

What the Joyful Know

**-a compilation of Laretta Hannon's
syndicated newspaper columns on the
topic of joy**

BONUS SECTION INCLUDED

-featuring the beloved *Invocation for a New Year* & the column
that made Lewis Grizzard's widow laugh like crazy

**When joy disappears,
look for your mistake.**
-Leo Tolstoy

Your Crown is Paid For

Q: You seem to be so full of joy, grace, and sensibility. Just exactly how did a sprightly young thing like you acquire such attributes?

A: You must be a centenarian to call this 45-year-old a “sprightly young thing,” but I’ll take it! And I thank you for the kind words. Despite frequent failure, I continue to work hard at cultivating those traits.

Let me respond to each attribute on its own. **I am joyful because...**

-all past sorrows, grief, losses, and leaden hours have made every day a gift to me now

-because the sun will rise tomorrow and with it an opportunity to begin anew

-because life is given to us for joy; it should be our default

-because happiness doesn’t depend on outward things but on the way I respond to them

-because I’ve made the choice to be joyful and remain joyful, no matter what

-because when I count my blessings instead of focusing on what is lacking, my blessings multiply; this keeps abundance flowing and proves that natural law is conspiring in my favor

-because if I have the right intention, do the work required, quiet my mind, and hand over my problems to the Divine, everything will be alright

-because what others think or say about me is none of my business and of no consequence

-because I try to use my talents in service to others for the highest and greatest good

-because I own everything in my life; I am responsible for each molecule with my name on it

-because I strive for unrelenting authenticity, gratitude, and forgiveness—especially when being real is risky; when the worst of times call for giving the most heartfelt thanks; and when the person I should forgive seems to be pure evil

-because I understand the importance of both keeping good company and letting go of bad influences

-because minute-to-minute absurdities are more than sufficient to keep me laughing

-because I have been utterly broken and cracked; as it turned out, this enabled the light to come in

-because I didn't accept a generational inheritance of ignorance, violence, and intellectual, physical, and spiritual poverty

-because I know that I am enough, and I have enough

-because I am curious about lots of things; this ensures new delights around every corner

-because I try to love when tempted to fear or judge

-because the wonder of music, stories, trees, dogs, Mama's lacy-edged fried cornbread, fire, the ocean, and human compassion never cease

-and because as James Baldwin said, my crown is already bought and paid for; all I have to do is place it on my head. That is sweet indeed.

On the matter of Grace, it's there only because of the love and mercy of something far bigger than me.

As to sensibility, I possess it because I've always read, listened, inquired, questioned, and paid close attention. I'm contrary as a result, and this has been a boon as well. After the ninth grade, following the crowd never held much allure. I figure if I go with the herd we might end up at the slaughterhouse.

Live Your Truth

Q: If you could narrow it down and list the three primary keys to finding, maintaining, and sustaining joy in your life, what would they be?

A: The First Key is gratitude. It is necessary for joy to even exist. Think about it: If you focus on the good things in your life, those will increase and result in more joy. If you look for the lesson or gift hidden within the hard times when they hit, you'll move through the pain better and have gained valuable knowledge at the end—another reason to be glad.

If you look at difficult situations as opportunities for post-traumatic growth, then that's what you'll get: growth and development and wisdom. In other words, a grateful attitude is what enables you to turn a setback into a comeback. But if you dwell on the lousy and negative, you'll get gobs of that instead.

Many folks don't realize the impact of their complaining and reacting—or how often they're doing it. Every thought, word, and action carries energy. The thrilling part is that we're in control of this energy, regardless of what gets thrown at us. We dictate how we respond. We have to be warriors, not whiners, and this begins with a spirit of gratitude.

Forgiveness, which is also essential for deep joy, is another outcome of gratitude. Gradually those old hurts begin to fade when you examine them through a different lens. As your appreciative nature strengthens, you don't need apologies from anyone in order to forgive. You don't hold on to past "injustices" because you understand that is a form of self-bondage. You stop drinking the poison you've concocted.

The Second Key is authenticity. By this I mean being the real you. Living your truth. Being the one you were created to be. I call it getting close to your flame.

This is a big, hairy headache because it requires courage. It takes cojones to accept that what anyone else thinks about you is none of your business; what they want you to do or be is irrelevant; and that you must heed your unique calling. Transparency, vulnerability, and ownership for your situation are also demanded.

As if that's not a tall order, then you have to put your talents and skills into motion for the highest and greatest good. But man, when that happens your joy will go off the charts. We're talking Joy-a-Palooza!

