

Embody Joy

Twelve Steppingstones to Joy in Troubled Times

Introduction:

On Christmas Eve, 2012, I attended a church service in Ipswich, Queensland, Australia. We sang, “Joy to the World!”

I realized, “Yes! I feel joyful!”

I was immediately struck by a profound sense of irony. How could I feel joyful, when my rational mind was filled with a multitude of worries about the future, from devastating climate change to the mass extinction of species? In a world where mass shootings, terrorist bombings and nuclear weapons dominate the news, joy seemed a luxury. Where was this feeling coming from, when my work over the last decade has filled my brain with local, national, and international data and trends in the “human condition,” bringing many crises in the natural and human world very close to home?

Yet, there it was. Joy. And it felt good and right.

Convinced that only extraordinary joy offered the energy required to survive in such challenging and paradoxical times, I paid attention to this feeling. As Christmas day dawned, I resolved to devote my creative energy in the New Year to understanding how it is possible—indeed essential—to embody joy in fearful times. I chose “Steppingstones to Joy” as the theme for chronicling my journey.

To remember each of 12 steps, I chose an image to symbolize each. Jenn Colligan Kuehne, a gifted artist and neighbor, created the twelve pictures that accompany my words. This essay is my invitation to explore each step, guided by these twelve pictures and the power they may convey as symbols.

Join me to savor this journey, and welcome others who choose to accompany us on this pathway to joy through a perilous era.

Steppingstone One, “Awaken,” is symbolized by a rooster



The rooster calls us to wake up!

As we leave our homes and comfort zones, either literally or figuratively, and set out to observe and engage the “human condition,” we encounter diverse communities across the country and the world. We begin our journey with the question Margaret Wheatley asks in Turning to One Another, “What are you willing to notice in your world?”¹

Awaken to your surroundings as you travel, and talk with the people you encounter. Even if your own life seems to be going well, remember that for billions of people in the world, the “human condition” is quite difficult. Wake up and notice how these difficulties appear, and who experiences them.

For example, my research of the “human condition” in just one Massachusetts county generated data concerning several serious threats to the quality of human life, including:

- Climate Change;
- Loss of arable farmland and affordable, potable water;
- Unequal access to affordable healthcare, particularly prevention services;
- Homelessness;
- Disparities in opportunities for meaningful, productive work that pays a living wage;
- Violence—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, including suicide, war, the cultures of militarism and machismo, and religious fundamentalism;
- Addictions—to both substances and behaviors;
- Racism, ageism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

This research echoed similar findings published by scholars worldwide. These data document that all these threats disproportionately affect people living on the margins. What Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in his 1970 Nobel Prize Speech remains true today: “There is a scale for things that happen nearby and a scale for things that happen far away. There is a scale for ancient societies and a scale for young ones, a scale for the happy and a scale for the unhappy...and confidently we judge the whole world by our own scale.”²

In much of the world, systematic human rights violations make certain populations more vulnerable to these threats:

- Minorities—racial and ethnic, GLBT, and indigenous peoples;
- People who are elderly;
- Children;
- People who are illiterate;
- People who are mentally ill;
- Immigrants and refugees (including internally displaced populations);
- People who are low income;
- People who are disabled;
- Women.

Institutions devote billions of dollars each year seeking to make the world, or their communities, safer and healthier for the above populations. Many of these efforts fall short because they address the issues and the populations noted above in “silos”— in isolation from one another. But pictures from space document how life on earth, including human life, and even the earth itself, comprise one indivisible system. Systems Theory documents how these (and many other) issues and populations are intimately interconnected within this indivisible system.

Simplistic analyses contend that these problems are primarily rooted in poverty, and that by alleviating poverty, these problems will fade away. However, deeper analysis confirms that poverty is only one of a myriad of factors, more a symptom than a cause. Thus, efforts to address poverty, without knowledge of the whole system, fail. Awakening to this whole “earth system” advances realization that failure to solve problems was not due to lack of effort or resources, but to a lack of coordination and connectivity among efforts and resources. The way most people go about solving problems, piece by piece, often makes things worse. Individual egos and resulting “turf wars” fragment the whole.

An antidote can be found in these words from Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.³

**Steppingstone two is symbolized by an OAR,
an acronym for “Ownership, Accountability, and Responsibility.”**



I first encountered the “OAR” acronym in a session on purpose during a three-day gathering of Mankind Project elders from all over the world in Springbrook, Australia.

It originated with ACTIONCoach, an international business coaching network (<http://actioncoach.com>).

Discussion of this steppingstone encapsulates ownership, accountability, and responsibility. OAR provides reins to control the ego. While all life is difficult, the choice to consume more than one’s share of limited resources makes life more difficult for people in marginalized groups, while lessening one’s own difficulties. We need to hold ourselves accountable – to admit responsibility for contributing to problems, and, then, to respond – to take responsibility for tangible action to do what we can to connect the efforts (“responding” = being responsible).

