



Yale Center *for*
Faith & Culture

Theology
of Joy

funded by the
JOHN TEMPLETON
FOUNDATION

**This essay was presented as a work in progress.
Please do not cite without the author's permission.**

Kenda Creasy Dean

Ode to Joy: The Adolescent Experience of Joy as Arousal

Prepared for Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation
on "Joy and the Vernal Season of Adolescence," October 30-31, 2014

Ode to Joy: The Adolescent Experience of Joy as Arousal

Kenda Creasy Dean

Mary D. Synnott Professor of Youth, Church and Culture
Princeton Theological Seminary

“I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew not looked and acted like undertakers.”

--Oliver Wendell Holmes

Kingston United Methodist Church has been a dying congregation for 135 years.

When our family began attending Kingston five years ago, it had a part-time student pastor, four leaky, creaky rooms, and twenty people on a gangbusters Sunday. If you were to look for a place *not* to plant a church—dead-end street, cramped lot, little parking, cemetery next door—you would find us.

I had been hemorrhaging, spiritually, for twelve years. Whenever our family moved, we dutifully took our place in “successful” congregations—and before long I would be secretly glad to be out of town on Sundays. I got used to being disappointed by church. I was exhausted from the life that flowed out of me each time I was there. Finally our children’s faith (or lack thereof) forced us to abandon our intellectual idealism--or arrogance--and do something concrete. I hadn’t lost faith in Christ, but I was at wits end with Christ’s body, which seemed increasingly and hopelessly lifeless.

It wasn’t that I hadn’t glimpsed Jesus in other congregations we had attended over the years. But in this tiny church, “primitive faith,” as John Wesley called it—the plain, raw power of anticipating an encounter with the God of Scripture--was difficult to dodge. With no trace of self-consciousness, people begged for prayers and wept in each others’ arms; sixteen-year-olds sometimes preached and eighty-year-olds sometimes sang (neither particularly well). When people’s theology made me cringe, their courage left me humbled. Prasna prayed for sobriety

and Kerry prayed for healing. Jim--who was once the custodian in Einstein's lab, and had travelled the Jim Crow south with a gospel quartet in a powder blue tuxedo--interrupted the service each week to say, through radiant tears: "We serve a *good* God."

Jesus seemed closer at Kingston somehow, and I must have brushed against his cloak because my soul jolted awake. Maybe it was because there were fewer committees blocking the view. Maybe it was because when the baby-faced preacher looks you in the eye from the pulpit, you don't duck out early. Whatever it was, involuntarily I began to do something I had not done in church since I was a teenager: I rejoiced. And one day, on a random Tuesday, I suddenly noticed: the bleeding had stopped.

Those twenty people are now eighty or so, and to everyone's astonishment almost all of the newcomers are young. They smell joy—despite the fact that there is no praise band and joys and concerns that take forever and our liturgy includes a corny closing circle around the sanctuary, which every pastor is warned not to tamper with. Yet the first word that springs to my mind when I think about Kingston is joy--the exuberant buzz in the sanctuary before worship, the overwhelming sense of integration, empowerment, and blessing that wells up within me when I am there, the inner surge that makes me feel inexplicably alive after every service.

This is as close as I get to being the person I would like to become. This joy is superabundant and life-giving. I can neither explain nor contain it. But I am awake.

Joy as Arousal

I'm not sure how churches lost track of joy, but it's an ancient disconnect. Had Paul's all-night preach-a-thon at the church at Troas been joyous, it would not have bored young Eutychus to death (Acts 20:7-12). Instead of zoning out at the back of the church, instead of falling three

stories below to be “picked up dead”--instead of starting out *in* the church and winding up *out* of it (how familiar is *that* story?)--Eutychus would never have been on the margins of the church at all. I imagine him dancing in the middle of a joyful congregation, aroused by God’s good news, awash in a sense of blessing and delight.

Joy is, first, a state of arousal. Teenagers unfamiliar with the dimensions of passion delude themselves by thinking, “If it feels good, it must be God.” But this much they have right: joy awakens them, activates their sense that they are “human beings fully alive,” to paraphrase Irenaeus, whose very humanity, fully embraced, glorifies God. Joy is an exuberant experience of freedom and movement, of “not being contained.” Joy bestows a sense of attunement, at-onement, congruence between the person I am and the person I want to become--much as Howard Thurman imagined the adulteress’ response to Jesus, who “treated her as if she were already where she willed now to be,” and placed over her head “a crown . . . which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear.” In other words, Jesus aroused her—“he stirred her confidence into activity”¹ --in a way that was completely new to this woman who had known so many men.