A lot of us get stalled because we doubt our inherent worth, our natural authenticity. We've been taught that we don't measure up. These beliefs are deceptions. God made you for a reason and with meaning, and you are no less than the next person.

You have to embrace who you are before you can "follow your bliss," as Joseph Campbell said. Joy remains elusive if you seek validation from the world. This means you don't need a mate to make you whole. You don't need a certain profit margin to be successful. You don't need to please or compete with everyone. You already are enough, and you have enough. Right now.

Keep clearing out the junk in your life so that the honest, beautiful work can come through. Expect that sometimes you'll have to break rules, follow your inner compass, do stuff that scares you, and let go of habits and relationships that compromise your purpose. Sadly, some folks would rather live small than lose what they have.

I suspect that the Third Key is actually a composite of dozens of things that vary by the individual. A few that fuel my happiness are

contemplation, nature, writing, silence, music and stories, disconnection from technology, humor, mindfulness, and reading.

Finally, surely the Ultimate Key is love. Doesn't it appear to be the whole reason we're here? The more we love, the more joyful we become. The trick is to figure out how to put fear, ego, distractions, and insecurity to bed. It's a matter of a made-up mind and a fortified spirit, I think.

So let's greet each morning with gratitude, and face the sun—even when skies are stormy.

As Thomas Dreier said, "Today should always be our most wonderful day."

Grow Your Joy

Q: I have made a conscious decision to follow your lead and look for and find the joy in my life, no matter how small. Unfortunately, I am usually quite reserved and less than spontaneous. What suggestions do you have for growing my joy?

A: I could write a book on this topic, but I'll just hit a few of the highlights here.

-Just as water can't exist without hydrogen, joy can't exist without gratitude. Cultivate gratitude first, and joy will follow.

-Examine how your thought patterns, beliefs, and behavior are undermining your joy. We are our own number-one buzz killers.

Do you expect things to fall apart or plan as if they will? Do you unconsciously emphasize your losses more than you relish your blessings? If so, you're putting the spotlight on the bad stuff and growing more of it. You're also skewing perspective on the situation. If you brood over what you lack, you can't see all the good stuff you have in wild abundance.

-Relinquish the need to control—anything. Control is not even possible, so release that desire. And while you're at it, don't be attached to the outcome of anything. Do your best, and be at peace with however it turns out.

-Forgive without requiring an apology from the other person. Give without expectation of something in return. Forgive everyone for everything, including yourself. Give only for the pleasure of it.

-Work to be your authentic self. If you dare to be real, you can't care what others think. Their judgment is inconsequential.

-Follow the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt, and “Do one thing every day that scares you.” Those paralyzing fears will melt away when you do.

-Have you cried buckets of tears at points in your life? Have you had tragedies, failures, or complications? Excellent! That catapults your capacity for joy. The lower you’ve been, the higher you can go.

-Keep great company. You’re not supposed to hold on to people and relationships that diminish you.

-Allow time each day for disciplined silence, disconnection, and reflection. Only then can you drown out the noise of the world and hear the small, still voice.

-Take ownership for how you feel and what your world looks like. Blame games are not permitted.

-Be in the present. Don’t allow the past to occupy your mind. Don’t fret about the future. It’s wasteful.

-Be especially thankful for the darkness. It’s easy to be giddy when everything is chirpy. But if you keep your gratitude meter charged at all times, you’ll have the sustenance needed to carry you through, up, and out of anything.

-Take the “Should I Be Joyful?” Quiz:

1. Do you have Ebola? Yes/No
2. Are you being held hostage by Muslim extremists? Yes/No
3. Are you dead? Yes/No

If you answered no to any of those questions, you should be joyful. So make up your mind, and choose it.

-Finally, let's see what the poet Rumi had to say about the spiritual dimension of joy in his poem "Moving Water," interpreted by Coleman Barks.

When you do things from your soul, you feel a river □ moving in you, a joy. □

□ When actions come from another section, the feeling □ disappears. □

□ Don't let others lead you. They may be blind or, worse, vultures. □ □

Reach for the rope of God. And what is that? Putting aside self-will.

□ Because of willfulness people sit in jail, the trapped bird's wings are tied, □ fish sizzle in the skillet. □

The anger of police is willfulness. You've seen a magistrate □ inflict visible punishment. □

□ Now see the invisible. If you could leave your selfishness, you □ would see how you've been torturing your soul. We are born and live inside black water in a well. □

□ How could we know what an open field of sunlight is? □ □

Don't insist on going where you think you want to go. Ask the way to the spring. Your living pieces will form a harmony.