For example, as nations develop and citizens accumulate material wealth, they need to also own accountability and responsibility for applying this wealth. The consumer-based model of increasing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) without regard for the environment or the human condition threatens life on earth. Throughout the world, more and more people contribute to climate change by driving cars, even when it is possible to walk, bike, or use public transportation. They eat higher on the food chain, aspire to houses with dozens of light bulbs and dozens of electrical appliances, rather than relying on natural light and their own two hands. They frequent luxurious resorts in beautiful, fragile ecosystems and, in a generation, deplete most of the available resources.

These are destructive habits of humankind that the earth and the rest of its living creatures cannot long endure.

At the same workshop, we learned a second acronym, “**BED**” (Blame, Excuses, and Denial). We often live in “BED” with regard to our destructive habits. These ideas have been expressed by what faith traditions term “repentance” or “atonement.”

In more secular terms, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, in their book Active Hope, refer to “The Great Turning.”⁴

Whether we are motivated by a faith tradition, or a moral imperative, this step marks a conscious decision to turn and proceed in the opposite direction—from “BED” to “OAR.”

At this point in history, humankind has an opportunity to “repent” or “atone” or “turn” in more universal ways than we have ever imagined.

Steppingstone three is symbolized by a broken heart, representing our understanding and experience of grief



The broken heart: As we own our destructive habits, and accept our personal obligation to be accountable and responsible for our role in creating and exacerbating the world's problems, a deep sadness may well up within us. As we acknowledge our role in the crises of the human condition, we may weep for the world, for those we love, and for ourselves.

Taking this step can open the door to a deep grieving process. Theologian Matthew Fox wrote in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*: "Our mother is dying." He was referring to Mother Earth and his Mother Church. The reality of death, both our own and that of those we love, evokes strong emotions. Plumbing the depth of this sadness evokes all the stages of grieving which Elizabeth Kubler Ross defined (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance).⁵ Devoting time to exploring each of these stages leads to understanding that many of the problems the world faces are actually rooted in, or exacerbated by, unacknowledged and unresolved grief.

Psychologist Carl Jung wrote, "There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own Soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."⁶ He also wrote, "The foundation of all mental illness is the unwillingness to experience legitimate suffering."⁷

Grief repressed, rather than expressed, has to go somewhere. People in wealthy societies demand and consume the vast majority of the world's opiates and other painkillers. Addiction rates skyrocket along with the GDP. Repressed anger and depression contribute to habits of violence and denial; America's obsession with guns and violent video games may well be a symptom of repressed grief.

Some people respond to repressed grief with shame and guilt, taking responsibility for more than their share of the world's suffering, and burn out, accepting a broken heart as the end of their journey. Consider Robert Bly's poem "Things to Think:"

*When someone knocks on the door,
Think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,
Or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one will die."*

Take these words from the "**Desiderata**" to heart:

*"You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars,
you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you,
the universe is unfolding as it should."*

Part of a commitment to repentance, atonement, or the "Great Turning," is to align the path of your journey with that of the unfolding universe, and walk on through grief.

Steppingstone four, prayer, is symbolized by clasped hands



Clasped hands: What is our alternative to denial?

“Taking responsibility” implies responding, which is an action. As tempting as it may be to remain on the sidelines when confronted by pain (our own or that of others) the journey to joy requires proper action. Clasped hands symbolize prayer, a form of discerning proper action.

Across a diverse world, the practice of “prayer” takes many forms in many faith traditions. The serenity prayer is valuable to many. For people who do not embrace a faith tradition, the practice of mindfulness can be an appropriate way to discern proper action. Whatever the entry point, this stepping stone involves what mystics call “diving deep and surfacing.”

One does not need to understand these practices to find them of value. Author Anne Lamott expresses prayer well in her recent book, Help, Thanks, Wow.⁸ Mystics in many faith traditions practice prayer continually, and count it essential to integrating their faith and actions. We can learn from their example, as we discern specific actions we can take toward the goal of joy. Whatever discipline and intention you choose, you will likely observe changes in your body, mind, and spirit that will lead to changes in your day-to-day actions. What changes?

**Steppingstone five, being open to outcomes,
is symbolized by an open heart.**



The Open Heart: Prayer, meditation, or mindfulness would not be real if we tried to predict or control their outcome. As Anne Lamott puts it in her book Help, Thanks, Wow: “What’s the difference between you and God? God doesn’t think he’s you.”

At this point, our path, the “steppingstones” to our future, may seem shrouded in fog. We are still a long way from the light we may have blithely imagined was at hand. Thus, we choose to walk on into the fog, with faith that further steppingstones will appear. Sometimes the fog lasts a long, long time. If so, we must make a conscious decision, to “love the one we’re with,” to see the value and beauty in each situation, in each step in our journey; to constantly open ourselves further to the messages continually streaming through the unfolding universe.

