

When Savoring a Pleasant Moment Is a Radical Act by Ari Honarvar

May 9, 2020

As we grapple with the first global pandemic lockdown of our lifetime, our daily routines have been upended, and it's difficult to keep up with new changes. Many of us are overwhelmed by the precarious nature of our health, our loved ones' well-being, and our financial security. But in the midst of uncertainty and fear, inspiring videos are emerging from the countries most affected by coronavirus—Iranian doctors and nurses dancing in hospitals and Italian residents singing from their balconies. This footage not only uplifts the spirit of those in close proximity, it also brightens the mood of people watching from around the world.

One thing I've learned from spending much of my own childhood in times of war and political upheaval is the importance of cultivating joy during crises. While it is critical to be informed about the trajectory of the new coronavirus via reliable sources, to practice physical distancing, and to care for our most vulnerable populations, it's also time to infect each other with love and fortifying stories. This is actually really hard to do, because we humans are naturally inclined to focus on bad news.

During the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, which killed over a million people, life was far from joyful. We Iranians had become accustomed to daily funerals, food rations, political oppression, and an ongoing threat of bombs and missiles. On top of that, consuming alcohol, dancing, and playing non-sanctioned music had suddenly become illegal under the post-revolution laws.

But even with these external challenges, I observed a few adults' ability to become scrappy and use all available resources for the essential task of nurturing joy, stability, and a sense of humor. Faced with food rationing, they experimented with new recipes. Faced with wartime blackouts, they told stories and recited poems. As the threat of bombing loomed, they told jokes and made everyone laugh until our eyes watered. Sure, this made us all feel better in the moment, but what research is discovering is that joy and laughter are essential for building the superpower of resilience, and even boosting our immunity and overall health.

Psychologist and trauma expert Peter Levine says joy is an experience of expansion, whereas fear is one of deep contraction. Cultivating joy is an important component of resilience as it increases our capacity to face difficulties. "Imagine if every time you stretched a rubber band, it would become more resilient, so rather than wearing out, it would increase its capacity, able to take more stretches without breaking," he says.

So even when there are obstacles which cause contraction, that expansion afforded to us by joy comes to our rescue. "The more we increase this capacity, the less overwhelming

emotions will be,” Levine says. For instance, trauma stretches us beyond our capacity to deal with a certain challenging situation, and we become overwhelmed with sensations and emotions. The problem isn’t that the sensations and emotions are too strong but that our capacity to hold and process them is maxed out. When we continue to cultivate joy, we gain the ability to feel the overwhelm without becoming overwhelmed ourselves.

For Persians, one of our most precious ways to summon joy is with poetry. I remember one night, in particular, in my home city of Shiraz, Iran, during the war. While sirens blared and the electricity was shut off, warning of an imminent attack, my family and I (feeling especially brave) snuck to our rooftop to watch the anti-aircraft missiles shoot into the air. To my 7-year-old eyes, the brilliant red patterns in the pitch-black sky rivaled the most magnificent fireworks display. But underneath the awe there was a simmering terror brewing in my belly of not knowing who was going to die next. Was it going to be me? My best friend? My sister in Tehran? My teacher?

And then someone from another rooftop shouted a verse of Rumi’s poetry into the clear night air:

Even if, from the sky, poison befalls all,

I’m still sweetness

wrapped in sweetness

wrapped in sweetness...

This was a poetic challenge to the bombers, but it was also a gauntlet thrown down to any Persian in hearing range. The verse soon was rejoined from another rooftop:

While others sing about love,

I am the Sultan of love!

Even as a young child, I could feel the ecstasy of these verses in my heart, radiating to every cell of my being. In an instant, my world not only became sane, but infinite and glorious. And what bomb could ever touch that?

Savoring moments of transcendence can mightily boost our well-being, and according to the neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, focusing on and absorbing ordinary moments of joy also has a very real and cumulative beneficial effect on our health. When we slow down during pleasant experiences, our system is given a chance to hardwire the experience in our brain. Through this simple yet effective method, we can train our nervous system to become Velcro for good experiences and Teflon for unpleasant events.

