wicked! No wonder our society has so many workaholics. The name of the religious game is that we deserve to suffer as our punishment for not being perfect as our father in Heaven was perfect.

Heavy duty stuff, or pretty joyless stuff, and it lives inside all of us subliminally, unless we've done work on ourselves to exorcise it.

## Exploitation

In times past, our planet had been respected. Trees and seas and soil were seen as being alive, animate, sacred. No longer. No wonder the Monsanto mindset feels free to rape the resources of our planet, for the Bible, taken literally, tells us we have dominion both over nature and over women, which is why too, women also get a pretty raw deal. In times past, the divine was embedded in the soil, in earth, in our bodies. God is now only 'above us', transcendent, no longer present in the world around us, in ourselves, others, in rocks and trees and animals and wind and sky and sea. As Nature is de-souled, it doesn't feel, so we can feel free to exploit it, as we are now doing at our peril, for profit. Francis Bacon, a prominent philosopher in the 16th century, continued this myth by suggesting that we can do whatever we want with our planet, to serve our interest. Only the large extractivist oil corporations celebrate.

You may chuckle and say 'Well, I don't go to church; this doesn't affect me'. I say again: sadly, folks, it *does*. The point is that this Judeo-Christian 'original sin' mindset is present in the cultural air we breathe and thus we inherit ideas around original guilt and a repression of joy, together with a predilection for war and conquest, a god that is punishing and male, a planet and a world where women and nature are free to be exploited. A planet of separation not of abundance. I have just been reading the Sunday papers and came across this headline. 'Russian police clamp down on uncontrolled joy at weddings'. The first line goes 'A special wedding police unit has been formed in a southern Russian region to combat 'manifestations of uncontrollable joy'. No doubt that dour-faced Putin set that up. Would he try so hard to recreate the old Russian empire; would he be so repressive of so many freedoms in his country, would he need to amass a personal fortune in the billions, would he be creating a gangster state and invading Ukraine and telling all the lies he tells, resulting in the financial impoverishment of his people due to all the sanctions currently being levied against him, if he felt joy?

The answer, of course, is no. All the autocrats are joyless creatures, projecting upon their subjects the uptightness and repression they experience inside themselves. All wars, prison camps, homophobia, colonialism, ethnic cleansing come out of a state of joylessness and *if we want to do something about the state of the world, one of the best things we can do is learn to bring joy into our lives*.

What I am saying, then, is that much of the evil done in the world is because of our lack of joy. It makes us hard, unloving and uncompassionate. It keeps our hearts clanged shut; it robs us of our humanity. As Osho once said: '*If a man does not know how to joyfully love a woman, he takes up a bayonet and kills other men*'. We see this in the behaviour of ISIS whose sole aim, it seems, is, in the name of Allah, to create a world order of fear and violence utterly denuded of anything creative or joyful. Even music is outlawed. In Fox's words again: '*When we cannot celebrate and reverence the cosmos, we fight it. Our problem is that we are cosmically lonely and the result of this is big ego*

*lost, making us all victims of consumer society.'*

## Experiencing being empowered through connecting to joy

The wonderful thing, though, is that a new world is beginning to emerge. More and more people are realising this and are no longer willing to live by the dictates of old, arid philosophies and instead are striving to bring joy and passion back into the world. Certainly, as one conditioned by joylessness as much as anyone, trying to play my tiny role in helping joy return to the world, has been my aim for 40 years. I hope that in the week we will have together, that we will generate a lot of joy. There was a little chant I learned when I was doing my Shamanic training in the 1970's in Mexico. It went:

*'The Earth is our Mother, we must take care of her, The earth is our mother, we must take care of her.*

*Unite the people. We are one. The sacred ground we walk upon. The sacred ground we walk upon.'*

The biggest healer and teacher of joy is nature which is why we will try and spend as much of our time as possible out of doors. The more we connect with the heart of nature, the more we will learn about the joy inside our own hearts.

Having joy is so important because joyful people can't be so easily controlled. They are much more their own person. This is why the system is threatened by joyful people and does its best to block us from it or criminalise us for it, for if we stay joyless we'll want to consume a lot (buying is always a substitute for being) and the system, to continue operating, needs our continual consumption, needs for quantitative growth and the problem is that if too much qualitative growth occurs, more and more people will see the fallacy of quantitative growth. I will leave the last word with wise old Krishnamurti:

*'Most of us are frightened.... the governments and religions are frightened of us becoming a total individual, because they want us to remain safely within the prison of cultural and environmental influences. But it is only the individuals who break through the social patterns by understanding them and who are therefore not bound by the conditioning of their own minds - it is only such people who can bring about a new civilisation.'*

Hopefully we'll all "break through" this week - out of whatever it is that holds us back from being our full joyful selves, that is, dancing in our own power, creating a world of abundance around us. *This is really a retreat designed to help you bring about a new civilisation.*

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Thank you very much for reading this. Feel free to reply, disagree, share. Maybe see you at my next retreat which will happen early next year.

Love



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