

We Can Still Have Joyful Moments

I want to tell you a story about finding joy in difficult circumstances. I think you'll understand why after you read this:

In 1939, the Japanese army captured Singapore (a British protectorate at the time) by using the jungle that surrounded it to hide their attacking forces. The British garrison in Singapore were completely surprised, based on their belief that the jungle was impenetrable.

One British soldier who was stationed in Singapore when it was captured, F. Spencer Chapman, decided that he did not want to be taken prisoner by the Japanese when the garrison surrendered, so he escaped into the jungle. Now, the accepted wisdom at the time was that the jungle around Singapore was either (1) so filled with poisonous snakes and plants, and so dense with vegetation, that it was impossible to survive in it, *or* (2) so filled with cool streams, tasty fish, and edible animals and plants that it was a tropical paradise.

Chapman survived 3 ½ years living in the jungle, moving frequently to avoid capture, and was finally rescued in a rendezvous with a submarine sent to retrieve him. Years later, he wrote about his experiences in a book, The Jungle Is Neutral. What he learned was that the jungle was neither destroyer nor paradise; it had elements of both, *but your experience of it was what you made of it*. Chapman even found moments of pure joy in the jungle, as he was hiding for his life.

I think this story is relevant to the situation we find ourselves in today. Yes, it sometimes seems that there is a constant bombardment of bad news: the pandemic, the economy, the protests, and the responses to the protests. What I take away from Chapman's story, though, is that there are still moments of joy to savor.

The idea of finding moments of joy in daily life intrigued Ingrid Fetell Lee so much that she studied it and wrote a book about it, Joyful. She found that joyful moments are stimulated by everyday objects and spaces, and that they have a powerful effect on one's mood if you are paying attention to them. She listed ten areas in which to find places, things, and experiences that can give rise to the momentary experience of joy. I'm going to list them with pandemic-friendly examples. Some of them may surprise you:

- **Bold, vibrant colors** – the flash of a red cardinal in the trees, a bank of flowers seen from your car, a brightly lit space;

- **Abundance** – the presence of great quantity such as the display in a candy store, a cup filled with freshly sharpened pencils;
- **Freedom** – a loosening of everyday habits or routines, such as moving your work space to a different window, or taking an hour away from work for a cherished hobby;
- **Harmony** – a consistent ordering of the parts of something, such as a re-organized closet or cupboard, or a re-organized collection;
- **Surprise** – unforeseen pleasures, such as a love note left on your partner's pillow, the sound of birdsong when you open your windows to increase ventilation;
- **Play** – any engrossing activity that has no practical purpose or result, such as joining an (online) choir, playing music, anything with a ball;
- **Transcendence** – experiencing something that goes beyond normal limits, such as watching superb athletes perform, or going outside at night to see the Milky Way;
- **Magic** – acts that appear to contradict natural law or our expectations, such as watching (or learning to do) card tricks, or hearing unexpectedly from a long-lost friend;
- **Celebration** – a pause in our daily lives to mark an event or significant passage, such as birthdays, engagements and weddings, births, new partnerships;
- **Renewal** – a sense of starting anew with bountiful potential, such as deliberately treating each new day as an opportunity to learn something new, reach out to a friend, notice new sources of joy in the world.

Our world, like the jungle, is neutral; it contains ugliness and beauty and everything in between. Our mood, our outlook, even our productivity, is determined in part by what we notice the most. The joyful moments that we make a conscious effort to notice and *enjoy* refresh and renew us.