



Anselm Grün

The Art of Joy

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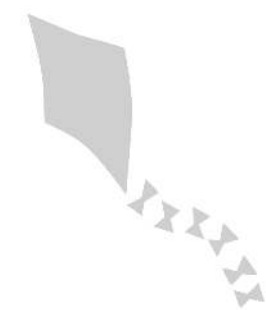
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Preface

We were on holiday. For him it was a normal working day. The May sun was warming us while we were sitting in a little square in Palermo. He was selling textiles, working his way through the backyards of the Vucciria in need of renovation. He was pushing his merchandise ahead of him along the cobbled stones in a handcart, advertising it to housewives, one of whom looked out of a window at one point and called out to him. Most of the time he was singing quietly, almost exclusively to himself, then the next moment at the top of his voice; and in between he called out the names of his female customers and his not always entirely decent jokes. While we were watching him from the square, only one of the women bought something small off him. However, he was holding no grudges against life on this beautiful day. Singing out loud, he moved along his way. It was like a cheesy opera scene; but even more so, it was an image of the joy of living. Who would envy the man his job? But somehow, still ...

Why was he singing? Because he had to. Why does a bird sing? Because it has to. With its song, it expresses its joy of being alive to itself.

In this sense, children are like birds. Children, young and old, can be like that, lost in their own world, to their heart's content, devoted to the moment. Just like little Antonia, not quite two years old, who recently came to the office and found something that delighted her: a whoop, a beaming smile. In this very moment, her whole body, her whole self, was this whoop. There was only room for joy in her heart, and for a minute the stacks of files started dancing.

Children can be like that; they don't walk; they skip, run, scream something to each other or whisper something into each other's ear. They are like that – playing is an earnest business, is intensive living. They are completely at one with themselves, lost in their own world, but at the same time full of movement.

Some indigenous peoples celebrate a child's first clear laugh, with all adults celebrating. 'A child's first laughter', the Swiss clown Dimitri once pointed out, amounts to 'an expression of love and wellbeing.' Maybe this is why children and adults love clowns so much – because they tickle the laughter out of us again. According to a common phrase, laughter 'bubbles'; we speak about 'bursting with joy'.

'Joy of living' – this means it is a joy to be alive. Any burdens fall off us. This positive energy, which gets body and soul moving, makes everything easy. We think about

love and ecstasy, laughter and pleasure, dancing and celebration; music is in the air.

‘It is good to be alive, I say, even if much speaks against it’ (Detlev Block). Life is not always fun. But in the end, the positive point of view has the upper hand. The joy of living is a soaring energy; flying above our everyday routine, like a kite in the wind; standing above the lowlands like a mountain climber whose worries suddenly appear small and insignificant, even ridiculous from a distance. All in all, life is lightness.

If children on the whole manage this state of being – why don’t adults? What is blocking us, what covers up this original energy? Who has driven out our initial joy to be alive? Is education to blame? Or the ‘moral cudgel’? Whatever it may be, what is more important is – how can we reclaim our lost joy?

‘Life's splendour forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come.’ Franz Kafka wrote this passage in his diaries.

The joy of living, Anselm Grün agrees, is something adults need to learn again and practise: to live completely in this moment, live with all senses, enjoy the moment. In order to learn this art, we must have nothing, want

nothing, we must not fixate any goals. 'Only the one who forgets himself may taste pure existence and experience the pleasure in it.'

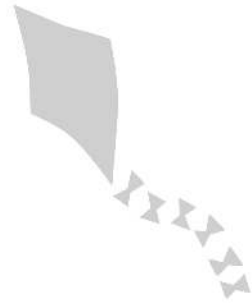
Greediness makes us lust. Joy makes us merry. Why do we find clowns so funny? We are not laughing at their expense because they're so clumsy. It is their pleasure in expressing something life itself represents, without purpose; the way they see contradictions and let them be; the way they portray these contradictions by playing with them - and the way they resolve them to cathartic and approving laughter.

According to Dimitri, a good clown is like a child which is playing simply because it has to.

If we could become like children - if we were to manage that - life would be funnier. For us and for other people.

Positive Energy

What Lends Us Wings



Who Enjoys Life?

