

“Christine Aroney-Sine’s new book is as delightful as its subject. Full of invitations to pleasure, rejoicing, and play, it celebrates a truly incarnational spirituality that reflects God’s exuberant yes to all of creation.”

Christine Valters Paintner, author of *The Soul’s Slow Ripening*

“Spiritual practice is designed to awaken us to God’s presence, but it need not be boring. Aroney-Sine has produced a brave work here, inviting spiritual seekers to become like children—playful, curious, and trusting. With Aroney-Sine’s guidance and support you will discover the God who delights in you and unlock a wellspring of joy.”

Phileena Heuertz, founding partner of Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, author of *Mindful Silence*

“Once after baptizing some young children, I invited them to splash in the baptismal font and even splash the congregation a bit too. . . . In *The Gift of Wonder*, Christine Aroney-Sine is pointing to those splashing in the water inviting us to do more of the same in order to be more of what God intends for us to be.”

Gregory H. Rickel, VIII Bishop of Olympia

“Using stories from the Bible, creative exercises, reflection questions, and her own beautiful poems, Christine addresses the questions of how we can bring joy to God and how we can live out the Christian faith as a journey of discovery. . . . She guides us on pathways to experience God’s generous gifts and to grow in contentment and peace in Christ.”

Lynne M. Baab, author of *Sabbath Keeping* and *Nurturing Hope*

“Christine Aroney-Sine has always provided a consistently prophetic voice that is edged with intelligence and grace and enfolded in an active spirituality of discipleship. This book continues in that vein. *The Gift of Wonder* takes the reader on a journey of discovery through the integration of goodness, beauty, and truth. A great read.”

Alan Hirsch, founder of 5Q Collective and Forge Mission Training Network

“There’s a deep desire among so many people I work with as a spiritual director and pastor to connect with God in a new way, to get out of their heads and into their bodies and hearts, to lighten up and play, to experience joy and healing. . . . I have no doubt it will rekindle delight and ignite our sense of wonder for all who engage with it.”

Kathy Escobar, copastor of The Refuge, author of *Faith Shift*

“As a pastor committed to the spiritual nurture and formation of my congregation, this book is a dream resource. . . . A robust approach that has something in it for men as well as women. Any individual, group, or leader will find creative inspiration and sustenance to flourish in this book.”

Mark Pierson, pastor, worship curator, author of *The Art of Curating Worship*

“*The Gift of Wonder* is a joyful and profoundly serious invitation to get dirty and play with the Creator. This book makes me want to get outside, take out some art supplies, become curious, and experience divine delight! If you are craving a fresh approach to connecting with God, this book will ignite your imagination and inspire you to explore new life-giving practices.”

Lisa Scandrette, coauthor of *Belonging and Becoming* and *Free*

“In a culture that values adulthood it will stretch us to explore Jesus’ crucial observation that we can only enter the kingdom through childlikeness. To explore that strange reality we’ll need some friends on the journey. Christine Aroney-Sine is such a friend, inviting us into the kind of rich, whole-person communal engagement with the God we knew as children. If you join her on this playful, messy, wonder-full adventure, you might never be the same again!”

Mandy Smith, pastor, author of *Making a Mess and Meeting God* and *The Vulnerable Pastor*

“For many, the term ‘spiritual disciplines’ conjures thoughts of monotonous practices performed alone and by rote, but not for Christine Aroney-Sine. With her usually exuberant style she reimagines the spiritual practices as communal activities that restore the intense joy and unbridled enthusiasm God wants for all followers. *The Gift of Wonder* is indeed a gift for anyone wanting to explore more creative approaches to the spiritual disciplines. The exercises and prayers are worth the price of admission alone.”

Michael Frost, author of *Surprise the World* and *Keep Christianity Weird*

“Refreshing and helpful, *The Gift of Wonder* soothed my oft-weary spirit. In our polarized, driven, and consumer-obsessed culture, this book is an invitation into God’s creative freedom. Christine not only encourages us to wonder again like a little child, she also gives us practical ways to experience God’s delight. From the childlike characteristic of playfulness to trust, she leads us into a rare and grace-filled space of choosing joy.”

MaryKate Morse, author and professor

“I trust Christine Aroney-Sine to teach me about wonder because she lives with playful curiosity—discovering beauty in the unexpected and the everyday details of life—and she writes with uncommon eloquence and simplicity.”

Mark Scandrette, author of *Belonging and Becoming*, *Practicing the Way of Jesus*, and *Free*

“Christine Aroney-Sine’s *The Gift of Wonder* is a book of wisdom and delight! Repeatedly while reading, I found myself grinning and laughing from sheer joy. . . . From philosophical and theological reflection to practical application, Christine shares how to see anew through appreciating God’s goodness infused all about us. She gives full permission to *play*—to delight in the Lord’s delight of each of us! Read this and then live it; it’s that good.”

Clint Baldwin, executive director of Word Made Flesh

“Play, pray, plant, paint! Christine Aroney-Sine invites us to recover our childlike sense of wonder. Each page encourages us to pause, to exhale, and to breathe in each moment with holy awe. Aroney-Sine offers wise, practical ways to care for our souls by cultivating gardens all around us. This is lived theology, rooted in the world, mediated through our eyes and ears, hearts, and hands. I’m grateful for such respite and creative renewal.”