□ There is a moving palace that floats in the air with balconies and clear water flowing through, infinity everywhere, yet contained under a single tent.

Meet the Buzz Killers

Q: Your last column about how to “grow your joy” was excellent. Can you cover some things that actually prevent one from experiencing great joy?

A: As I said last week, this topic is so vast that I’ll just share a few key thoughts. Here’s a list of some of the top “joy killers” that come immediately to mind.

-Comparing Yourself to Others

Do you judge yourself against the perceived accomplishments or failures of others? We must not get lured into this trap. So what if someone has a bigger house, a smaller waistline, or a higher net worth? These are not indicators of true worth.

Your value comes from the inside, where joy resides. The more you depend on worldly validation, the more unfulfilled you will be. You’ll be drowning in shallow water when the real riches are in the sea.

-Making Decisions Based on the Judgment of Others

This is dangerous terrain as well. Have you ever agreed to do or be something only because it was what someone else wanted? We’ve all been there, but we must guard against making it our habit of being. If you choose to live in that space, go ahead and buy plenty of laxatives, and hang a sign on the front door that reads, “Welcome to the No Joy Zone.”

-Being Inauthentic

The deepest misery comes from not being who you were born to be. It’s an affront to God. You have to live your truth. Otherwise,

you'll languish in chains of your own making. You were made with a purpose that must be honored. Do not break the sacred contract.

I know this is scary, especially when you've settled nicely into your comfort zone. Do you fear the hard work required to become more authentic? Do you worry about what might change or happen once you "get real?" That's okay, those fears are normal. You may be in for a bumpy ride at first, but the payoff will send your Joy-O-Meter off the charts.

-Out of Alignment

This is where core values come into play. Can you identify yours? Are you living in alignment with those values? If not, what can you do about it? Core values are a reflection of your authentic self. Keep those in focus to prevent chronic battery drain.

-Attachment

We need to accept that some things aren't meant for us. Otherwise, we're in for a lot of suffering. It's difficult to release the desires and dreams we've held so close, but these attachments block our joy. Let them go. They stand in the way of the glorious stuff that awaits.

-Lack of Courage

Do you shrink or do you rise when the going gets tough? Are you unwilling to start over, begin anew, and reinvent yourself? Decide that the setback is merely an opportunity for the comeback.

-Not Listening

Listen and pay attention. Seek first to understand. Hold your tongue, and open your ears. Tune in to the words of the other person. Be awake, mindful, and conscious in the present moment. When you're not listening, you're not loving. When you're not loving, you're not living.

More & More Joy

Q: I've attended both of your classes on the topic of joy. Each one was so different from the other and very enlightening. I hope you will consider a third course in the future. In the meantime, I would pay good money to see some of your notes. Is that something you would share with us?

A: Of course. Here's a look at some of the preliminary notes I jotted down for the most recent class. Please remember that these are rough, not in any logical order, and may not make a lot of sense to anyone else but me. But then again, you might have fun deciphering them or interpreting them for yourself.

-“Today should always be our most wonderful day,” said Thomas Dreier.

-Don't despise where you are. Do something about where you are.

-Ego edges God out every time.

-It's essential that you get back to who you are, who you were born to be. It's a process of unlearning and remembering, not creating.

-Your misery and your joy come from what you focus your mind on.

-Your life is a mirror of your thoughts, beliefs, and behavior. You

own whatever it looks like.

-Our condition shouldn't be dictated by our circumstance.

"Happiness does not depend on outward things but on the way we see them," said Leo Tolstoy.

-Operate in the right realm. Why do we keep going to the wrong places and then wonder why it didn't work out the way we wanted it to?

-Always follow the invisible thread.

-Listening is a high form of loving.

-Distraction is the first step before deception. Turn off your blasted phone.

-Ask this: Who or what is distracting you from your mission?

-Keep your mind right when things are going wrong. Take the bad, and use it for good. That's the secret of my mojo.

-You can't move forward without doing the necessary work. "Just 'cause you can see it, it doesn't mean it's close," said the waitress.

-Believe in Divine timing. Trust it. I know it never happens quickly enough for us. What you wish might just be delayed, not denied.

-Do your best, and don't be attached to the outcome. That's freedom.

-Don't be ruled by emotions and feelings. That's slavery.

-Cultivate your ability to let things go. Some things are not meant for you. That is fine and as it should be.

-Your destiny is not determined by your history. You can make different choices and change direction at any moment. That alone should encourage and embolden you.

-It's not what's happened to you. It's what you do with what has happened to you.

-Don't pace around in the cage of a soul-killing job, a destructive relationship, or anything else that doesn't serve the dreams of your higher self.