Each person will discern different messages. For example, one dawn in Australia, as I prayed for guidance, a bright red King Parrot lit on a eucalyptus branch just above my head, peered down at me, and defecated on my glasses! I took this, and many other messages, to heart. I committed to opening my mind and heart to the universe unfolding all around me, to new vistas that appeared as the fog lifted.

At this point, we become especially aware that we are not alone! In my journey, for example, I have been constantly accompanied by the spirit world: my ancestors, the animals and plants of the mountains and desert of my childhood; and these spirits communicate with me.

Here is a portion of an early poem about my childhood:

*My boyhood teachers were not mortals:
Each mourning dove a feather pen from God.
This land was theirs, in me, they shared it,
Bobcat, badger, rattlesnake my kin:
Beyond these times of chaos and confusion
In mountain meadows we will dance again*

This was not schizophrenia—I didn’t live in the world of these spirit animals, I visited them and returned! I also carefully visit my ancestors, and respectfully seek their counsel. Their consistent and continual message:

“Shut up and listen. You have everything you need. You were given a full toolbox for the purpose you accepted before you took your body. Use your human body—it’s the one thing you have which we do not. We can’t do what you need to do. Don’t worry about what we can do. That’s our business. Mind your own business, and, kindly, don’t expect us to do your work.”

So we listen and stay open to outcomes, however unexpected.

**Steppingstone six,
grace,
is symbolized by a red flower rooted in black soil, which embodies
the way our personal consciousness extends down through our
subconscious into our own, and the collective, unconscious.**



Grace: This step, half-way to joy, is essential, and, thankfully, requires no effort on our part. Scott Peck, in his book The Road Less Travelled, defines grace as “a powerful force originating outside human consciousness that nurtures spiritual growth in human beings.”

In his book The Shaking of the Foundations, theologian Paul Tillich, in his sermon “You Are Accepted,” described grace with these words:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

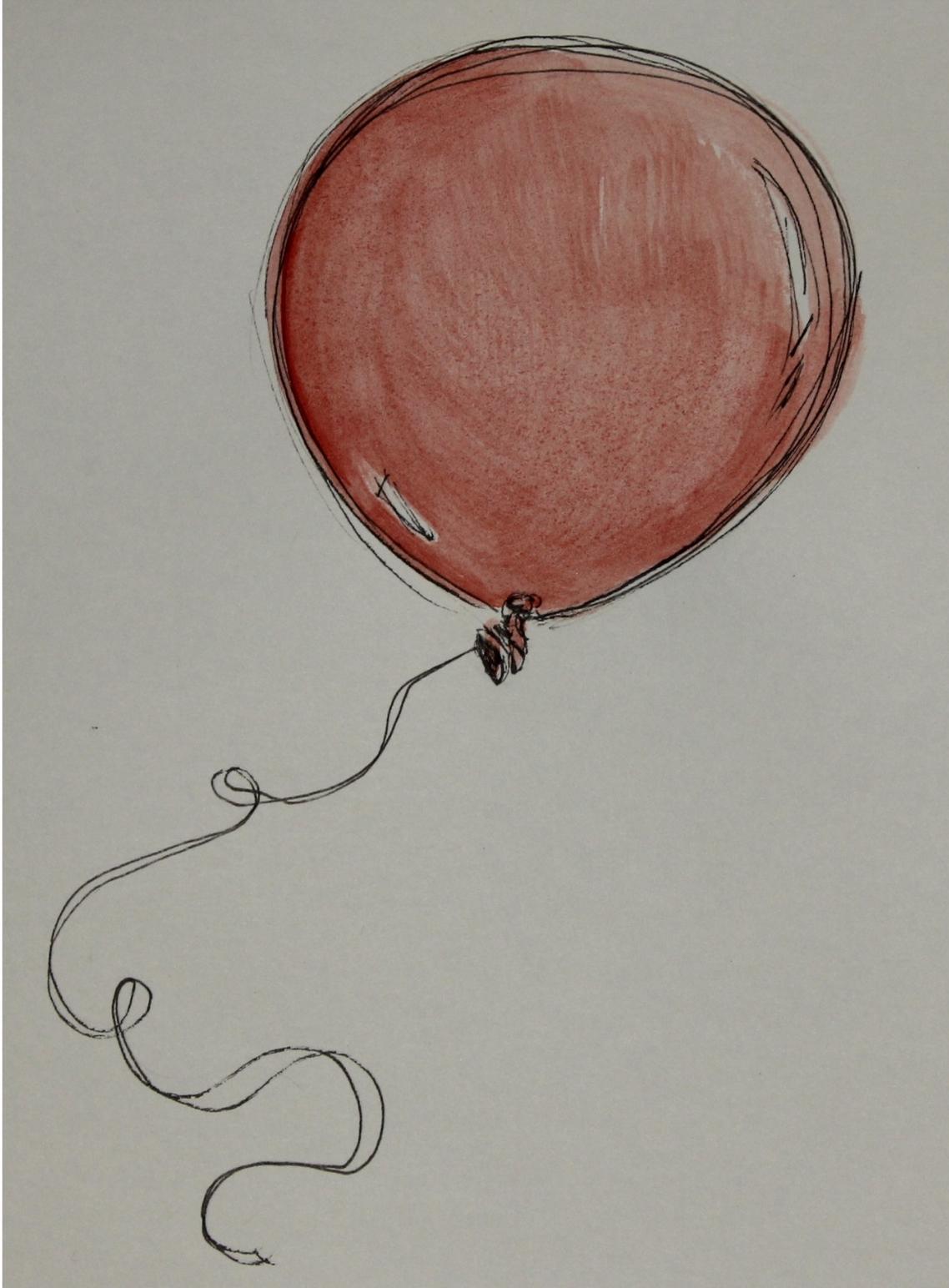
Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.” If that happens to us, we experience grace.

