

# ‘Let Us Sing as We Go!’

## Finding Joy in Ministry

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**P**ope Francis gives us the title of this reflection. Near the end of his encyclical on the environment, *On Care for Our Common Home*, after detailing all the scientific, political, moral and cultural problems that threaten our environment and the challenges before us in making a response, he says, “Let us sing as we go!”<sup>1</sup> This to me epitomizes the spirit of this papacy. Our leader is a man who understands all the pain and suffering in our world — not only the ecological disaster, but also the refugee crisis, war and terrorism, violence, hunger and disease, and yet his words resonate with joy. The titles of two of his principal writings so far include the word: *The Joy of the Gospel* and *The Joy of Love*.

For those who minister in health care, who struggle with illness, injury, limited resources and all the attendant mental and physical distress on a daily basis, the call to “sing as we go” may seem like a stretch. What kind of songs are we invited to sing? Not dirges or laments, but songs of joy. The kind that stir your heart and get your foot to tapping. Think of your old school song, the national anthem, favorite hymns and folk songs and even some advertising jingles that bring instant recognition. We might say that the psalmists taught us to sing. How often have we prayed in Psalm 66: “Shout joyfully to God, all you on earth; sing of his glorious name; give him glorious praise.”

Psalm 4 may be even more apt (or the equivalent in your own words): “Many say, ‘May we see better times! Lord, show us the light of your face!’ But you have given my heart more joy than they have when grain and wine abound.”

A feeling of joy may not be uppermost in your heart on a Monday morning, when you face an endless to-do list. Or at the end of a day that hasn’t gone well, with several tense and unresolved encounters. Or when you were waiting for the family of a critically injured accident victim

to arrive in the ER. Any cause for joy was far from your consciousness. You might well pray, “Lord, may I see better times. Show me the light of your face!”

But the psalmist ends his prayer on an upbeat note: “You have given my heart more joy than when grain and wine abound.” If we are to discover joy in ministry, it can’t be in spite of pain and suffering, but because we understand that God’s merciful love is present in every encounter.

“Be joyful.” Can anyone tell someone else to be joyful? The following is an incident that happened some years ago, when I was the chief mission officer for the Mercy Health system based

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in Cincinnati. I was giving a presentation to the board of trustees on our core values — human dignity, justice, compassion, sacredness of life, service and excellence — a respectable lineup by any measure. One of the board members, Fr. Myles Sheehan, SJ, MD, interrupted.

“We’re missing one value — joy,” he said.

He was talking to board members focused on overseeing a multibillion-dollar enterprise committed to improving the health of multiple communities, with special emphasis on the needs of those who are poor. Pretty serious stuff. And he was talking about joy. Obviously, he didn’t mean superficial merriment, but something deeper, more intrinsic to our mission. I have never forgotten his words.

### THE PILLARS OF JOY

In *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, Nobel Peace Prize laureates Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama analyze the nature of true joy, obstacles to joy and what they call “pillars of joy.”<sup>2</sup> An underlying premise is that being joyful is a choice, a way of approaching the world. Experiences of joy can be associated with key moments in one’s life: a betrothal, the birth of a child, a celebration of recognition by others. But beyond these occasional experiences, joy is an enduring attitude toward people and events that generates what the authors describe as “a shining contentment” or the “spiritual radiance” born from deep-seated well-being and benevolence.<sup>3</sup>

Four of the pillars of joy seem very apropos to those ministering in health care. The first, forgiveness, is especially poignant, given the authors’ personal histories. They are two figures who experienced firsthand the pain of apartheid, imprisonment, government atrocities and exile. Forgiveness, they explain, does not necessarily mean forgetting what has been done or failing to seek a remedy. Rather, it means freeing oneself from anger, resentment and the desire for revenge. In other words, it is a choice one makes to free oneself from the past.

In our contemporary health care workplaces, it is rare to experience the violence they reference. But there can be numerous and real personal feelings of irritation or of being wronged: being expected to do more than one’s share; being overlooked for recognition; being addressed rudely;

and so forth. To intentionally forgive is a sign of strength, not weakness. It can lighten one’s spirit by casting off unwanted burdens.

