What is good? Joy and the well-lived life

by Miroslav Volf
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"Look at the birds of the air," Jesus said to the crowds gathered around him (Matt. 6:26). I've been looking at the birds lately, and it strikes me that today our lives are more akin to the frantic scurrying of rats and the disciplined marching of ants than to the contented and joyous singing of birds. In some regards, we humans are more like rats and ants than like birds.

But there's more to today's dearth of contentment and joy than just the elements of human nature. Cultures of postindustrial societies encourage and reward scurrying and marching more than they do rejoicing. They reach into what seems like the most intimate regions of our hearts, and by affecting our desires and our sense of responsibility, they disturb the peace of contentment and suppress the buoyancy of joy.

The joy we seek is the crown of the good life. It sums up what I call the affective component of the good life, or at least it does so in the Christian tradition (other religions and religious traditions have analogues to it). Two other formal components of that good life are circumstantial (life going well) and agential (leading life well).

These three components aren't independent of one another, each standing on its own, like three legs of some cozy "good life stool." So joy isn't something we do or do not experience in addition to leading life well and life going well. Instead, like a crown on the head of a queen, joy rests on and expresses a life that is lived well and

that goes well—never, of course, perfectly well, but well to a certain measure and in certain respects and despite all the accompanying pain and sorrow, guilt and inadequacy.

If joy meant simply feeling good, we could take a joy pill—or smoke weed—and rejoice. But we can't, because joy is feeling good *about* something good. The good over which we rejoice could be a good circumstance in our lives: good health, wonderful family, or winning the lottery, for instance. (The most important of all such circumstances for monotheists is the existence and character of God, which is why they can "rejoice in the Lord" despite otherwise adverse circumstances.) The good over which we rejoice could also be admirable conduct, like leading lives of integrity, humble service, or courage. (The most important source of joy in some strands of Judaism is the Law itself.)

If joy is feeling good about something good, then anything that diminishes the good or our sense of it as good will inhibit joy—which brings me back to desire and responsibility and the way we experience them today in the cultures of postindustrial modernity.

"The eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing," writes the author of Ecclesiastes (1:7–8), describing the ancient experience of insatiability. We are finite, but our desire is infinite, limited, it seems, mainly by our need for rest. Insatiability is a human condition—but one that the modern market economy magnifies. According to Kenneth Galbraith, the modern market doesn't so much respond to existing needs by supplying goods, but rather "creates the wants the goods are presumed to satisfy." Desire, hunger, and dissatisfaction are the market economy's fuel. The more fuel it has, the faster it can run, and so it creates the void it seeks to fill.

The result is a rushing stream of both amazing and not-so-amazing goods and services—along with a perpetual lack of contentment and diminished capacity for joy. The relation between joy and contentment at any given moment is straightforward: the less content you are, the less joy you will have (though discontentment often precedes joy). Joy celebrates the goodness of what is, what was, or is to come; the market economy fuels insatiability and malcontent, systematically erodes the goodness of what is, and cripples joy.

Insatiability—a kind of bad infinity of insatiable desire—is paired in modernity with the bad infinity of undischargeable responsibility. In a highly competitive world that never seems to stop, one task chases another, and we are never done. Sisyphus strains and grunts, always overwhelmed, always inadequate; he doesn't dance and rejoice. But it's not simply that we feel overwhelmed and inadequate. Rightly or wrongly, we experience the impossible task as our moral responsibility, not simply as our personal ambition.

Wilfred M. McClay writes:

> In a world in which the web of relationships between causes and effects becomes ever better understood, in which the means of communication and transportation become ever more efficient and effective, and in which individuals become ever more powerful and effective agents, the range of our potential moral responsibility . . . expands to literally infinite proportions.

Perceived infinite moral responsibility means an abiding culpability, a low-intensity inarticulate guilt that bleaches color from our experience of the world. Together inadequacy and guilt arrest joy and make its muscles shrivel. Enveloped in mists of futility and melancholy, we comfort ourselves with excitement and fun, but rarely achieve the richer pleasure of joy.

Those whose desires are infinite never have enough, and what they have is never good enough. Those who feel infinitely responsible never do enough, and what they have done is never good enough. The two bad infinities, one crippling joy and the other shriveling its muscles, are in fact one: a sense that things are never good enough. And so we scurry on and march through life.

Our challenge is in a strange way both frustratingly difficult and surprisingly easy to overcome. We must rediscover and embrace the goodness of small, large, and incomparably great things in our lives. When we do, birds will return—and sing.