After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.

Grace is not the destination for our journey. It can give us strength to walk on. If we cling to grace, it disappears as quickly as it appeared. If we walk on, it accompanies us, and may reappear, unexpectedly, when we need it most.

Or not. Don’t count on it. Count on your commitment to the journey.

Steppingstone seven, Logos/Word/Light, is symbolized by a helium balloon.



The helium balloon symbolizes our need to “take ourselves lightly—to laugh.”

When the gift of grace, like a morning breeze across the sea, blows the fog of guilt and shame away, another spiritual guide appears, expressed by the Greek word “Logos.” Logos is translated as “word” in the opening verse of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

I believe the Spanish Biblical translation of Logos as “Verbo” provides a better insight into the indefinable beauty of this concept. Verbo is “verb” in English, implying action; to me, analogous to the Hebrew verb “YHWH” (“to be”) which is the answer the burning bush tells Moses when the prophet asks God’s name. “God” is a verb!

Logos invites us to journey (“sojourn”) on beyond words or time or even images. Consider the Hebrew idea expressed by YHWH’s first remembered words in Genesis 1:3, “Let there be light.” This is what it means to “take ourselves lightly.”

Logos simply “is.” For those who identify with particular aspects of the Christian tradition, this concept (*Logos* capitalized) can be synonymous with Christ (not a person but rather a spirit of compassion).

Logos is also well expressed in other traditions. This can be an incredibly powerful place for journeyers, as they discover they are not alone, but rather accompanied on their spiritual journey with a multitude of others all over the world, in every culture and faith tradition.

We identify this light with laughter, with taking all things, and most especially ourselves, “lightly,” with learning how better to laugh at ourselves and at the absurdity of so much of the human condition.

We remember the laughing Buddha and laughter in the Hebrew Bible (as when the ancient matriarch Sarah laughed when YHWH told her she was pregnant).

This step relieves us from taking things that will happen along our journeys personally, realizing we are all part of the earth’s life system; that no person is an island. Laughter somehow releases within us the power and the courage to act, to be intentional about our journey toward joy, to “only put good gas in our tank;” to avoid toxic people and situations, to witness these toxic situations without allowing ourselves to be “hooked” into rescuing others to feed our own egos.

At the same time, we need to remember that witnessing holds great risk. Free-will is a two-edged sword.

To witness the oppression of marginalized people or the despoliation of sacred land without taking concrete action risks casting the sojourner back into BED: the land of blame, excuses, and denial.

There are times on our life's journey where we need to own our power and act. These times are grounded in logos. To move forward, we need to commit to address the situations we can, and let the rest go. The former slave Frederick Douglass expressed this idea well when he wrote:

