

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week Three: “The Uncertainties of Daily Life”

November 20, 2021



Welcome back to my talk on finding joy in uncertainty. In the last section, I spoke to finding joy in the certainties of aging, sickness, and death. Today, I'd like to look at finding joy in the uncertainties of our daily lives and how we bring the other practices I've talked about into our everyday life experience.

One of my former teachers used to say, “We live our lives as though we're in complete control, knowing the whole time that we're not.” I've always found that to be a really helpful motto. We like to think we are in control. When we realize that we're not, it changes things. Much of what I'm talking about now is finding conditional joy in the mundane experiences of our lives that we confront on a regular basis. In the moments where we feel a great deal of stress or where we feel stuck, we can begin to look closely at what's going on. In other words, were we bringing to an experience an expectation that everything would go as we expected? Were we bringing an attitude that we don't know what's going to happen? Or were we stuck identifying with the control that we thought we had?

To give a mundane example, the other day, I had a doctor's appointment. I had planned to leave at a certain time to take the subway to get there. Those of you that happen to live in New York might know that these days in particular, the subway is not always as we expect it to be, and yet we approach it as if the schedule will work as it says it's going to work. I went to the subway and got on the train. The doors closed, and then they opened again. We sat there, and then eventually it was announced that there was a problem with a train somewhere else on the line and that was causing backups and they didn't know when it would be cleared. I waited 10 minutes, looked at my watch, and realized I wasn't going to get to the doctor in time. I got off the train and decided to look for a taxi, and then when that failed, I went to the other subway station. The whole time, I was fuming at the MTA and then fuming at myself for leaving later than I should have, cutting things too short, and so on. I'm sure you've all been there in one way or another. I called the doctor to say that I'm going to be late.

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week Three: “The Uncertainties of Daily Life”

November 20, 2021



At some point between the two subways, I looked at what was causing the stress. Of course, it was the notion that I had control over the situation. Then I was able to laugh at myself and find joy in that moment of recognition: Ah, yeah, urban life. Why should I expect anything to be different? I can find delight in those moments where things work out perfectly, of course, but can I also find joy in the moments where they don't and recognize that it's really OK? That's a very simple example, and many of us confront these kinds of things all the time. We recognize that we thought we controlled the situation; we realize that we don't, which is always the case; and we find delight in that moment of discovery.

I have another story that's a little more challenging. I have a friend who founded a company many years ago that marketed a particular product. He was a very generous person. The company was going quite well, and he always said that he intended for his heirs to survive financially from the success of this company. He also thought some of his heirs might potentially take over the company. His identity was totally tied to the success of this company. None of his family members were interested in running the company, so he had a plan that one of his employees would be able to run the company after he retired, and the family could be on the board. Then that employee got quite sick. This is a company that is pretty specialized in what they do and what they make. Suddenly his plan to keep the company in the family didn't work out, and there was no plan B.

I had a long talk with this person the last time I saw him, and at some point, he recognized how strongly he was identified with this company and how much he was suffering as a result of realizing that perhaps this company wasn't going to survive him (or at least as he knew it). We looked at various options together on how he could proceed. The first thing was to let go of the original intention for his heirs to survive financially from the success of the company. As generous as that might have been, could he let it go? And could he let go of his own identity with

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week Three: “The Uncertainties of Daily Life”

November 20, 2021



this particular operation? It was a big step, and I’m not sure if he got there. But I could see the suffering that it was creating. I saw the potential for this suffering years ago, but nothing was going to change until it became evident that he had no control over this situation.

I went through this practice of letting go of identification with what we are doing a number of years ago. I had been in a particular business for decades, and I decided to let that business go and move on to what I’m doing now. It was hard at first. A lot of old colleagues were identified with that business and still are. For me, I realized that I didn’t want to be in my 80s still plugging away at that particular business. It was of no interest to me, as much as I love the people in it. And so I let it go. That was a big step, but it was an important step for me. Then I just opened up to what might happen next.

It’s important to open up to this uncertainty and find joy in not knowing what’s going to happen. It helps us become open to possibilities. And then when this joy is present, compassion isn’t far behind. When we realize that the ground beneath us is continually shifting and there is no point in fighting it, joy arises and compassion isn’t far behind. We have to remember that we don’t experience joy at the exclusion of sadness. There’s so much tragedy around us, and COVID has amplified that in so many ways. Many of us remember that in the early part of the pandemic, at least in New York, sirens were constantly passing by. Morgues were overflowing. It was tragic. It still is tragic in some parts of the country. And yet, every night at 7:00, everybody’s windows would open, and we would start applauding the frontline workers. We would see neighbors that we didn’t even know we had. And there was a joy in that. That brought about something new, and the joy and the love for what we did have came through very fully.

As you go into your day, start to explore those moments where you’re feeling tense and stressed, and see what’s really happening. That’s a moment of inquiry into what is keeping the joy from arising in that moment. We’ll almost inevitably find that what arises is this notion of control that

Jon Aaron

*Finding Joy in Uncertainty*

Week Three: “The Uncertainties of Daily Life”

November 20, 2021



we thought we had or this sense of heavily identifying with something to the point that if it fails, we don't know who we'll be. Are we able to let go of that? Often, these are big steps. And yet once we let go of the idea of control, there are so many possibilities beyond that. Every moment is an opportunity for this. When we come into our next part of this talk, we'll see how we can bring that to the situation in the world today. I look forward to seeing you then.