

I'm reading a book called, "This Is Your Brain on Joy" by Dr. Earl Henslin, with a forward by the appropriately named Dr. Daniel Amen. The subtitle is "A Revolutionary Program for Balancing Mood, Restoring Brain Health, and Nurturing Spiritual Growth." I didn't plan to buy it, but it was sitting in my Amazon cart and someone else in the family ordered it by mistake. So I might as well read it.

In the book, Henslin talks about how certain regions of the brain, when they are over-stimulated, can create real obstacles to our ability to experience joy. One of those regions is the basal ganglia, which he calls the "Basement of Giant Fears." In that basement of our brain is the amygdala which triggers our fight or flight response.

An overactive amygdala, such as you will see in the brain scans of trauma victims or military veterans, can keep a person in a perpetual state of fear. PTSD is a joy killer for sure. But

even those of us who have not suffered from significant trauma know how fear can interfere with joy.

Some of us have small fears: of spiders and snakes or being in a really tight space, getting called upon in class or being out in the middle of nowhere and running out of gas. Some of us have bigger fears: of dark alleys and Bay Area freeways, not having enough money and living in earthquake country. And some of us have existential fears: of terrorism and nuclear war, climate change and the next political campaign.

In the depths of the Great Depression, FDR said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. These days, I'm afraid that we have nothing but fear itself and it is robbing us of our joy. And so I was looking to the story in Luke's first chapter to give me some ideas about how we can get from fear to joy this year.

The Virgin Mary was likely a young girl and she had plenty of reasons to fear. When she was engaged to Joseph, an angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her that "the power of

the Most High" would come upon her and impregnate her. In light of current events, I don't blame her for being afraid. Throughout human history, powerful men have had their way with women, with or without their consent, making me wonder if, in her situation, Mary could have said "no" to that angel. What she said is "Let it be with me according to your word" which is not exactly a resounding "yes."

Perhaps I am reading too much into the story, but I suspect that Mary was not as easily persuaded as church tradition has taught us. It is one thing to find out that something is going to happen to you and quite another thing to come to terms with it. We all know that the Big One is coming, but we are not ready for it. We all know that climate change is happening, droughts are deepening and fires are worsening, but we haven't made the lifestyle or policy changes that would indicate that we believe it will happen to us.

So even though Mary has been told that big changes are coming, it doesn't mean that she has accepted those changes...yet. Acceptance isn't a decision you make or a single action you take. It's a process. For Mary, it's a journey. We know that because right after the angel departs from her, she heads for the hills. She goes "with haste" to a Judean town in the hill country where her cousin Elizabeth lives.

Elizabeth is the wife of a priest named Zechariah. She also is with child. She is carrying John the Baptist. I like to think that Mary went to her cousin because she saw in Elizabeth something of a minister, just like another wife of a clergy named Elizabeth we know. Elizabeth Williams, the wife of former pastor Wayne Williams, was in many ways a minister of compassion. That's not surprising considering that if you want to be married to a member of the clergy for very long, you have to be! For one thing, your preacher partner loves to talk, so you have to be a good listener. That's why Mary goes to

Elizabeth, because she needs to talk. She has a scary story to tell and she knows Elizabeth will listen.

But Elizabeth has her own fears. She and her husband are getting on in years and suddenly she becomes pregnant even though everyone has always assumed she is barren. But ever since Zechariah came home from his service at the temple months ago, he has not said one word to her. Some angel—or demon—has caught his tongue and he can't talk. Is he in some kind of trouble? Is he angry with her? What kind of curse is this? And how is the stress of his silence helping her prepare for what has to be a very high-risk pregnancy?

So we have these two fearful women and when they get together, we expect them to be sharing fears and shedding tears, but they don't. When Mary arrives on Elizabeth's doorstep and her cousin welcomes her into her home, Mary crosses the threshold of fear into joy. When Mary sees her cousin, she thinks, "I am not alone anymore." When Elizabeth

hears the sound of Mary's voice, she is not alone. In fact, she is filled with the Holy Spirit. The child in her womb can feel it and leaps for joy! Like a priestess anointed by the power of the Spirit, Elizabeth pronounces a blessing upon Mary and the baby she carries.

We might be tempted to overlook this little domestic scene, but if we do, we will miss something important about Elizabeth. She asks Mary, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord has come to me?" That sounds like a strange question until you realize what Elizabeth is doing. Even before Jesus is born, she is already calling him Lord. And that makes her his very first disciple. I'm pretty sure that no one has ever given her credit for that. We all think it was Peter. Maybe I'll write a letter to the Pope!

But getting back to the story, to the two women who are carrying two babies and sharing a moment of maternal bliss. Call it hormones or call it sisterhood or call it the Holy Spirit,

but somehow they have found an inner strength that enables them to en-joy, to enter into joy, despite the fear their pregnancies have caused them, despite the heart-ache those boys will bring them.

Mothers of healthy babies are lucky; they get to carry joy around in their bodies. But all of us—men, too—carry the potential for joy inside of us, even if we don't know it or can't feel it. Even if no brain scan or ultrasound will reveal it.

Christian author C.S. Lewis didn't have a lot of joy when he was a boy. His dog was killed by a car when he was four. His mother died of cancer when he was nine. His father sent him off to boarding school. He had been baptized a Presbyterian, but as a young man, he became an atheist. It wasn't until after he met J.R.R. Tolkien that he met Jesus. He wrote a book about his conversion to Christianity and called it, *Surprised by Joy*.

Fast forward almost twenty years. As a professor at Oxford, he started corresponding with an American woman,

who was also a writer and a former atheist-turned-Christian.

She was going through a divorce and moved to England, where she struck up a literary friendship with Lewis.

When she was about to be deported, he agreed to a paper marriage just to keep her in the country. But when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he realized that he truly loved her. So he convinced a priest to come to her bedside and marry them for real. Her name: Joy Davidman. Twice in his life, this somewhat jaded, skeptical, introverted scholar was surprised by Joy.

I can remember reading about him when I was a somewhat jaded, skeptical, introverted scholar, single and feeling sorry for myself. It gave me some hope to think that if Lewis could find joy in his life, anybody can.

The truth is that we don't need a brain scan to locate the obstacles to joy in our lives. We are quite familiar with our fears. Our world is full of them this year. But to get from fear to joy

we don't need a change in circumstances as much as we need a change in perspective. There have been lots of times that we may have wanted to make haste and head for the hills. But we don't have to go that far. There is someone waiting to receive us right here, someone who is standing on the doorstep, ready to embrace us. His name is Jesus. And he is more than ready to help us cross that threshold of fear so we can live in the household of Joy. In Jesus, the Scriptures are fulfilled:

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
[Psalm 16:9-11]