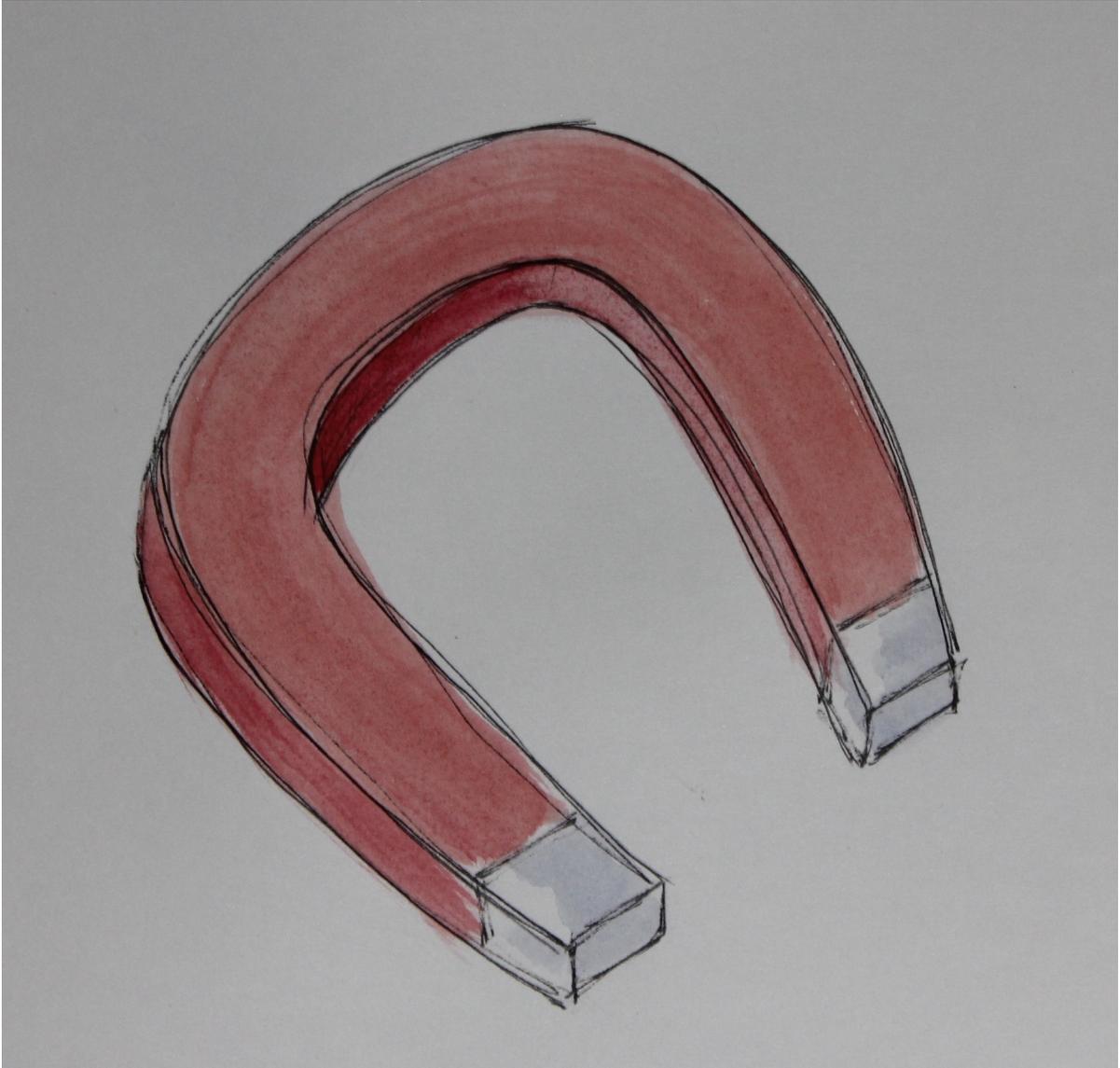
“Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it is maybe both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed on them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”⁹

Taking ourselves lightly, laughing in the midst of suffering, frees us from the power of tyrants. Tyrannical power is called “power-over” and blocks us from our journey. But when we join our power to that of others, we experience “power-with,” which activists Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone describe in their book Active Hope.¹⁰ This step becomes a key time to connect and to call on the others we encounter on our journey.

In the Christian tradition, on Epiphany worshippers sing, “We Three Kings.” The wise travelers from the East in this song call out to the “star of wonder, star of night” to “guide [them] to thy perfect light.” One interpretation of this reference to “perfect light” is to symbolize the light embodied, with wisdom and power, in this concept of Logos as set forth in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. As we journey from grief through prayer, then opening our hearts to grace, the thought that this entire universe emerged from this Logos lightens our burden. This universe has been unfolding from the singularity that preceded the Big Bang, nearly 14 billion years ago. Quantum physics and string theory posit that there may be other universes: But we are here now, we are not alone, and we need to take actions now to align our own unfolding with that of this universe.

Proverbs 9:10 can provide another insight into this same step: “The fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Wisdom, knowledge and understanding depend upon a verb, upon action. Our call, our vocation, is not to just sit on the sidelines, but rather to be, to act, to continue to grow!

Steppingstone eight, integrity, is symbolized by a horseshoe magnet.



The horseshoe magnet: As noted above, we cannot solve all the world's problems, yet neither can we justify sitting on the sidelines. Integrated action is required. The goal of this step is to integrate our life experience thus far, by identifying the connections among all the issues and all the marginalized populations.

As this integration process gains strength, we realize that the challenges we personally encounter are just a taste of many more challenges that we have yet to notice in our world. At this point, we resolve to stop focusing on individual issues and populations, and instead, to focus on the connections among many issues and populations—seeing the web.

We recall these words of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, "What is the pattern which connects the orchid to the primrose and the dolphin to the whale and all four to me?" and these from the mystic Meister Eckhardt, "Relation is the essence of everything that is."

As connections come into focus, we realize that this pattern, these relationships are not just theoretical, but rather actual, tangible connections, like a magnetic field or radio waves, generated by wisdom and energy gathered throughout our whole life's journey, and our participation in the journeys of all with whom we have come into contact.