Teenagers’ desire for arousal is not simply a response to their biological circuitry. Adolescents long to be in the throes of passion, to love and to be loved to the point of suffering (true love, after all, is “to die for”), to feel fully alive, often entwining joy and anguish. Augustine recalled that he “loved to suffer, and sought occasions for suffering.”² When marketers sell sex to teenagers, they are really addressing teenagers’ desire for arousal—i.e., their longing to feel alive, despite consumer culture’s inability to deliver on this for very long. If

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, reprint ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 106.

² Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford World Classics: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 14.

we wonder why the media's portrayal of sex is feels more joyful than the church's portrayal of faith, here it is.

Joy During Adolescence

Most American adolescents—perhaps 60%--share a bland, anesthesized attitude toward religion. They're not against faith, but it doesn't matter much to them. To the extent that religion interests American young people at all, according to the longitudinal National Study of Youth and Religion, it is because it is useful. Most teenagers affirm religion because it helps them be nice and feel good about themselves. It helps them fulfill what they identify as the central goal in life, to "be happy."³

The exceptions are the 8% of American young people that the NSYR labeled "highly devoted." These youth want to be happy, too--but their happiness and sense of well-being seems less of an end in itself. These teenagers seem to have deeper wells of significance--for example, an articulate God-story or creed (as David White calls it, a "purposeful story"),⁴ a faith community they belong to, a sense of a God-given purpose, and oodles more hope than their peers (i.e., the sense that the world is heading in a good direction, and that they have a part to play in getting it there).⁵

All of this suggests that joy is a sacred, generative awakening. The sexual overtones of joy as arousal speak to the way adolescents experience joy—as generative exuberance, as mystical ecstasy, as locomotion. Thanks to the dopamine surge that accompanies arousal (dopamine is the neurotransmitter responsible for pleasure, desire, attraction, etc.), arousal

³ Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, reprint ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 148.

⁴ David White, *Dreamcare: A Theology of Youth, Spirit and Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), pp.11-32.

⁵ See K.C.Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 58.

courses through the young person's being, literally, awakening every sense, focusing her attention, attuning her to the moment—hence the experience of “being fully alive.” But because arousal also stimulates our desire for an “other,” it awakens our desire for the ultimate “Other,” as well. To experience joy is not just to flood the nervous system with dopamine; it is to frame this experience as an occasion for God's delight. And all these ways of feeling “fully alive” are available, for the first time, to the sexually maturing adolescent, whose emerging physical fertility is a sign of a spiritually fecund lifestage.

1. Generative Exuberance: Adolescent Joy as Fecundity

Paul referred to joy as a “fruit” of the spirit (Gal. 5:22), suggesting it is the result of the God's desire to create life, and that joy itself is a virile, life-giving power. In this way joy functions as a virtue, a “strength” in the Eriksonian sense—a form of resilience that comes from resolving a developmental crisis. This explains joy's exuberance (from the Latin for being “abundantly fruitful”) and virility. For theologians and developmental theorists—not to mention teenagers themselves—joy is fecund. It seeds life.

The generative nature of joy has not been lost on psychologists and neurobiologists. Daniel Goleman describes “limbic hijackings” (moments when the amygdala reacts before the rational brain has time to send the body instructions) that occur in moments of great distress—or times of intense joy, like responding to a joke with uncontrollable laughter.⁶ Cognitive neuroscience links joy to creativity (i.e., “flow states”),⁷ to attachment (as mother and baby respond back and forth in perfect attunement, their endorphin systems are mutually

⁶ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, 10th anniv. ed. (New York: Bantam, 1995), 14.

⁷ See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (San Francisco: Harper), 2008.

regulated),⁸ to empathy (when we imagine ourselves in the shoes of another, mirror neurons rewire our brains to make us more similar to them),⁹ to cognitive integration (positive emotions increase the balance between differentiation and undifferentiated states, whereas uncomfortable emotions discourage integration).¹⁰ Alan Schore points out that, until recently, most research on personality development posited anxiety as the trigger for developing the brain's limbic (emotional) system. Today, Schore says, scientists link that trigger with joy, since the experience of healthy attachment is so powerful that it actually alters the genome.¹¹ Interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel, pointing to the brain's plasticity in the presence of others with whom we are deeply attuned, explains: "Brain firing leads to brain rewiring."¹²

So as it turns out, the "spiritual highs" and church camp romances are more than eye-rolling youth ministry moments. Joy is generative, creative, and intimately connective, neurologically and theologically. The experience of joy begets more joy. Joy moves beyond itself; as the Triune God moves beyond God's own self to reach out to creation, rejoicing moves us to reach back toward God. Superabundant and exuberant, joy seeks connection, which allows for even greater generativity.

