

# chasing joy

musings on life in a bittersweet world

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Forest of Peace



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preface

**T**his book, entitled *Chasing Joy*, is but another expression of the pursuit of happiness as one of our God-given inalienable rights that Thomas Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence. The quest of happiness isn't an easy one in today's bittersweet world as we are nourished daily on media meals of cheerless stories of war, and the horrors of torture, murder, and street violence. Not only must we face all this bad news, but we must also deal with our own personal difficulties and disappointments. Everyday life certainly challenges those of us who sincerely desire to live the Good News proclaimed by the angels at Bethlehem and expressed in that exultant old Christmas carol, "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, written only twenty-five years or so after the death of Jesus, the itinerant preacher, Paul of Tarsus, exhorts his Christian converts of Thessalonica to “rejoice always.”<sup>1</sup> His call to live joyously isn’t exclusively a Christian one since it is also found in the world’s other great religious traditions. Yet to rejoice and strive to live joyously while witnessing the horrifying events of our world seems to be either insane or satanic!

Authors write books for a variety of reasons. I wrote this one because I was inspired during the years I spent writing what is perhaps my favorite book, *The Passionate Troubadour*. It is a medieval novel about Francis of Assisi, renowned for his expansive love of all creation and his radical poverty. For me personally, what makes Francis stand out from the thousands of other saints is not that he was a barefoot, self-impooverished saint, but that he was a merry saint.

His unquenchable joy was long a mystery to me since his life was anything but happy once God had touched him. The Spirit of God inspired his dream of a community of laymen dedicated to simple living and service to those in need, but the Church seriously crippled his vibrant dream by institutionalizing it. To make matters worse, his own Franciscan companions watered down his simple rule, claiming it impossible to live even if Francis himself lived it! Yet to these and other painful disappointments, Francis responded with joyful acceptance, as he also did to the physical afflictions caused by his personal asceticism—the blindness of his later years and the constant pain of his stigmata.

St. Paul said that to “rejoice always” was God’s will for us, but he didn’t say how to accomplish this seemingly impossible feat. It was clear to me that Francis of Assisi found that ability. As I wrote of his infallible joyfulness, I was inspired to seek the same source of profound joy that Francis had discovered.

However, being inspired to live joyfully in the world in which I live was to be challenged to the extreme. How could I as an American rejoice constantly when my government waged what my conscience said was an immoral war of imperial aggression? How could I rejoice when politicians slashed social programs for the poor and elderly as they simultaneously reduced the taxes on the country’s wealthiest? And instead of my Church being a source of hope, it too became a cause of sadness as it returned to yesteryear’s rituals and legalistic rigidity. How could I be joyful when my church was more concerned with preserving its own image and status than inclusively incorporating the marginal and alienated or working for justice and peace? In my personal life, when my own family or friends were diagnosed with cancer or suffered some tragic catastrophe, how could I respond with joyful acceptance?

The formula “If it bleeds, it leads” is the programming agenda for what news stories lead off a broadcast of our 24/7 news. That outlook and the restless discontent created by unsatisfied desires, coupled with all the disappointments, heartache, and sorrow in our personal lives, make it a real challenge to live a joyful life. It is this very challenge that the following reflections explore as they propose that not only is it possible to live a

joyous life, but one of an unshakable joy that is powerful enough to withstand even the darkest tribulations of life. Paul wrote that we are to pray always, be grateful in all circumstances, and always rejoice since it is the will of God for us. If these three imperatives are indeed the will of God, then blessedly wise are those who strive earnestly to live in such unflinching joy! At the Last Supper, the Teacher bequeathed his invincible, theft-proof joy to his disciples and then promised, “no one will take your joy away.”<sup>2</sup> To achieve this unflinching joy, simply use the gift that you have been given.

