

# Choosing Joy

BY CECILIA AMOROCHO HICKERSON

Theologian Henri Nouwen urged, “Be surprised by joy, be surprised by the little flower that shows its beauty in the midst of a barren desert and be surprised by the immense healing power that keeps bursting forth like springs of fresh water from the depth of our pain.”<sup>1</sup>

What is joy? Is it fleeting, elusive, always sought after but rarely-if-ever obtained? Does it course through us like a subterranean river, ever-present but tapped only occasionally, when conditions are favorable? Is it always right in front of us, undetected, waiting for us to be awakened to its presence? Is it a small thing, or immense?

We may have trouble defining joy, but I’m guessing that, when each of us has experienced joy, we’ve known it. Joy is not the same as happiness; author C. S. Lewis, declared that real joy seems “almost as unlike security or prosperity as it is unlike agony,” suggesting that “one second of joy is worth 12 hours of Pleasure.”<sup>2</sup>

In reflecting on joy, I kept thinking about a geological inclusion, “a body or particle recognizably distinct from the substance in which it is embedded.”<sup>3</sup> An inclusion diminishes the value of a diamond, but adds to the value or beauty of amber, star sapphire and a number of other gems. Joy might have the uniformity of a diamond—like playing with a puppy. Or it might be a feeling made more intense and more precious by the inclusions of grief and loss—a puppy collapsing into a nap in just the spot a beloved old dog always napped. I think it’s this latter form of joy that carries us most strongly through our lives.

In his poem “Surprised by Joy,” William Wordsworth describes the shock and pain he felt the instant he turned to share an unexpected moment of joy with a loved one who had died.<sup>4</sup> The writer of Psalm 30 praises God for deliverance from a life-threatening illness: “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. . . . O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever” (Ps. 30:11, 12b).



*Free Girl No. 9*, Cynthia Christine

Novelist Isabel Allende, in the aftermath of her daughter’s death, learned to find joy in giving: “I am happier when I love than when I am loved. I adore my husband, my son, my grandchildren, my mother, my dog, and frankly I don’t know if they even like me. But who cares? Loving them is my joy.”<sup>5</sup>

“Joy does not simply happen to us,” wrote theologian Henri Nouwen. “We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.”<sup>6</sup>

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## Notes

1. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living* (New York: Convergent, 2017), 92.
2. From a handwritten letter written by C. S. Lewis, August 19, 1945, summarized in Alison Flood, “Unseen CS Lewis letter defines his notion of joy,” December 9, 2014; [www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/09/unseen-cs-lewis-letter-defines-joy-surprised-by-joy](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/09/unseen-cs-lewis-letter-defines-joy-surprised-by-joy).
3. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University, 2010).
4. William Wordsworth, “Surprised by Joy,” *Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1995); [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50285/surprised-by-joy](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50285/surprised-by-joy).
5. Isabel Allende, “In Giving I Connect With Others,” *All Things Considered*, April 4, 2005; [www.npr.org/2005/04/04/4568464/in-giving-i-connect-with-others](http://www.npr.org/2005/04/04/4568464/in-giving-i-connect-with-others).
6. Nouwen, *Ibid*, 169.