-“Nothing created is thrown away. Every creature, plant, and life has use and purpose. No one is skipped over,” said the monk.

-Pain isn't without its uses. Use what you've been through for the benefit of others. It's your platform, the foundation of your mission. Don't let your pain be in vain. Don't waste its lessons or keep them to yourself.

-It is through the bad stuff that the soul expands.

-If you don't transform your suffering, you will transmit it.

-Slow down. Do less. Be still. Take rest.

-“Beware the barrenness of a busy life,” said Socrates.

-“When you're offended, it's only your false self that's offended,” said Richard Rohr.

-In everything, give thanks. Nobody owes you anything.

-Sometimes the safest place to hide from God is inside your church.

-You are hardwired for victory. Designed for restoration. You were born a conqueror.

The Last Column

Dear Readers,

After more than three lively years here, I have decided to end the column. My reasons are creative ones: I need time and space to work on other things, namely a book or two.

Know that your participation in the column has enriched my life beyond measure. Whether as a reader, submitter of questions, encourager, or critic, you have made this “job” a constant joy and given me a lot to think about. Please accept my bone-deep thanks.

As this season ends and a new one begins, I’d like to leave you with some messages I hold close from previous columns.

-Forgive without requiring an apology. When in doubt, forgive everyone for everything, including yourself.

-“Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.” –Rumi

-Love when you are tempted to fear or judge. Love is the right response.

-Strive for unrelenting authenticity, gratitude, and forgiveness—precisely when being real is risky; when the worst of times call for giving the most heartfelt thanks; and when the person you should forgive seems to be pure evil.

-“Kindness is a necessary addition to everything.”-Leo Tolstoy

-Have you cried buckets of tears at points in your life? Have you had tragedies, failures, or maddening complications? Excellent!

That catapults your capacity for joy. The lower you've been, the higher you can go.

-Want more mojo? The secret is to turn your setbacks into comebacks. You start by looking for the gift or lesson hidden within the disaster. Vow to take the bad and do something good with it.

-Joy follows wherever gratitude lives. Dwell on your blessings, not your hurts.

-Be sure to allow time each day for disciplined silence, disconnection, and reflection. Only then can you drown out the noise of the world and hear the small, still voice.

-Cultivate outlandish ideas and dreams. They have no expiration date.

-Take responsibility for how your life looks. Own every molecule with your name on it.

-Relinquish the need to control—anything. Control is not even possible, so release that desire. And while you're at it, don't be attached to the outcome of anything. Do your best, and be at peace with however it turns out.

-Take your eyes off the rearview mirror.

-No matter what has happened, you have something to contribute. Because what remains is always more than what is lost. And through every fire you emerge more seasoned.

-You were made with purpose. You're not here to be what others want you to be. You are here to be more of who you were born to be. Only then can you use your gifts in the highest way. Live your truth in service to others.

-“The aim of life is to live, and to live means to be aware, joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely aware.”-Henry Miller

-What’s essential is invisible. What the world or folks think or say about you is none of your business. Make it entirely inconsequential. Give it none of your attention.

-Progress is made by a leap of faith.

-Let go of relationships, behavior, and thoughts that don’t nourish your spirit.

-Keep great company.

-Remember what James Baldwin said: your crown is already bought and paid for; all you have to do is place it on your head.

-Rejoice, and be glad. Repeat often. And I do mean OFTEN.

Bonus Section

-JUST FOR FUN:

Eavesdropping in the ER

-BY READER REQUEST:

An Invocation for a New Year

ER Eavesdropping

Q: I've heard you poke fun about how country folks talk about their health problems. I live in a small town far away from Atlanta, and I cringe every time I hear such talk. How should I respond the next time this happens?

A: Kick back and enjoy it. After all, these are rich vestiges of a vanishing culture and vernacular.

One day I'm going to set a novel in the waiting room of a rural Southern hospital. That way I can use the language I grew up hearing whenever illness was the subject.

Two dominant traits emerge when my people speak about being sick:

1. Extreme exaggeration of one's actual condition (gruesome details are a plus) and
2. Mispronunciation of words related to health.

So here's what my characters in the waiting room might well say...

Couple 1

"Lord, I can't believe Buddy's back in the hospital. Just last week they drained 6 quarts of fluid off of his neck."

"I know. Hospitals will kill you fast. Remember when that foreign doctor took a knife to Jolene Sugg's back? When they saw what was inside, all they could do was just sew her back up. She was eat up with the cancer. And you know once that air got to it she was dead"

within a week.”