In other words, we can overcome the hardwired negativity bias—the tendency to absorb and remember potential threats and unpleasant experiences, while ignoring positive experiences. The negativity bias evolved out of our need to survive. Predators, poisonous plants, and other perils made a profound impression on our ancestors, and those who survived learned to avoid such dangers in the future.

Hanson says that for the modern human, the negativity bias is no longer a feature. It is now a design flaw. Throughout the day, one bad experience ends up occupying much more of our attention than many neutral and good experiences, thereby preventing us

from learning from our beneficial experiences and turning them into a lasting neural structure.

Just like everything in life, our brains are continually changing. “Much of this change is pushed on us and our brain is changing willy-nilly—cars honking, people frowning, bad news,” says Hanson.

Luckily, we can use neuroplasticity, or the brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections, to our advantage. With every new sensation, thought, feeling, or action, new neural connections, or synapses, are formed, and with each repetition, these neural connections are strengthened. Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb summarized this synaptic efficacy as “cells that fire together wire together.” Thus, the brain can learn to trigger the same neurons each time and gradually wire them together. Using this Hebbian theory, we can change the brain for the better by reveling in pleasant events a handful of times a day—pausing to listen to the sounds of birds chirping, relishing a bite of food or a good cup of coffee, smelling a flower, or enjoying a pleasant thought about a loved one.

“No drugs, nothing fancy, no exotic meditation technique needed,” says Hanson. “You begin to move from moments of gratitude to the trait of gratitude, moments of self-worth to the trait of self-worth, and this is a profoundly powerful practice.”

According to clinical psychologist Carla Marie Manly, there is also a strong positive correlation between cultivating joy and increased levels of life satisfaction and personal growth. In contrast, when we are controlled by fear and depression, life satisfaction naturally plummets and personal growth is hindered. “We are far more effective, supple, and self-optimized when we face times of crisis with a wise, joyful attitude than when we cower in destructive fears and anxiety,” Manly says.

This current pandemic poses a unique challenge for us as we maneuver from fear to joy, from contraction to expansion. We are social creatures, and given the highly communicable nature of coronavirus, it is wise to limit our physical interactions to a bare minimum for the foreseeable future. Levine invites us to call this practice physical distancing rather than social distancing.

“The sense of helplessness and social disconnection affects the immune system. You don’t want to break that social fabric,” Levine says. Families can play together, dance, and sing with each other, but we cannot forget those who live alone or are grieving. We must continue to socially connect through technology, or forego the Internet and, as Levine suggests, bang pots and pans like the Italians to show that we are all in this together.

Expansive thoughts, emotions, and actions tend to travel in packs. For example, volunteering during this pandemic can give us a sense of purpose which contributes to our joy and a sense of well-being. People are donating homemade masks to hospitals, and delivering food and medicine to their elderly and immunocompromised neighbors. Others are finding joy through gardening, cooking, spending more time in nature, or taking an online course on “The Science of Well-Being.”

Iran has been a hotbed for corona for the past few months and there is little I can do directly to help my relatives in isolation there. So we Skype and meditate together from afar. We talk about pleasant memories and what is blooming in our garden right now. These talks are the highlight of our day. Since the lockdown in California, I’ve begun doing the same with my American friends and with asylum seekers in a Mexican shelter, who

continue to uplift each other through music and play.

Those of us who lived through the fundamentalist power grab in Iran experienced a revolution of joylessness. Perhaps the most radical act of resistance in the face of adversity is to live joyfully.

Nurturing joy, of course, isn't the same as negating reality or suppressing difficult emotions. By all accounts, we will have a long, bumpy road ahead of us. Many are already dealing with much loss and grief. Many are overworked and exhausted. Navigating life right now will most likely be fraught with unforeseen difficulties. Luckily, boosting our resilience, as we set out to deal with these challenges, is guaranteed to be pleasurable. And for those of us who are capable, it's now more important than ever to bolster our resilience, to care for ourselves and those who cannot care for themselves, and to infect each other with joy and laughter.

Join this Saturday's Awakin Call with activist-chemist Ari Honarvar, author of "A Girl Called Rumi," and founder of "Rumi with a View." More details and RSVP info [here](#).