

## Joy Notes

Christopher N. Poulos



In this essay, I attempt to write the emergence of joy in my life, as I have stumbled into it, in little flashes and glimpses, in minor notes and in waves. I do not think that joy can be more than ephemeral, though I seek here to embrace it, to hold it, to celebrate it when it appears.

*Keywords:* Autoethnography, dialogue, family, improvisation, joy, play

### Joy Notes

Joy moves in lightly, like a faint breeze tickling a cheek.

Joy flickers, like sunlight peering through a small crack.

Joy peals, like a small child's laughter.

Joy washes over me, like a sudden wave.

Joy pops in, then out of view, like a finch flitting through the branches of an oak.

Joy shows up gently, like the turning up of one corner of a mouth.

Joy flutters, like an aspen leaf in a cool breeze.

Joy strums, like my son's guitar.

Joy twinkles briefly, like a knowing eye.  
 Joy flirts, like a teenager.  
 Joy swishes, like a wet three-pointer.  
 Joy wavers in and out of my range, like a mirage.  
 Joy flashes and fades, like lightning on a mountaintop.  
 Joy pulsates, like my other son's drum set.  
 Joy brightens, like a little kid's ice cream grin.  
 Joy shimmers, like the surface of a lake in the late afternoon.  
 Joy glows, like a summer sunset.  
 Joy astonishes, like a vivid dream.  
 Joy splashes, like a cool fountain.  
 Joy plays, like a light note tinkling off a keyboard in the distance.

### **Play: An Opening**

In my life, joy has been hard to come by.

I have survived much trauma, and pain, and turmoil. I have lived in the darkness of abuse, and violence, and harsh judgment. I have suffered in silence, bound by the code of secrecy of an afflicted, troubled family.

It has not all been darkness, but much of my existence has been shrouded in a dark veil. So, as I have come into deep adulthood, I have found myself searching about for things to lighten (or even release) the load of my past. Some of this release has come to me through the magic of accidental ethnography (Poulos, 2009).

When I turned 50, I decided to try something new. I decided to learn to play piano. "I need *play* in my life," I thought. Little did I know that this kind of play would, like my early baseball career, turn into *work*. But somewhere in there, I also recaptured the joy of play. The sound of a finger on a piano keyboard, hitting the right note just right, is the sound of beauty. This is a forgiving instrument, I think. Even some of my mistakes sound pretty. I play like a child—not *very* well—in fact, less well than the seven year old who takes lessons before me...but I play. And in the playing, I find little joy notes.

Oddly, ironically, perhaps synchronistically, there are two songs I can play pretty well: *Ode to Joy* and *Oh, Susanna!* Each, in its own way, urges us to embrace joy—or at least to drop the tears for a moment.<sup>1</sup>

And I look back over my life, and find little moments, little eruptions, of joy amid all the sadness.

The sadness I have written about. It stems from the family afflictions of alcoholism, and violence, and secrecy, and the dark pain of separation among people who are supposed to love you well, supposed to be your safe haven, supposed to treat you as if you matter. Sadness falling into despair...

But this essay is about the joy in my life, in our lives...

There may be some among us who think that these things don't go together—joy and autoethnography.

There certainly aren't many joyful autoethnographies.

But...I wonder.

Part of me suspects that *everything* in our lives is intertwined, whether we know it or not.

So the question arises: *Where/how/why/do you* find connections between joy and autoethnographic inquiry?

Mostly, I have stumbled into joy, kind of by accident.

For me, as for many, there is great joy—and sorrow, and everything in between—in writing my life, in this life of writing.

And in my life, I have had, from time to time, little moments—small notes of joy, softly played.

This essay is about the hope found in those moments of respite, in those little breezes that flow into my life, in those little sights and sounds, in the flickering sunlight, in the wavering, in the little bursts of laughter, in a smile breaking across the edge of those lips, in the twinkle of an eye, in a look and a gesture, in a caress...

In the play of joy, in the joy of play, I find an opening.

It is an opening to *possibility*.

## The Birth of Joy

I look back over my life, and I remember moments of possibility.

