



The Institute of Family Living

THE OPPRESSION OF STRESS, THE LIBERATION OF JOY

Joy is an elusive quality: different from a sense of well-being, deeper than happiness. At IFL, we often see clients who have lost their capacity for joy. Overwhelmed, easily frustrated, often exhausted and “stressed out,” they have become victims of what the Japanese call “Hurry Sickness.” Children suffer too: child psychologists and educators frequently warn us that our children are over-programmed and over-stressed. Far too often, they seem joyless as well.

Recently, several of us from IFL heard Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at the University of Toronto. A man who epitomized courage in the face of the overwhelming systemic oppression of *apartheid*, and a visionary who inspired the “Peace and Reconciliation Commission” in South Africa’s new democracy by seeking a process of justice and forgiveness, Archbishop Tutu has given the world an enduring model of peace-making. What struck us all was his ebullient spirit, his wonderful sense of humour, and his deep joyfulness. It was evident that this joy is grounded in Archbishop Tutu’s faith in God’s love and mercy and in his strong commitment to a view of freedom that encompasses liberation for both victims and oppressors.

Here in Canada, we don’t live in a society that has the same structural tyranny, but I wonder if the pace and stress of living in a city that leaves people homeless in the cold of winter, tolerates children needing food from food banks, and suffers violence in our schools, is in fact a different kind of oppression, one that also reduces our humanity to “survival” modes and *us-versus-them* polarizations. As therapists, we frequently find ourselves commenting on the pace of life that so many families face, preventing them from enjoying one another. No time for family meals, few opportunities for tired parents to read bedtime stories to children, both parents working — usually of necessity — without adequate backup resources in case of illness, little “couple time” to nourish a marriage. Add to that the increasing number of families where one parent travels regularly, thereby contributing to the stress level of the sole parent left at home, plus the additional stresses of coming and going that the family endures, and you have a recipe for trouble.

A high proportion of the referrals to IFL come from family physicians, who see daily how stress-related illnesses, chronic sleep deprivation, anger management problems, addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, the internet, contribute to family crises or to the breakdown of relationships. In helping clients do a reality check, therapists use tools such as a *stress test*, which looks at changes and losses over the past year, a *time management chart*, and a *self-care assessment*, which measures several areas of life. Too often clients report that their pace of life, the challenge to earn more money, the lack of family supports, and the constant demands of work diminish time available for family or friendship, exercise, play, meditation or worship, attending concerts, walks in nature, sleep, and so on. *But changing habits, creating new patterns in work and home, requires both time and commitment.*

Noticing the simple things of life, the daily gifts of grace, require that we be attentive and free from compulsions. Archbishop Tutu spends two hours in prayer and meditation every morning before his working day begins. In spite of living through profound suffering and grief, he is known for his ready laughter and broad smile. Of course there is stress in his busy life, but it does not rule his existence. Joy does.

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