In other words, joy is erotic. This is not new ground for either teenagers or Christian spirituality, of course. Drawing on the Cappadocian use of *eros* for the love that is the soul's ecstasy, Catherine Mowry LaCugna describes God's "fecundity:"

⁸ See Alan Schore, *The Science of the Art of Psychotherapy* (New York: W. W. Norton), 2012.

⁹ See Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Tarcher), 2013; also, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), esp. 307-335.

¹⁰ Daniel Siegel, interview with Sam Mowe, *Spirituality and Health* (September/October 2014), <http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/qa-dr-dan-siegel> (accessed October 26, 2014).

¹¹ Alan Schore, "Joy and Fun: Genes, Microbiology, and Child Brain Development," interview, (July 11, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0iocZu1mVg> (accessed October 26, 2014).

¹² Siegel, *Spirituality and Health*.

God goes forth from God, God creates the world, God suffuses its history and dwells within it, redeeming the world from within. God makes an eternal gift to the world of God's very self. Through the outpouring of God into our hearts as love, we become by grace what God is already by nature, namely, self-donating love for the other.¹³

For LaCugna, God's self-giving love leaps outward, defying boundaries, in order to sweep the beloved (us) into God's being. "The centrifugal movement of divine love," she concludes, "does not terminate 'within' God but explodes outward."¹⁴

2. *Mystical Ecstasy: Adolescent Joy as Self-Forgetting*

When the onset of formal operational thought bestows the capacity to ponder one's inner life to adolescents, the need for sensation becomes subjected to the young person's newly acquired reflective capacities. To be numb is to be dead; so adolescents seek the pulsating sensations of personal experience. The sheer decibel level of adolescence — not to mention the appeal of the gross, the horrific, and the sentimental to youth who otherwise seem to show little emotional range — all find their origins in the adolescent's need to experience herself. As a result, youth become fixated on feelings, evaluating every experience according to its emotional topography: heights and depths, ecstasy and angst, heaven and hell. In short, during adolescence we develop *interiority*. As Parks puts it, "The soul grows larger to allow more space for becoming."¹⁵

The mark of ecstasy, then—be it explosive or slowly emanating—is a kind of leaving of oneself, of being drawn outside of time, that moves us closer to others. As with other primal emotions, when we are overwhelmed by joy we are "beside ourselves." We are so over-full that

¹³ LaCugna, 353-354.

¹⁴ LaCugna, 353-354.

¹⁵ Sharon Daloz Parks, "Faithful Becoming in a Complex World: New Powers, Perils, and Possibilities," 1998 *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999). This quote is from the oral pre- sentation of this lecture (April 1998).

we cannot help but share ourselves; we cannot contain ourselves. For Christian mystics, “the way of ecstasy” (in the New Testament Greek, “being displaced, or put out of place”) referred to the union of a human with God, an experience of grace so rare and complete that the creature feels attuned to the Creator. Such joy changes us. Focusing our attention fully on the object of our delight represents a powerful moment of self-forgetfulness, allowing us to reflect—however fleetingly—the God whose self-donating nature shares the divine self with us.¹⁶

The human response to God’s movement towards us in Jesus Christ is also ecstatic; it is a leap of faith, beyond the self toward others, and ultimately toward God. Christianity’s outward reach embodies joy’s ecstatic thrust, and youth are quick to notice when it is absent. To call the death of Jesus an ecstatic event is not to reduce it to a feeling; rather, it is a joyful proclamation that, in Christ, God is moving in the world. God has reached beyond God’s own self to identify with that part of human existence that sits farthest from God — death—and has burst the Temple veil like an amniotic sac, joyfully announcing: “God is on the loose!” As Peter Berger puts it, without ecstasy, the church lacks the voice of angels, the call for us to rise above time and space, join hands, and fix our gaze on God.¹⁷

3. *Feeling Moved: Adolescent Joy as Locomotion*

The most deeply satisfying criterion for excellence among adolescents is “Did it *move* me?” If the concert does, and church does not, the concert wins. In the stories that testify to Jesus’ “compassion” (com + *passio*), the literal Greek means, “He was moved

¹⁶ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 351.