I remember when we took our firstborn son, Eli, home from the hospital, three days after his birth by Caesarian section.

As we walked out the front door of the hospital, carrying our new treasure, a light breeze stirred. And I looked at Eli, who was feeling a breeze for the first time. And he turned his head toward the west, and took a sniff of that breeze.

I swear a faint smile touched his lips for the first time.

That smile would later become a *knowing* smile, a smile carrying wisdom beyond his years, a smile that says, “You may be older, but I know something you do not.” It is a smile that indicates vision, and playfulness—a smile imbued with a wryness that suggests a creative spirit.

Three or four months into Eli’s life, I am at work. It’s been a long day. As I head back to my office, I find myself searching for a way to turn away from the stress, if only for a moment. I enter and notice the light flashing on my phone. I have a voicemail message. I punch the keys hopefully. And I hear Susan’s voice on the other end, “Hey, I want you to hear this...” And there it is, the sound of pure joy. My son’s first laugh, opened up by a springy seat-toy that hangs from a doorway, allowing him to bounce around. Peals of pure, unbridled laughter punctuate my day. It is a sound like no other—spontaneous, unabashed, unselfconscious, innocent, raucous laughter. And, just as a smile crosses my lips, a hint of sadness shows up as I realize that I wasn’t *there* to hear it. Then the smile returns just as quickly, as I realize that I have something almost as good: a recording of that laugh, a *permanent* record of joy, thanks to Susan’s quick thinking.

I drive home, and I think of his little smile, which makes me think of hers. And *that* smile suggests another memory, another moment, another note, another little flicker of joy.

It is the first day of class—January 14, 1980. Long ago now, but I remember this day as vividly as yesterday. Acting I: a new adventure for me. You see, I was a shy kid, one who did not take to the stage easily. When I was younger, and had to give a report in front of the class, I would get physically ill. Violent nausea, shivering anxiety...but, as the years passed, I became determined to overcome my malady. And then I found myself at the University of Colorado, and before I knew what hit me, I was enrolled in an acting class.

The theater building is something of a maze. An unforgiving building with dark, twisting corridors, walls painted black. *A labyrinth*, I think. *Will there be a Minotaur?* My theatrical mind clicks into gear.

I know drama.

I climb the stairs, following the small crowd, hoping I am on my way to the right room. Turning the last corner, I find myself in an opening, an archway rather than a door, and I look out into a cavernous room. There are no chairs or desks, just an open space, about 300

square feet, with 20-foot ceilings. Again, the walls are painted black. Across the room, a group of students mills about, some chatting aimlessly. And then I see *her*, standing a little apart from everyone, hands folded and clasped serenely in front of her, a little smile flickering across her lips.

Many years later—31, to be precise—Sue and I are still together. To say it was “love at first sight” is to oversimplify things. But know this: At that moment, I *knew* we would be together. I don’t know how. But I knew. And she has been the greatest fountain of joy I have ever known.

We have shared life’s trials and tribulations, naturally.  
 But we have also shared much ecstasy.  
 And little glimmers of joy.

## Jubilation

I feel it...

Working alongside Grandpa on the farm, then going for ice cream. I am 8 years old.

I roll around on the grass in joy, as Sue and I share our first kiss in a beloved mountain cherry orchard.

I turn a perfect double play: 6-4-3.

Joy floods in as I look in her eyes, and say, “I will...”

I feel a surge as we swim a reef in the Caribbean, surrounded by glowing fish of many colors. Honeymoon. Whew.

I feel it as Eli, our first-born, emerges, and I am awash with it again as the doctor hands me our second-born son, Noah. Each time, I hold this new little one close, love surging, joy abounding.

Skipping rocks on the lake, two little boys at my side.

I smile as Eli, age 4, leaps, grabs the monkey bar, swings, flies, rolls, and runs.

Fireworks off the end of Cape Hatteras.

I laugh out loud as my kids wrestle me to the floor.

Doing a can opener off the high dive, just like when I was 12.