‘Who is the one who will have life, and desires to see good days? And if, hearing Him, you answer, “I am the one”, God says to you, “If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips that they speak no guile. Turn away from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it.”’ This sentence can be found at the very beginning of the Rule of St. Benedict (Prologue 15-17). For 25 years, I was in charge of the youth work at Münsterschwarzach Abbey in Germany, and our motto for working with the young people was this quote of St. Benedict’s from the Prologue to his Rule, in which he invites young men to enter the convent by asking: ‘Who is the one who will have life, and desires to see good days?’ It was our aim to teach young people to ‘desire to see good

days', to find joy in living. However, the joy of living is something other than what today's 'culture of fun' desires. It is something other than superficial fun. It is the art of living completely in the moment, of living with all senses, of taking in what is happening just now. It is the art of being present; and sometimes it calls for attentiveness, sometimes it calls for letting go of all the voices that continually demand something off me or drive me here or there. I can commit to the moment if I let go of any wanting, if I can forget myself. What I need to let go of most of all is the eternal question: what is in it for me? What do I feel while I'm doing it? Only the one who forgets himself may taste pure existence and experience the pleasure in it.



More Pleasure – Less Joy

Language has its own experience with pleasure and joy. The word 'joy' derives from Old French 'joie' which itself is based on Latin 'gaudere' – to rejoice; it refers to inner excitement. When I rejoice, my heart is leaping with joy. Joy is linked to the joy of living, a sentiment coming from the heart. The word 'pleasure' derives from Latin 'placere' – 'to

please, to be approved'. If I find what is to my liking, then I am content, I am pleased. People's addiction to the pleasures of life contains this notion of pleasing ourselves. I pay money, so I can find pleasure, so that I can be sufficiently entertained. However, such pleasures rarely touch the heart. It is joy which makes the heart leap; pleasure makes it sound like we have received our money's worth. Hermann Hesse, who contemplated this connection frequently, phrased it like this, 'But the high value put upon every minute of time, the idea of hurry-hurry as the most important objective of living, is unquestionably the most dangerous enemy of joy. The motto is as much as possible as fast as possible. What follows is always more and more entertainment and less and less joy.' Hesse always observed the world around him in detail, and he was also a severe critic of the frantic chase after forever new pleasures. The one who is always in a hurry cannot rejoice. Hesse was convinced that the pleasures people nowadays chase after in order to have fun are basically substitutes. And they indicate an inner inability to feel joy. Joy needs the moment, and it needs slowness. Those who hurry from one event to the next only find short-term pleasure. Hermann Hesse contemplated this connection. He considers haste joy's enemy, and the reason why only pleasures are sought after which can be bought at short notice. Those who want to learn joy must evidently slow

down. They must practise living in the moment instead of time and again chasing after all the pleasures they can get their hands on in order to have enough. This will never be quite enough for their hearts and their longings.



Fun not Compulsory

‘The mother of excess is not joy but joylessness.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher of ecstasy, came to this very matter-of-fact conclusion. If someone lives in excess and is unable to pass up any pleasures, then – so Nietzsche believes – this is not based on a joy which seeks expression, but on the contrary – on joylessness. Those who are unable to feel joy are forced to be constantly on the move in order to find pleasure. They will not find a happy medium. As paradoxical as it sounds: joylessness is the mother of our craving for pleasure. Our present ‘culture of fun’ mirrors the sadness of our times. It is a joyless time when we need to find entertainment because we have lost the joy in our hearts. More often than not, fun then comes at someone else’s expense. We ridicule others in order to have fun. However, we fail to see how hurtful and therefore inhumane this ‘culture of fun’ is. It is not an invitation to

everyone to rejoice in life, but an invitation to find fun for ourselves without caring about others, even to abuse others in order 'get a kick' out of our own laughter. When I observe people after they have had what they call 'fun', then I often look into sad and empty faces. Whenever they don't feel they're being watched, their whole sadness surfaces. They want to chase away the dark mood in their hearts. But they don't succeed. Fun remains superficial. It does not make its way to the bottom of people's hearts. However, at the bottom of everyone's heart joy is buried – a treasure waiting to be lifted.



Devourers of Happiness

'The craving for pleasure is insatiable and its favourite food is – happiness.' The Austrian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach sums it up perfectly: there is a craving for pleasure. A craving for joy does not exist. Pleasure can make us ill. We become insatiable. We can never get enough and still need to have more. We become addicted. Craving is an illness, a pathological need for more. The word derives from the Old English 'crafian', meaning 'to demand, to claim as a right'. Those who rush from one form