

Eight Pillars of Joy: Perspective

(Adapted in part from *The Book of Joy* by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and The Dalai Lama)

“For every event in life,” says the Dalai Lama, “there are many different angles. When you look at the same event from a wider perspective, your sense of worry and anxiety reduces, and you have greater joy.”

Perspective is a key foundation to lasting joy, because the way we see the world is the way we *experience* the world. Changing the way we see the world in turn changes our experience and thus the way we feel and the way we act -- which in turn changes the world itself. As the Buddha says, “With our mind we create our own world.” As Christians, we know that we cannot begin to build the Kingdom of God, until we begin to love our neighbor -- including the stranger, the other and even our enemy -- as ourselves. As hard as that is, a good place to begin is by changing our perspective so that we no longer see them as someone different, but as a beloved child of God. Once we can do that, our ability to love our neighbor begins to open up. For the Dalai Lama, perspective is no less than the “skull key that opens all of the locks that imprison our happiness.”

Tutu and the Dalai Lama refer to Perspective as a “quality of the mind” because while changing our emotions can be quite hard, changing our perspective is relatively easy. It is a part of our mind over which we have a great deal of influence. While we may not always have control over how we feel, we do have control over how we see the world and the *meaning* we give to what we witness, which in turn can change how we feel.

Self-Distancing

Because self-centeredness is our natural, default perspective, it takes *intentionality* to move beyond it. The practice of “Self-Distancing” is to gain a wider perspective by intentionally stepping back within our own mind, and to look at the bigger picture, moving beyond our limited self-awareness and our limited self-interest, to think more broadly about our problems or the situation. Every situation we confront in life comes from the convergence of many contributing factors. We must become skilled at seeing them. Failure to do so leaves us in a *perspectival myopia*, a nearsightedness that prevents us from seeing our experience in a larger context, and blind to larger truths.

In the book, Tutu uses the example of being stuck in a traffic jam. You can deal with it in one of two ways: You can let the frustration really eat you up. Or, you can look around at the other drivers and decide to use your imagination to see their perspective. One woman might have pancreatic cancer and is on her way to the hospital. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly what they are dealing with, just to know that they too are suffering with worries and fears because they too are human. Instead of wallowing in your own suffering, you can choose to lift them up and to bless them. You can say, 'Please God, give each one of them what they need.'

Exercise:

Think of a situation or circumstances you are currently facing that is causing you frustration, resentment, or anger. Any negative emotion.

1. Describe the problem as if it were happening to someone else. Reframe the issue without using words like "I," "me" or "mine."
2. Imagine the problem from the perspective of a week, a year or even a decade from now. Will the issue still have an impact on you? Will you even remember it?
3. Consider the issue from several other perspectives.
4. Reflect on the impact of this exercise: What did your thoughts and feelings about the situation change? How might you act differently?

What are some possible perspectives to consider?

- *Other people in the situation* - Who are the other players in the situation or circumstance? See them all as having equal value and being worthy of God's love. And then imagine, how might they be impacted? What might they be going through?
- *The wider community* - What are the concerns in your community or neighborhood or the world at this moment? Does your circumstances seem insignificant in the face of the troubles of the world. How is this serving the whole?
- *Your children or spouse/partner* - What would they think of this situation? Would they be proud of the example you are setting? What might they say to you?
- *The poor and the marginalized* - Is this a 'first world problem' as they say? Does considering the plight of the poor put them in a new perspective?

- *Jesus* - Put yourself into the Gospels as a character who comes running up to Jesus to share this issue or concern with - or to ask for help. What would Jesus' response be?
- *God* - What would God's opinion be of this situation or circumstances? Would this be important to God? Is this something you would include in your prayers? Or would you be embarrassed or ashamed to bring this issue to God? Because God sees all perspectives, who's perspective might God point out to you that you haven't yet considered?

Perspective is the birthplace of empathy

By getting out of our own head and our own limited perception of the world, we can begin to see and feel what others might be going through. Self-distancing helps us to be more empathetic. When we pray that we would get that job we just applied for, for example, practicing perspective can help us see that there are undoubtedly other applicants and we even imagine that some of them might need this job, far more than we do. What are their plights? What are their circumstances? Such a simple practice can not only reduce our own anxiety, but can increase our gratitude, and increase the compassion for others.

Empathy opens the door to togetherness, and keeps us from building walls around our individual selves—walls that keep us from seeing the other as our brother, and from seeing Jesus in the stranger. Opening up to the lives and perspectives of others, and being willing to experience their suffering and hardships, reminds us that we, too, are not alone in our own difficulties. And it can reduce our tolerance for the suffering of others, because perspective increases our sense of independence. Suddenly, the suffering of another is no longer *their* problem, but it is *our* problem because we begin to realize that my humanity is inexorably bound up in yours. We love and serve God, by loving and serving others. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

Practicing perspective doesn't mean we no longer have problems, but that we can encounter them with greater equanimity and serenity, creativity and compassion. As Tutu reminds us, lasting joy is a byproduct of a life well-lived. By opening the door of our perspective as wide as we can, we inadvertently open our lives to greater joy as well.

Practicing perspective (self-distancing)

1. Prayer - whenever you pray, pray for others. Try to imagine their circumstances, and their hardships. Try to put yourself in their shoes and feel what they might be feeling.
2. Prayer walk - Walk your neighborhood intentionally opening yourself up to what you see around you. Try to put your own cares and concerns away and be totally present to your neighbors, their houses, their cars, their activities, their signs and their signs of life. What might their hopes or fears be? As you walk by, pray God's blessing on them. As you walk, listen for the Holy Spirit, how might she be inviting you to be 'salt and light' in the world?
3. Nightly reflection and journaling - Using the exercise above as a nightly practice to review any issues or circumstances that are bothering you? Whose perspective did you fail to see? What might it be? How does this change you?
4. Others?