I feel it as we toss the Frisbee around the yard, and fall, first into idle chatter, then into some serious storytelling, then into raucous laughter.

And we come full circle.

I dive into the lake, and it hits me like a shock.

Romping through the backyard with the dogs, playing chase.

Reading Dr. Seuss's *Fox in Sox* to my young sons, full speed, they laugh as I trip over the words: "Chicks with bricks come. Chicks with blocks come. Chicks with Bricks and blocks and clocks come. Look, sir. Look, sir. Mr Knox, sir. Let's do tricks with bricks and blocks, sir. Let's do tricks with chicks and clocks, sir" (Seuss, 2005, p. 8).

And so on.

Noah, lunging at his opponent in his first fencing tournament, scoring his first win. He is 8 years old.

Eli, saber rattling as he parries and ripostes, winning first place.

Sitting in front of the fireplace, sipping warm drinks, talking.

Running through a meadow, leaping over flowers, laughing.

I sit atop a high mountain, deep in the Rockies, a grin spreading.

Lazing, looking up at the clouds, watching them float slowly by as the day does the same.

I walk onstage, turn toward the audience, beam as the Ph.D. hood is draped over my shoulders for the first time.

A double-rainbow over a 12,000-foot peak.

Eli graduates from high school, and I look him in the eye, and...a wide grin breaks between us.

Noah, king of his kindergarten class, ascends to his cardboard throne, and looks out over his "subjects."

I stand in the third row, watching Eli play guitar to a rapt audience.

I leap to my feet as Noah hits his fifth three-pointer of the night.

## Epiphany

One day in early Autumn, I find myself wandering around at a local flea market. I wonder if there is hidden treasure here. Mostly, I find cast off junk. And a memory breaks into my mind's eye, of a moment from my childhood...

I am with my grandpa, walking through the forest behind his house. He walks briskly, the cane in his hand belying his ability. And I quickly discover the cane is not for walking. He stops, pokes the ground at his feet, hears a "clink," reaches down, and digs up a little blue bottle, fully intact, and hands it to me. "See, son?" he says, "You never know where you might find a hidden treasure." And a broad smile lights up his face.

Later that day, we are on a little rowboat, on a little pond on his big farm. And I am looking down at my hand, at the Catawba worm that will serve as bait—a potentially treacherous hook-charged meal for my quarry, the fabled largemouth bass, much favored over its lesser, bonier cousins (the bream, or sunfish) that inhabit these southern waters. This particular worm seems to have a bit extra in him, as if he is more determined than his peers to escape his watery fate. I look closely at him, and a small smile spreads across my face, as I flick him off onto the shore, to take his chances among less storied predators. I think to myself, vaguely, that we are not so different, me and that worm, both craving freedom as we do. And I wonder if freedom is a gateway to something more—joy, perhaps?

And then the camera switches, and I find myself descending the stairs in our Atlanta home. It is Christmas Day, 1968, and all that I have prayed for these past few months is a new baseball glove. And there it sits, out in the open, unwrapped, right under the tree. And I cannot believe how beautiful it is! Forty-three years later, I still have that glove, still use it to play pitch with my kids.

Then I am standing at the flea market, staring off into space, jostled out of my reverie by the elbow of a fellow browser. I look up, and what I see, right there on the table in front of me, is a little antique figurine of Santa. I pick it up, turn it over, looking for a price. Twenty-five cents. Hmm. This is a sign, I think. And, anyway, this deal is too good to be true. So I buy my first of many Santas of various sizes and shapes and dispositions—a habit my family teases me about, but one that brings me little flashes of joy throughout the year as I glimpse a Santa out of the corner of my eye, somewhere around the house or my office. You see, Santa is a baseball glove, freely given. Santa is the spirit of generosity. Santa is a childlike, joyous figure, harbinger of the possibility and imagination and giving spirit that animates my life. Santa is the patron saint of charity and children. Maybe, he is the icon of pure joy. Anyway, I think he has a place in our everyday world.

