

Joy: The Culmination of Hope Fully Experienced in the Present

For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. - C. S. Lewis

I can't help but wonder if I've thought about joy wrong my whole life. "Happiness regardless of circumstance" has always been my default definition, but that definition fits "contentment" much better. Joy is contentment plus. Contentment is a choice; joy is a feeling (and that's not a bad thing). It happens to us. One of the times in my life I remember being most joyful was when our second daughter, Brighton, was born. Throughout the pregnancy, Melia had been constantly sick. It got to the point where she had to spend the night in the hospital to get fluids via IV to get rehydrated, and after that we had several family members rotate coming to town over the next several weeks to help take care of her and Arden during the day. On top of Melia's agony, as we got close to the due date, we learned Brighton had a significant health anomaly, to the point that she might need an organ transplant shortly after being born. But finally, after nine long months, she arrived. I remember crying as I held her for the first time – she was healthy, Melia was healthy, and everything was going to be okay. I held her and cried, sitting in the present and taking it all in. I cry now knowing it doesn't always turn out that way.

And that's just it. I put so much hope in them being healthy because I knew it wasn't a guarantee. But they *were*(!), and joy overwhelmed me in that moment.

Despite joy being a feeling, an agent acting upon us, we can still make choices that put us on its path. Much to my own shame, our ability to put ourselves in the position to experience joy is made clear to me as I contrast my actions during Brighton's birth with my actions during our first daughter, Arden's, birth. I had very few expectations going into it. "Humans do this all the time, so she'll be here soon, and we'll keep moving forward in life." Out of a combination of cheap-ness and naïveté, I assumed the responsibility of taking pictures of just-born Arden. After cutting the umbilical cord, my thoughts immediately went to, "Oh, right, take pictures!" Soon, Melia and Arden were settled and perfect, we had a bunch of [blurry] pictures, and I was abundantly happy, but I can't say I felt joy. It didn't take me too many months to realize I had missed an opportunity. I had stepped out of the present to preserve money for the future and memories from the past, and joy passed me by.

In light of these experiences, I propose a new definition of joy: the culmination of hope fully experienced in the present. Joy might not be a choice in and of itself, but we give ourselves the opportunity to see it when we place our hope in something. We can't choose to feel joy, but we can choose to be more present in each moment. Undoubtedly the deepest joy comes to us as a by-product of living life in the Spirit: as a result of placing our hope in things unseen and touching eternity by living in the present. I pray we're all able to experience more of God's gift of joy throughout this holiday season.

Blake Mullins