This book on joyful living is the result of the head-on collision between my own attempts to imitate a joyful saint of thirteenth-century medieval Italy and the painful realities of living in today’s bittersweet world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Perhaps it can serve you as a survival manual for how to live happily.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16

<sup>2</sup> John. 16:22



thirty-three

## hey old clod, what now?

**F**rom the Taoist tradition of ancient China comes another echo of the Spirit's call to joyfulness in life, regardless of the circumstances. An old holy man named Master Hu, a follower of the way of Tao, lived long, long ago in ancient China. Old Hu loved God and God loved Hu. So whatever God did was fine with Old Hu, and whatever Hu did was fine with God, since they were such good friends. Being good friends, Hu and God liked to kid around and Hu would jokingly call his friend God, "The Great Clod." That was fine with God, who would joke with Hu in return, like give him warts on his face, arthritis in his hands and feet, a canker sore in his mouth, and even gout in his feet. God was a great kidder and that was fine with Old Hu, since they were such good friends.

As a result of God's numerous jokes, old Master Hu grew lumpy as a toad and crooked as a human pretzel.

“You Old Clod,” Hu would shout at God, laughing, and that was fine with God. Just to show his old friend Hu that he was listening, God made Hu’s right leg ten inches shorter than his left, and that made Old Hu walk around in little circles. Laughing loudly, Master Hu would say to the villagers, “Ha ha! See how the Great Clod listens to me! Look how ugly and silly I’m becoming,” and looking up to the sky, “Hey, Old Clod, you make me laugh and laugh, but that’s what friends are for.”

This only caused the villagers to wag their heads at Master Hu, and their tongues too, saying, “Old Hu has gone crazy!” Hearing that, he winked at them, and looked up to the sky, shouting, “Hey Clod! Are you awake or not? What’s next?” And zap, out popped a fresh wart. Seeing his newest affliction, the villagers walked away convinced that Old Hu was crazy, and maybe he was. Had God also sent craziness down on him, along with his warts, arthritis and gout? If so, it didn’t bother Old Hu, it was just fine with him since he loved God and God loved him.

So as the years jogged by one after another, Old Hu became the most twisted, arthritic, wart-covered, ugly, happy old man in all of China. Then, one day, casting a cataract-clouded eye heavenward he whispered, “Hey Clod! What now?” And God reached down his hand and drew Old Hu right up unto Himself. And that was just fine with Hu. That’s what a Friend is for.

Among the stories and parables of earth’s religions this Taoist parable has to be one of the finest illustrations of the imperative to be joyful regardless of the circumstances. Taoism was an early spiritual path of

ancient China based on the teachings of Lao-tse, who lived in the sixth century BC. The *Tao*, or “The Way,” emphasized simplicity in spiritual practice and fostered living in harmony with nature by seeking a balance in life of the male and female principles of creation. This story of Master Hu is short, so consider reading it a second time, slowly and aloud, since it vibrates with great power. The tale of Hu expresses the unconditional source of how to be always joyful regardless. The litany of miseries visited upon old Hu resemble those God bestowed on mythical, poor Job in the Old, or First, Testament. Unlike poor Job, Master Hu could laugh and joke with God about his heaven-sent misfortunes. This rare ability was clearly the result of his deep, intimate friendship with God, whom Hu treated like a true friend.

When confronted with painful difficulties or a serious illness, such an intimate, trusting relationship with the Divine Mystery is the source of enduring happiness. Mirthfully dealing with your miseries isn’t the same as stoically enduring them. To live in joy requires living in trust that your Divine Friend will creatively convert whatever is unpleasant in your life into something good. Trust is a deeply confident reliance upon another who has proven in past experiences to be truly trustworthy. This kind of trust is the fruit of love and intimate friendship. Master Hu and God were friends! Master Hu dealt with his endless misfortunes with gleeful humor because of his unshakable love and trusting assurance that God loved him as a dearest friend.

It would be understandable to disregard this Tao's tale as humorous but impractical in the real world, since it's only a story. No Master Hu ever existed! That's true! And likewise there was never a real Good Samaritan or Prodigal Son either. Those stories, like Master Hu, are teaching parables, life patterns to show us how to behave, and also how God behaves!