Couple 2

“Me-Maw, when did you start having so much trouble with your eyes?”

“Oh, I’ve had Cadillacs on my eyes for ten years now. I can’t get ‘em fix-did ‘cause you know Crazy Aint Carrie will steal my pain pills. She’s already been banned from the pain clinics in a three-county area. I caint let her get me in trouble. Bless her heart—I think she got hooked on the Oxycondoms after they gave her that croat-a-zone (cortisone) for her bron-i-cal tubes.”

Couple 3

“I just hope Scooter don’t have another tumor. That last one was the size of a grapefruit.”

“I know it. I still can’t get over the trouble LaDonna went through. I mean, they said her uterine fibroid was the size of a broiler chicken.”

And so it goes. My own Me-Maw relished poor health more than anyone. She embellished her angioplasty to become open-heart surgery. But when asked about the “surgery,” she gave the most succinct description of angioplasty that I’ve heard: “They went in down here by my right grind (groin)—down here by my privates—and undid that clog in my heart.”

She also had a sinister explanation for her robust appetite. “Now you can believe this or not, but there’s something inside of me that’s eating my food besides me.”

I still have family members whose first-aid kits overflow with the ingenuity of poor folks. WD-40 is relied upon to ease stiff joints, and our time-honored solution to all dental problems and deep

cuts is Super Glue.

Healthcare professionals in these rural areas also engage in the melodrama. They told my then-fifty-eight-year-old mother that she had the bones of a ninety-nine-year-old. That if she risked having a colonoscopy she'd leave the hospital...feet first, through the back door, and in a body bag. They actually said "feet first" and "body bag." (The colonoscopy proceeded without incident.)

I think I'll go ahead and work the waiting room scene into a short story that I have in progress. I can't resist it. Let's don't disapprove of these things; let's preserve and celebrate them while they still last.

As for me, I need to go now. I feel a little peaked and need to see what I have in the medicine cabinet. After all, it takes 1,000 milligrams of *anything* to work on me.

An Invocation for a New Year

On This Day, Day One...

-Remind me that it all boils down to love and service to others. Period.

-That it is all about You and nothing about me.

-That no matter what happens, I have something to give. Because what remains is always more than what is lost. And through every fire I emerge more seasoned. So what the heck, count that as a gain as well.

-Because I was made with purpose, I am not here to be what others want me to be. I am here to be more of who I was born to be. Only then can I use my gifts in the highest possible way.

-Remind me that this requires major moxie. Guide my thoughts, words, and actions so that I am emboldened and can help others not be so afraid.

-Grant me patience, lots of it. (In fact, can I supersize that?) Emphasize that everything happens at the appointed hour, in perfect timing. That I can't put worldly judgment on the path designed for me or anyone else. And although some things are not meant for me, others might be just delayed, not denied.

-Aid me in the tests. "The two hardest tests on the spiritual road are the patience to wait for the right moment and the courage not to be disappointed with what we encounter," says Paulo Coelho.

-Give me the desire for less and less. Less buying, less doing, less of what Socrates called the barrenness of a busy life.

-Remind me to make room for more and more. More time in silence, more time to savor, and more time away from technology and other harmful distractions.

-Steer me toward the right road described in the prayer from St. Teresa of Avila (excerpted from "Let Nothing Disturb You: Thirty Days With a Great Spiritual Teacher").

"I think often of St. Paul's words that
'all things are possible in God.'

As you set out on your journey
take no notice of the warnings people give you,
or the dangers they suggest.
It is absurd to think
that you can travel along a road full of bandits
to reach a costly treasure
without running any risks.
The worldly think that happiness consists
of journeying peacefully through life.
Yet for the sake of making an extra dollar
They will sacrifice their sleep night after night,
and leave others with no peace of mind or body.

You are traveling by the royal and safe road
along which our Lord,
all the elect, and the saints have passed.
Put aside the misgivings
that the world would impose upon you.
Take no notice of public opinion.
This is no time to believe everything you hear.
Be guided only by those who conform their lives
to the will of God.
Try to keep a good conscience.
Practice humility.

Despise the values of the world.
Do these things
and you can be sure
that you are on the right road.

If God is pleased with you,
whoever resists you—
whoever they might be—
will be utterly disappointed.”

-Finally, on This Day, Day One: Grant me so much gratitude that my lungs expand with it as I take in each breath. So that it oozes out of my pores when I sleep. Imprint every cell in my body with thankfulness for what is.

**For more information about Laretta Hannon,
visit thecrackerqueen.com.**

Copyright 2013-2016 by Laretta Hannon
All rights reserved.