

A Little Jig in the Heart

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The fall leaves had been dropping for several weeks, covering the lawn. One day I laid down an ultimatum that this evening everyone would rake leaves. No exemptions.

As I wrote in my book *Alone: A Widow's Search for Joy*, shortly after supper the rakes came out and the work began. One child grumbled because she couldn't read her library book. Another questioned why we didn't just let the wind blow the leaves away. I persisted, and the work continued.

When our huge pile of leaves was burning in the backyard (legal at the time), the children warmed to the situation. They hauled out foil-wrapped apples and buried them in the fire.

As the embers flickered in the darkness, we huddled together on the back step, tired and dirty, eating ice cream and discussing the merits of half-baked apples. A hush fell on us as we enjoyed the gradually encroaching night. The grumbling was gone, replaced by a happy silence and the good feeling that "we're still a family." I felt a strange peace underscored with sadness. My husband had been dead not quite a year. We faced Christmas as a fatherless family. Would we know joy?

C.S. Lewis writes that "joy is the serious business of heaven." Centuries ago, the shepherds on the hills heard angels proclaiming the birth of the Christ-child. The gospel writer states they were "overjoyed." Whooped and hollered, maybe? A few minutes earlier they may have been grumbling about the cold. Then, all at once, they heard the message about Bethlehem. The angels' words were a sign to these

lowly shepherders that something wonderful was happening. The Messiah had come!

On that first Christmas, God's serious business was joy, and still is today, even when circumstances are disheartening. Joy is the unrestrained emotion that bursts forth spontaneously when we are at peace with our circumstances, even if that means a Christmas without a pile of presents under the tree, a turkey roasting in the oven, or a father. Joy survives without these.

When I am sad or lonely at Christmas I tell myself, "Joy is peace dancing." In other words, for joy to dance, I need peace first of all.

At Christmas some people would like joy handed to them, gift-wrapped in shiny paper and a big red bow—the only way they imagine joy is packaged. Sorry, it doesn't work that way. It can't be created out of glittering lights and glitzy ribbons. Unlike laughter, joy isn't produced by raunchy jokes of stand-up comedians. Joy starts with peace. Peace with family. Peace with politicians. Peace with neighbors. Peace with self. Above all, peace with God and the journey we are on with God.

Several years ago, early one morning, I looked outside my window at a conference center to see a priest in brown cassock doing a little jig, barefoot, on the dewy grass. My heart did a flip-flop. Joy is peace doing a little jig in the heart, not visible to the eye, but always felt.

On that evening long ago, raking leaves with my children gave me an unusual peace about our situation as a fatherless family. And it gave me joy, a quiet joy. Nothing had changed. There was still a great loneliness deep inside. We were still strangers in a strange land. I hadn't won the lottery. I still squeezed time mercilessly to make room for one more activity to keep the day from falling apart. Yet that brief moment of joyful peace gave me courage for the journey ahead. Life might be difficult, but with God's help we would survive. We were winning.

Joy is peace dancing. **END**

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