One important worldwide movement where this integration process is taking place for men is through the "Mankind Project."¹¹ Through this tradition, men build energy to create a safe world by exploring the unconscious archetypes that scholars such as Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and the mystics from every tradition have encountered in their journeys / stories / writings.

Art is a great way to integrate all these many elements, so this steppingstone opens our hearts through art in its many forms, including our own art.

For example, I write poetry and fiction. These art forms have been my salvation. The most important gift I receive through my writing is to come to grips with my own fear of pain and of death, to reconcile this fear, and to become at ease with these inevitable outcomes of living. I have come to accept ("integrate") the fact that my body is wearing down, that it will at some point cease to exist, and I am at home with this fact and with my belief that my body is simply the tool available to me at this point in my journey, to experience and to act upon my purpose.

My own poetry and that of others is one way to express this. I am inspired more and more by the notion of "kindness."

I was deeply moved by the 2013 movie "Cloud Atlas," which contains scenes that reconnected me to the Russian author and Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who lived in exile near our home in Vermont, and has been an inspiration for my writing.

The following poem by Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye is one example:

KINDNESS

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.*

Nye's poem, and "Cloud Atlas," called to my mind a poem I wrote several years ago, for a fellow poet and friend who was facing death:

Next Steps

*If the universe is infinite,
Then every poem has been written
Infinite times:
But,
If the universe is finite,
Then so are we.*

“But” is the key word in this poem for integrating kindness into life’s unexpected steps, to establishing continuity, leaving nothing out.

Note the positioning of this same key word “but” in the Bible, Proverbs 29:18:

“Where there is no vision the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.”

These art forms all help us integrate vision, knowledge, wisdom, intent and action, and lead us to the next three steppingstones.

Steppingstone Nine, vision, is symbolized by a campfire.



The Campfire: Too often in our lives, we get stuck at the word “but,” as in the first clause of Proverbs 29:18, lamenting the lack of vision on the part of our fellow sojourners. Stuck on our “buts,” we wring our hands and feel sorry for ourselves, impeding further progress toward joy!

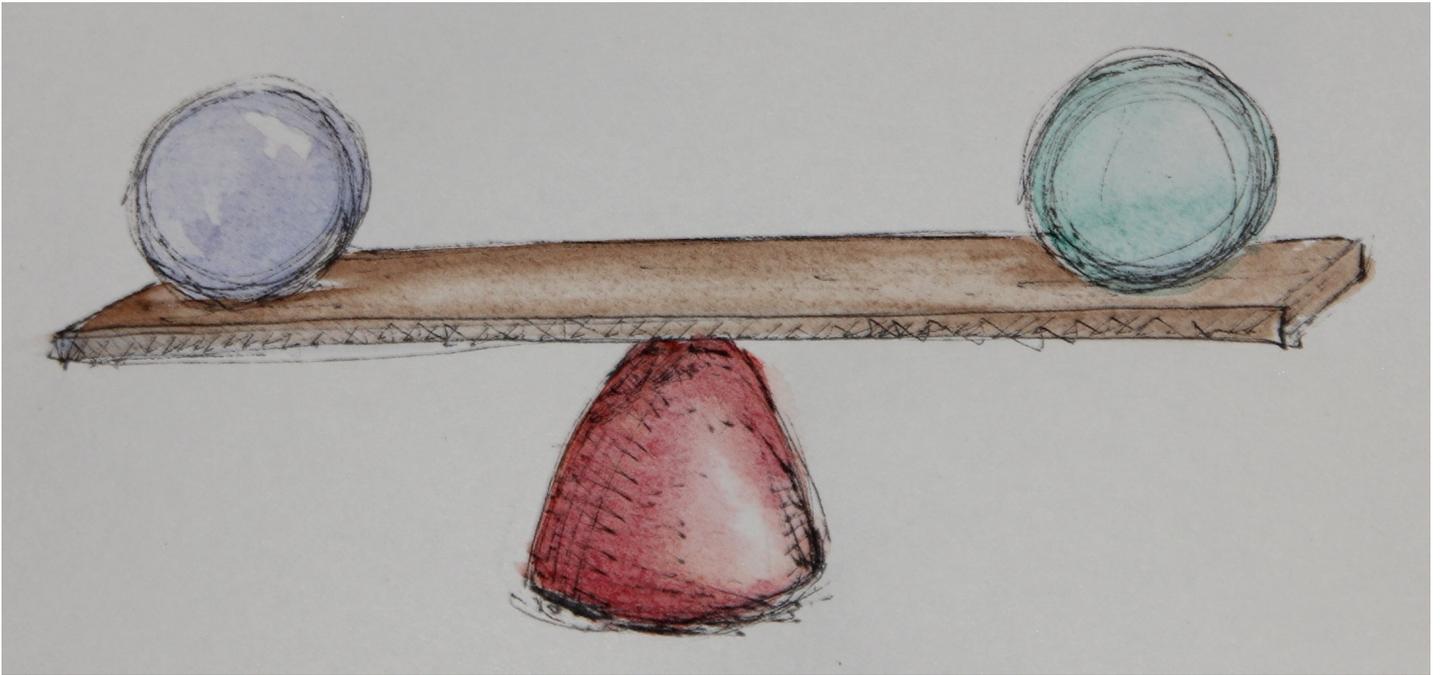
A better alternative is to remind ourselves of the gifts we received through our visions, to pay more attention to our dreams, and embody that which our core vision brings to our lives.

