



Of a certain AGE

Sue Stafford
Columnist

Joy to the World

As I write, the calendar will turn to December 21, the winter solstice, and a time that brings me joy every year as we begin the climb out of shorter days and longer darkness toward the light and warmth of spring and summer.

The cold and dark of winter has always been my time of remembering and reflecting. As I listened to Christmas carols the other day, I was struck by the word "joy" in "Joy to the World," one of my favorite carols that always ended the midnight Christmas Eve service at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland, before we streamed out into the cold of early Christmas morning.

My reflections turned to what brings me joy. After a week of rolling the question around in my mind, gradually adding to my list, I was able to put joyful things into categories and came to realize that most of the things that give rise to joy come as a result of making myself "available" – to myself and the world around me. By pausing, slowing down, and quieting my mind, I am able to not only listen but to hear, to not only look but to see.

The creations of Mother Nature are the most common sources of joy for me. My view of the Three Sisters when they don their winter coats of snow each fall never gets old. The appearance each spring of the gangly spotted fawns, frolicking around their watchful mothers down on the creek bed, gives me pause to watch in wonder. I never tire of the breathtaking azure sky punctuated by the tops of stately green ponderosa as I look up in my backyard. The purring of my old kitty, Maeve, as she touches my nose with hers in a morning greeting reins in my busy mind.

Then there are those sensory joys, so easy to miss if I am not paying attention. The fragrance of fresh lavender as I brush against it in my yard captures me every time. The rich taste of that first spoonful of coffee ice cream (straight from the carton) delights my taste buds. The sense of release is great as tears fall while listening to harmonic

strains of beautiful music that fill my soul. Snuggling into my bed warmed by the electric blanket on a cold winter night is heavenly.

Perhaps my most rewarding joys come from interactions with other people. There is nothing that brings me greater joy than time spent talking and laughing with a life-long friend who knows me better than I know myself.

I have always enjoyed hearing people's stories, so my former counseling practice, and now my interviews for newspaper articles, give me great satisfaction when someone has shared a part of their story with me. In my days as a therapist, I had the pleasure of working with people that some might find difficult. But there is something in me that is deeply touched by working with wounded individuals. As a substance

abuse counselor, I worked with low-income elderly clients who lived in public housing around Pike Place Market in Seattle. Eddie, the native Alaskan, a man of intellect and talent whose battle with alcohol derailed him early in life, shared with me his gifts and challenges, enriching my life while I offered him acceptance and encouragement.

As a horticultural therapist, I helped adults recently released from the Washington State Hospital, and living in transitional housing, discover the joy and healing power of planting, tending, and harvesting their own garden plots. Minds controlled by mental illness and the drugs used to treat it, found freedom and healing in the garden.

For three years I was part of a three-woman team that went into the Monroe Correctional Complex for

men to facilitate a personal growth group for prisoners, utilizing expressive arts, as they examined their lives. These men, some of whom were there with life sentences, moved me in ways that very few have. The laughter and tears and acceptance that we experienced together provided a deep joy that is with me still.

The human condition, with all its messiness and pain, is also the source of great joy and satisfaction for me often found in the most unlikely places. Some of my greatest lessons in living came from my Transitions clients at Hospice of Redmond as they approached the end of their lives. I learned so much about living, and preparing

to die, from them. We shared moments of pain and regret, but also times of joy and laughter. They gave so much to me and I hopefully was of assistance to them.

In all of those different parts of my life, I learned that I am here to walk alongside my fellow man and woman as we journey together through this life. It is the sharing of the journey that gives me my greatest joy.

As I share with you, my readers, it brings me sweet joy when something I have written touches you. Thank you for sharing with me how you have been moved by my words. It means a lot to me. Merry Christmas, and joy to you!

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