The second pillar, gratitude, widens one’s perspective even further. The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu describe gratitude as “the recognition of all that holds us in the web of life and all that has made it possible to have the life that we have and the moment that we are experiencing.”<sup>4</sup> Within the ministry of health care, there are innumerable reasons for gratitude: that one has the personal gifts, education and training to share. That we have resources to serve. That there are others engaged in the ministry with the same commitment. No matter how harried the moment, these reasons endure. As the authors say, “Gratitude helps us catalog, celebrate, and rejoice in each day and each moment before they slip through the vanishing hourglass of experience.”<sup>5</sup> A whispered prayer of thanksgiving before entering a sickroom or boardroom can bolster one’s interior joy.

Compassion is probably the attitude that most resonates with those who minister in health care. It is the third pillar, and it implies moving beyond empathy to efforts to relieve the suffering of another. Even if one is not engaged in patient care, there are others in the workplace who invite our compassion. A helping hand or a kind word can lift another’s day as well as one’s own. The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu also point out the need for self-compassion, recognizing that we are vulnerable and limited, like all people: “As a result,

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it is a fundamental basis for developing compassion for others. It’s hard to love others as you love yourself, if you don’t love yourself.”<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging one’s weaknesses and seeking help can enable one to be more compassionate to others and, ultimately, more joyful.

The fourth pillar, generosity, draws on experiences we all have: Our joy is enhanced when we make someone else happy. With respect to financial generosity, we might be tempted to say, “I’m just getting by, I don’t have anything to contribute

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to the latest cause or collection." But sometimes we can give an attentive ear, a few minutes of time, a sympathetic word, a healing touch. We all have gifts to share, and, in the giving, we increase the sum total of joy in our workplace and in the world. Archbishop Tutu illustrated the power of giving with this insight: When you give, it may feel like you are subtracting from yourself, but, in fact, you are making room for God to give you more.<sup>7</sup> It's no wonder that a day of ministering in health care fills one up with joy.

This brief discussion is only a small sampling of the riches of the Dalai Lama's and Archbishop Tutu's reflections. The narrative is filled with stories and anecdotes, quips, humor and suggested practices drawn from their life experiences. They are two figures of contemporary wisdom who can enrich our lives by sharing their personal stories. That they have chosen to focus their book on the theme of joy is profoundly inspirational.

To return to a figure whose writings may be more familiar to us: Pope Francis offers us a wonderful perspective on joy in *The Joy of the Gospel*, his apostolic exhortation on evangelization in our day. He says, "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since 'no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.'"<sup>8</sup>

*The Joy of the Gospel's* opening paragraphs contain many references to joy in Scripture. From the prophet Isaiah: "Shout aloud and sing for joy!" (12:6), "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth!

Break forth O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones." (49:13).

The Gospels are full of cries of gladness and invitations to rejoice, beginning with the angel's greeting to Mary, "Rejoice!" and her subsequent song, "My spirit rejoices in God my savior." Well, you might say, we haven't seen any angels lately. But Jesus, on the eve of his passion and death, promised, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." Further, "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Pope Francis follows these encouraging words with some down-home observations: "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter," and "an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!"<sup>9</sup> These can be helpful reminders when one is tempted to succumb to the inevitable trials of the workplace.

The church's ministry of health care is one of its most powerful expressions of evangelization. Whenever its ministers demonstrate forgiveness, express gratitude, show compassion and give generously of themselves, they inevitably attract imitation. Whatever one's role, to minister to others out of a deep interior joy is to radiate the spirit of the Gospel. Let us sing as we go!

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**NOTES**

1. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), para 244.
2. The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy* (New York: Avery, 2016).
3. *The Book of Joy*, 34.
4. *The Book of Joy*, 242.
5. *The Book of Joy*, 249.
6. *The Book of Joy*, 260.
7. *The Book of Joy*, 263.
8. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), para. 3, citing Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete in Domino* (On Christian Joy).
9. *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 6 and para. 10.

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