Everyone has a piece of the vision. My piece originated with a profound feeling of forgiveness, accompanied by an inspiration to forgive others. As I contemplated this vision, I realized that so much suffering in the world comes about because of debt. As individuals, communities, and nations slide into debt, the possibility of community seems to slip away. This can be monetary debt, or other forms of obligation that render us powerless. As I dove deeply into this vision, I learned about the concept embodied in the Hebrew Bible, the “Jubilee Year,” described in Leviticus 25, and echoed by Jewish prophets as the “Acceptable Year of the Lord.” Reflection on this “Jubilee Year” enabled me to integrate my vision with my life.

As we become more familiar with the sacred scriptures of many world religions, we find similar visions within many traditions, expressing themselves as enlightenment, transformation, forgiveness. In the Christian tradition, the vision translates into the third step in the “Repentance, Grace, Forgiveness” tradition.

This insight provides a handrail for the continuing journey to the final three stepping stones. This vision is not uniquely expressed in Christianity! Quite the opposite: the “light” that the campfire symbolizes can be encountered on a multitude of spiritual paths!

Steppingstone ten, law, is symbolized by a balance.



Balance: As we share our vision with others along the journey to joy, at this step we feel the balance shift—what had been an uphill crawl can become a downhill slide!

By this point we have gathered several key resources. Once we get past the word “but,” we encounter the word “law” in Proverbs 29, which is one of these resources. This word, and the symbol of the balance, translates vision into action.

Like “logos” when it appears in writings or scriptures, the word “law” is often the result of a very narrow translation. A broad interpretation of “law” could be: “This universe has a specific set of guiding principles (gravity, for example) that cannot be violated.”

Love is at the heart of this set of guiding principles. At the universal level, “love” is another way to define gravity (Physicist Brian Swimme uses the word “affinity”). Martin Luther King made this point often; for example:

“When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to the ultimate reality.”

When asked about “law,” Jesus of Nazareth, a great teacher for Christians and non-Christians alike, didn’t recite a long complex litany. He said simply, “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

What all faith traditions hold to be ‘sacred’ expresses this fundamental law. Whether it is called law, or gravity, affinity or attachment, love is inextricably interwoven into the DNA of this universe.

Human beings, as sentient, self-aware, conscious creatures, have arrogantly tried to tame this law, named these efforts “religions” and thus reduced an indescribable set of experiences to a set of rigid, prescribed creeds. By doing so, religions can rob indescribable experiences of their inherent spiritual power, by presuming that human beings can totally define, understand, and then keep or break the laws that their religions proclaim, with no consequences beyond religious ones.

But the real “laws” of the universe can no more be broken than this universe can start over again at the big bang. That’s why dis-integrated efforts to address the many issues of concern listed above don’t work. These dis-integrated efforts are not holistic, not “in balance,” so they create as many problems as they solve. Fr. Jack Childs, a retired professor at Salve Regina College in Rhode Island and the former lead elder in the Mankind Project Elder in the New England region, teaches about the deeper meaning of this word and concept “holistic.” If a vision is not “whole=holy” it is not a vision; it is simply a strategic plan without roots or wings.

To experience this insight through art, two movies, “The Economics of Happiness” and “I Am,” are really good resources.¹² These movies are affordable to purchase or rent; group viewings can be great opportunities to build strong community!

Steppingstone eleven, economics, is symbolized by a dollar sign in a house.



What makes a house a home? The word “economics” derives from the Greek word for “home” (oikos), which is also the root of the word “ecology” (oikos, logos).

As a steppingstone, economics does indeed involve money, because at this point, material resources come into play along the journey to joy. The problem is that many people begin with this step, forgetting, ignoring, or skipping the ten previous steps, and thus believe that if we have money - or get, or provide, money - we can achieve happiness (joy) for ourselves, and/or provide happiness (joy) for others. If we start here, thinking we have only one step to take to joy, we inevitably experience a huge sense of disorientation, disintegration, and fear.

On the other hand, if we arrive at this steppingstone after having crossed the previous ten, we arrive with the wisdom and perspective to know that money is just one tool among many.

Money, like every material element of this universe, is subject to the law of love. Love comes first: to reverse this sequence kills the soul. All economic activities are carried forward, like boats on a river, by the powerful, invisible current of love, a “law” of this universe (Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner’s 2005 book Freakonomics provides ample evidence for this).