You see, to me, Santa signifies a creative, generative spirit—the notion that, perhaps, if we work at it, we can offer something new to this world. Perhaps, if we work at it, we can offer a gift that might change something for the better, if only a little. Perhaps, if we work at it, we can live out the legacy of all creative, generative souls throughout history—the legacy of creation, of making something

that matters, of building something that outlasts a moment of joy, but maybe spreads something powerful into the wider pools of our collective consciousness.

For me, that gift is the text of autoethnography.

For my money, there is no greater gift than that of sharing a well-crafted life story.

For me, autoethnography is a portal to joy.

Of course, this particular autoethnographic text—this text that purports to explore the “joy notes” of my life—begs the question: “What is joy and to what end?”

I found myself pondering this question over the summer.

I may be no closer to an answer, but...I may also have had an epiphany.

Like many things in life, it all depends on how you look at it.

## Joy and Dialogue

In my quest for the meanings of joy, I begin at the simplest place. I consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which bills itself as “the definitive record of the English language.” Said dictionary offers the following relevant primary definition of the noun: “A vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction; the feeling or state of being highly pleased or delighted; exultation of spirit; gladness, delight” ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).

I find myself only slightly (not highly) pleased, certainly not overjoyed, by this definition. Like all definitions, it is *limited* and *limiting*. It barely hints at the ineffable quality of the experience, coming closest, perhaps, with the phrase “exultation of spirit.” That phrase, however, merely *hints* at how this feeling might inhabit my day, overtake my consciousness, flood me like a wave. It helps only a little to ponder the fact that its etymology is shared with the English word “jewel,” and to remember the look on my dear Susana’s face when I bought her a ring set with a precious sapphire from Montana, a kind of sapphire that only shows up in two places on earth—Montana, where we travel every summer, and North Carolina, where we make our home.

But I digress.

So I decide to poke around in the scholarly neighborhood I inhabit, searching for writings about joy.

My search of the books on my shelves yields a few brief mentions—little side comments in writings on love, on creativity, on the mythic imagination—all of it suggesting, though not really coming out and saying, that we are creatures of mystery, animated by our emotions, sometimes brimming with joy, sometimes sorrow, but most often inhabiting the emotional spaces in between these extremes (May, 1969, 1972, 1991). Of course, I already know this, so I continue my search. In the end, there is, frankly, not much material on joy itself. Turning to the library databases reveals that scholars have written precious little in their various journals about joy itself, particularly in my field (communication studies), though much has been written about Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*.

Finally, I stumble upon a jewel—an intriguing piece written by a Judaic studies scholar—entitled *Joy: A Buberian Perspective* (Gordon, 2001).

Now I am *onto* something.

It turns out that Martin Buber (1972), in his writings on the Hasidic movement in Judaism, linked joy to his own philosophy of dialogic living-in-encounter. In the early Hasidic tales, in the times of creation, the “sparks of God” fell into all things that exist in the world. The job of the *Hasid*, or the human seeking exalted, fervent joy, is to ignite, raise, and “free” these divine and holy sparks in the world.

And, it turns out, the most likely and powerful way to ignite these sparks is to engage in dialogue—in community, or *communion*—with other humans. So joy is a communal phenomenon: “Buber holds that the communal joy in Hasidism was an expression of its most important phenomenon: ‘holy community’” (Gordon, 2001, p. 108). For Buber, a life of dialogue is the key to this joyous life in community. In the famed I-Thou connection, joy wells up like a fresh spring or a newly ignited fire, imbuing life itself with its energy.

Which brings me back to my own quest for joy notes in my life, to the doorway or portal to joy I have been seeking here.

## Family Joy

The signs were there all along.

My answer, if you can call it that—no, my portal to possibility—was there, right under my nose, so to speak.

Family, the main source of most of my troubles in this life, is, it turns out, also the crucible of my joy.

Funny. I fancy myself a scholar of family communication. It is, I suppose, true that we teach what we most need to learn. But you would think it would have occurred to me before now that the lion's share of my holy sparks resides, well, at home.

It took writing about it to see it.

It began with my children, who really taught me how to play again. And, in the joy of play, in the play of joy, I have found an opening.