¹⁷ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Super-natural* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), 78.

in his gut,” or, less delicately, “His guts turned over inside him.” Youth recognize moving experiences — those marked by the heights of joy or the depths of anguish, occasions when their “guts turn over” inside them — as truly authentic, as proof that God is real. Consequently, adolescents often consider *any* moving personal experience, from roller coasters to orgasms, potentially “spiritual.” The degree to which Jesus “moves” us when we practice faith, teenagers believe, is the degree to which Christianity is valid.¹⁸

The need to travel beyond the boundaries of self is part of adolescents’ standard psychological circuitry. In a much overlooked portion of his work on identity formation, Erikson observed that the adolescent craving for “locomotion” causes young people to seek ways to be moved both physically and existentially. Young people are constantly “on the go”; they take drugs to “get high” or “take a trip”; they “lose themselves” in sports or dance or music; they are “swept off their feet” by romance and they “get a rush” from fast cars, extreme physical challenges, or lightning-paced action movies. *Wanderlust* does not drive the adolescent desire for “locomotion” as much as it drives the human need to break through the self’s boundaries to be “transported” to a new place, from which they may glimpse a larger, more encompassing world that invites their participation.¹⁹ (At one point in our history, altar calls did the same thing.)

Partly because of its outward thrust, joy is a de-centering, self-relativizing experience for teenagers. Like the experience of play, joy is an occasion for delight and wonder, for

¹⁸ We can blame much of this on the modern emphasis on subjectivity. From the beginning, Protestant identity was subjectively gained, not from participation in religious ritual, but from a personal experience of God, a voice that has only been amplified by the contemporary accent on personal experience. Increasingly, we not only use our “feelings” to justify our artistic preferences (“I like it”) but also, less reliably, to justify our behavior (“I felt like it”) and our ethical choices (“It felt right”). As globalization dislocates young people from communities with shared value systems that once provided objective boundaries for the self, mobility and placelessness become standard. God, too, appears homeless, often operating outside traditional venues of religious institutions. Today God “happens” wherever God is “felt.”

¹⁹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 115-117.

“getting lost in the moment” as we surrender ourselves to the “other” through a game or a good book or a conversation. Like sex, joy connects. Like sex, joy creates. Like sex, joy has explosive power. And like sex, it awakens every fiber of our being as we become united with an other/Other in a particular moment in time. This is what gives joy its magnitude in the teenage mind: anticipating an encounter with the other, especially an encounter with God, makes us larger.²⁰

The Church as a Source of Adolescent Joy

The church’s answer to joy is worship—a position that sexualized media culture has assumed as well. Young people experience arousal as generative, self-forgetting, and moving readily through the sexual liturgies of popular culture, but oddly less often through the embodied liturgies of congregations.

Yet these practices—praise, worship, communion—are the signs of a joyful community attuning itself to God. Like a mother and baby engaged in the life-regulating, back and forth, mimetic communication that begets attachment, we become attuned (and attached) to God through these practices as well. Praise, for instance, is the creature’s other-directed, outward reaching mode of *ecstasis*. Our doxology is evoked by God’s *ecstasis*, and praise is our mode of return, “matching” and imitating God’s movement of exodus.²¹ Theologian David F. Ford demurely considers this human “disinclination to remain self-contained” to be evidence of “the worshipping self” — the self shaped by participating in God’s “logic of

²⁰ Cf. Stephen Cady, “Creative Encounters: Toward a Theology of Magnitude for Worship with United Methodist Youth,” unpublished dissertation (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2014), 1-2.

²¹ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 350.

superabundance” through the primary discourse of praise.²² To worship God is to refuse to contain ourselves: worship enjoins us to the mystery of God and gives us an identity that is entwined with others.²³ Worship remakes us in practices that radically affirm us as valuable in God’s eyes, and invite us to stretch beyond our comfort zones, reaching into the mystery of God and others. As the Father ecstatically sends forth the Son and Holy Spirit into the world, worship provides adolescents a way of “return.” In “returning” to God through praise, young people can attempt to match — however imperfectly — God’s ecstatic movement toward them by reaching back toward God.

Worship, in this sense, is a way of life, not just a way of spending a Sunday morning; the worshipping self is an identity and not just a habit. When youth practice generativity, self-forgetting, and holy locomotion, they become aroused. But developing the worshipping selves of teenagers means that faith must be more than an intellectual exercise. The worshipping life is primal, messy and imperfect because it is embodied—but it is also warm and pulsating, spontaneous and responsive. In this kind of worship, sleepy teenagers (and bleeding women) wake up; dormant faith becomes joyful. For churches to become communities that help young people become worshipping beings, rather than act as service providers to keep kids happy or as nets to catch teenagers before they fall out of church altogether, will us to seriously rethink what we call “youth ministry” and to reimagine what we count as worship. That will be another paper altogether.

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 317, cited by David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 98.

²³ See David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 99-100.