Lots of what we may experience when we contemplate money is still undoubtedly subconscious or unconscious, constantly driving us all the way back to stepping stone two, to the realm of “BED” (Blame, Excuses, Denial) as we contemplate all the work we may be called upon to do. If we are driven back to BED again and again, we risk becoming paralyzed by fear. Again and again, we need to own this fear, to retrace all ten steps, and to start over.

This can take a lifetime. Acquisition of material goods, the “bling” of our lives, is a great temptation.

The key to successfully crossing this steppingstone is to truthfully answer, for ourselves, the question “How much is enough?” We recognize that the answer to this question will be different for each person or organization; but it needs to be specific, consistent, and sustainable.

As noted above, the movies “Economics of Happiness” and “I Am” can help answer this question. As your answer becomes clearer, the final step to joy can be taken.

**Steppingstone twelve, joy, is symbolized by a cornucopia:
a “horn of plenty.”**



The feast: Often a waiter brings a meal and sets it in front of us with the word, “Enjoy!”

This might seem trite, but after going through the previous eleven steps, we can see how a feast is the embodiment of happiness, or joy: the destination of the universe.

As we dig deeper into many sacred traditions, we repeatedly encounter feasts as their destinations. Feasts are filled with symbols and archetypes, which are often encapsulated into the word “love.”

This word, like others above (oikos, logos), has lost a lot in its translations from the Greek, where there are at least four words that have been translated as “love.”

Still, it retains its ultimate, mysterious power.

Some experiments with water crystals test how they respond to the word “love” and to expressions of love, and, as we humans are mostly water, there may be a scientific explanation for the power of this word. While this research is open to question,¹³ advertising agencies are undoubtedly aware of the power of the word love, and use it shamelessly (e.g. “I’m lovin’ it;” “Love is a Subaru,” etc.).

Despite such efforts to control this word, it remains elusive and powerful; yet, it is the only alternative to fear. And, to embody joy, we refuse to live in fear.

Once again, this concept can be expressed most effectively through art. Our art, our writing, is one way to express our joy, our happiness: the destination of our journey.

Many books, movies, poems, visual arts, and other art forms deal with the theme of love. The last sentence in Thornton Wilder’s classic, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, captures this idea perfectly: *“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”*

The Destination and the Starting Point

To summarize, sometimes without our understanding why, joy just happens.

But to sustain joy is a journey. I have proposed twelve steps. However many steps our journey may encompass, I believe it is essential to keep moving. A person's (or an organization's) journey is their only purpose for being embodied in this universe.

Our aspiration is that one or more of these steppingstones or images may resonate with others. A "story" becomes "true" to the extent that it leads from, through, and to, an inner experience that resonates with the hearer's own story.

My "story" leads me to believe that each living thing has a purpose; that these purposes differ, but together, they form an integrated whole. My purpose is to embody joy.

Here's a final summary of the steppingstones and the images that help me remember my story and purpose. I hope they may help you remember yours:

1. Awaken (Image: a rooster)
2. Be Accountable (Image: an OAR—not a BED)
3. Grieve (Image: a broken heart)
4. Pray (Image: clasped hands)
5. Be Open (Image: an open heart)
6. Receive Grace (Image: a red flower rooted in black soil)
7. Live Light (Image: a helium balloon)
8. Practice Integrity (Image: a horseshoe magnet)
9. Share Vision (Image: a campfire)
10. Keep the Law (Image: a balance)
11. Define Your Economics (Image: a dollar sign in a house)
12. Embody Joy (Image: a cornucopia-horn of plenty)

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Margaret Wheatley: Turning to One Another. Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco, CA 2008
- ² Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize Lecture, translated and published by Stenvalley Press, London, 1970, p. 25
- ³ See <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>
- ⁴ See Macy, Joanna and Johnstone, Chris: Active Hope, (New World Library, Novato, CA 2012), page 5, and other references throughout the book to the concept of the “Great Turning.”
- ⁵ See <http://www.ekrfoundation.org>
- ⁶ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/549821-there-is-no-coming-to-consciousness-without-pain-people-will>
- ⁷ <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/mbradley/psyography/carljung.html>
- ⁸ For an interview with Anne Lamotte, see <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/19/164814269/anne-lamott-distills-prayer-into-help-thanks-wow>
- ⁹ See Singing the Living Tradition. (Beacon Press, Boston, 1973), p. 579
- ¹⁰ For an eloquent discussion of these issues, see Macy and Johnstone (op. cit.), Chapter Six, “A Different Kind of Power”, pp. 105-120
- ¹¹ See www.mankindproject.org
- ¹² See <http://www.theeconomicsofhappiness.org> and <http://www.iamthedoc.com/thefilm/>
- ¹³ See <http://is-masaru-emoto-for-real.com> for one viewpoint