That opening—to possibility—is also found between the moments of play. I have discovered, with some surprising ease, that many of the deepest moments of dialogue in my life have been with my wife and children, my little family (Poulos, 2008).

We chop potatoes, and sparks begin to fly.

We walk the dogs: more sparks.

We swim in the frigid mountain lake, then run laughing to the hot tub to warm up...laughing, laughing.

We take a road trip to the Carolina mountains: joy.

We walk along the beach, running in and out of the crashing surf, and sparks begin to fly.

We hike to the summit, sit, pant, stare, and reflect.

We enjoy a fine home-cooked meal, and revel in the moment.

We work ourselves to exhaustion, collapse together on the couch, and light some holy sparks...

And we realize, together, communally, in dialogue: This life we share is good.

Very good.

And there is joy in that revelation.

## **Meta-joy**

So why should we care about each other's joy?

Why should you care about mine?

Why do you care about your own?

I'll admit, when I got the invitation to participate in this conversation, I was immediately intrigued.

And a little bewildered.

I have been writing autoethnography for a while now, and at moments, I have touched joy, invited it in, caressed it into my work.

But much of my work has been troubled.  
 For much of my life, I have been troubled.  
 I will continue to write my way through trouble.  
 I will continue to trouble my writing.

And yet, lately, I have been flirting with laughter more often, feeling the sudden surge of joy, of wonder, of discovery...that can come from a moment—even a brief one—of accidental dialogue (Poulos, 2008) or from stumbling into a mystery that calls my attention, calls me into writing. I have felt the flash of energy that comes from meeting someone new, from seeing something differently, from writing worlds into being, from play, from work, from reading a story written from the heart, from meeting a student where she is...and helping her walk toward her best, most joyful self. I have felt delight in the uninhibited presence of a child. I have known joy in an encounter with a wise old one.

Some little part of me keeps telling me that all lines in a life intersect at some point, regardless of what I want.

Some little part of me tells me that, regardless of what I want, joy and sorrow, hope and despair, pleasure and pain, writing and life, life and writing, writing life, and living the writing life...may someday come together in a burst, in a wave, in a shimmer, in a splash, in an earthquake, in a little soft note...

Some little part of me tells me that this joy is a part of human life that may deserve cultivation.

Some little part of me tells me that this writing life is a life of *turbulence*—and that turbulence, to really be turbulent, needs both peaks and troughs.

Some little part of me tells me that I should pay a little more attention to the peaks...and, perhaps, linger there for a little longer than has been my habit.

Some little part of me tells me that you reap what you sow, that perhaps I can sow a few more seeds of joy in my life, and thus begin to feel it more frequently.

Or, at least, more readily.

I do know this: I will continue writing joy, and “joying” my writing...

In this way, I hope to play little joy notes, fingers flickering across my keyboard, for as long as I possibly can...

## Note

1. *Ode to Joy*: "Oh, friends, not these tones! Let us raise our voices in more pleasing and joyful sounds." *Oh Susanna!*: "Don't you cry for me!"

## References

- Buber, M. (1972). *Tales of the Hasidim: The early masters* (O. Marx, Trans.). New York: Schocken Books.
- Gordon, R. (2001). Joy: A Buberian perspective. *Shofar*, 19, 105–116.
- May, R. (1969). *Love and will*. New York: Norton.
- May, R. (1972). *The courage to create*. New York: Norton.
- May, R. (1991). *The cry for myth*. New York: Norton.
- Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) online. ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).
- Poulos, C. (2008). Accidental dialogue: The search for dialogic moments in everyday life. *Communication Theory*, 18, 117–138.
- Poulos, C. (2009). *Accidental ethnography: An inquiry into family secrecy*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Seuss, Dr. (2005). *Fox in socks*. New York: Random House.

---

Christopher N. Poulos, Department of Communication Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Correspondence to: Christopher N. Poulos, Department of Communication Studies, Ferguson 115, UNCG, Greensboro, NC 27402. E-mail: [cnpoulos@uncg.edu](mailto:cnpoulos@uncg.edu).