Craig Detweiler, president of The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology

CHRISTINE ARONEY-SINE

THE GIFT
OF
WONDER

INTERVARSITY PRESS

CREATIVE PRACTICES FOR
DELIGHTING IN GOD

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*To all who are learning to laugh
and dance and play with God.*





CONTENTS

Introduction	I
1 Delight Yourself in God	11
<i>Practice—Choose Joy</i>	21
2 Open Yourself to Awe and Wonder	23
<i>Practice—Ten Miracles Before Breakfast</i>	36
3 Let Your Life Speak	38
<i>Practice—Listen to Your Life</i>	50
4 Unleash Your Inner Child	52
<i>Practice—Plan a Playdate</i>	64
5 Set Your Imagination Free	66
<i>Practice—Read a Children’s Book</i>	77
6 Give Yourself the Gift of Curiosity	79
<i>Practice—Walk a Finger Labyrinth</i>	90
7 Remember We Are Earthlings	92
<i>Practice—Seed Bomb Our Neighborhoods</i>	106
8 Return to the Rhythm of Life	109
<i>Practice—Have Fun with Leaves</i>	121
9 Rest in the Moment	123
<i>Practice—Walking in Circles</i>	137
10 Cultivate Gratitude	139
<i>Practice—Plan a Gratitude Scavenger Hunt</i>	152
11 See Things Differently	155
<i>Practice—Make a Rainbow</i>	168
12 Stay Close to the Cracks	170
<i>Practice—Shine Light in the Cracks</i>	183

13	Come to the Table	185
	<i>Practice—Welcome to the Manger</i>	196
14	Embrace Trust	198
	<i>Practice—Braid the Cords Together</i>	205
	Acknowledgments	209
	Appendix: Guidelines for Leading a Group	211
	Creative Practices	215
	Notes	219





INTRODUCTION

*I choose to enjoy the glory
of the everlasting, ever present One,*

To sit and listen

to what delights God's heart.

I choose to breathe in the wonder

of eternal love,

And dance to the rhythm of eternal breath,

listening to the whispers

calling me to slow down and take notice.

I choose to absorb the beauty

of the divine presence,

to delight in the Creator of all things

and relish the delight God takes in me.

Can you imagine a God who dances with shouts of joy, laughs when you laugh, loves to play, enjoys life, and invites us to join the fun? I couldn't until recently.

I grew up with a serious, workaholic type of God who chastised me for not keeping busy twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Even when I realized this was not what God was really like, it was hard to change. I felt guilty when I slowed down, took a break, or just went out and had fun. This following Jesus is serious business after all. Like the disciples who tried to chase away the children that came to Jesus,


I couldn't be bothered with frivolous practices where play and laughter disrupted my routines. Gasping in awe and wonder at an opening blossom or a slow-moving caterpillar seemed like a waste of time.

Then one year my early Lenten readings included the verse "Unless you become like children you cannot enter the kingdom of God." These words riveted my attention.

The next day I came across an article by Dr. Stuart Brown, who has dedicated his life to the study of play. We all need play, he believes. It connects us to others, sharpens our minds, and may even help us avoid degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's. "What you begin to see when there's major play deprivation in an otherwise competent adult is that they're not much fun to be around," he says. "You begin to see that the perseverance and joy in work is lessened and that life is much more laborious."¹

"Seek the kingdom of God above all else," Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples, and this has been the passion of my life. How could play, fun, and the delights of childhood prepare us for this? There was rarely anything childlike about my spirituality or that of my friends and colleagues.

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14 NRSV).



HAVE WE DISMISSED THE
CHILD WITHIN US AND LOST
THE JOY OF LIFE AND THE
DELIGHT IN GOD THAT
EMERGES WHEN WE PLAY
AND LAUGH AND MARVEL
AT THE WORLD AROUND US?

Have we dismissed the child within us and lost the joy of life and the delight in God that emerges when we play and laugh and marvel at the world around us?

Ask kids what they don't like about adults and they say we don't have enough fun. We don't enjoy life enough and we don't enjoy God enough either. To enjoy God more fully and recognize God's delight in us, we must

rediscover the world of childhood and unleash the inner child hidden deep in our souls.

I posted this question on Facebook: What are the childlike characteristics that make us fit for the kingdom? I was amazed at the enthusiastic response:

- playfulness
- awe and wonder
- imagination
- curiosity
- love of nature
- compassion
- unconditional trust

These all emerged as childlike qualities that my friends thought were important preparation for the new world Jesus came to introduce us to. Of course, others pointed out that children can also be aggravating, bothersome, and intrusive at the most inopportune moments. Yet as Judy Brown Hull suggests in her insightful book *When You Receive a Child: Reflections on Luke 9:46-48*, even these can be gifts from God that reflect something of the kingdom and the intrusiveness of Jesus as he enters our lives. “Unselfconscious, bothersome, unpredictable—children have another similarity to Jesus: while they are fully human—they do not fit tidily into the totally adult world any better than Jesus did.”² She provocatively goes on to suggest that this might be because Jesus’ reality is closer to that of a child than an adult.

Having listed childlike characteristics that make us fit for the kingdom, responders often commented, “I’ve never thought about this before.” Delighting in fun and laughter as a pathway to enjoying God is something most of us never consider.

We suffer from play deprivation, nature deficit disorder, awe depletion, compassion fatigue, imagination suppression, and more. As a result I think we suffer from God deprivation too.

I am increasingly convinced that rediscovering our inner child is essential for our spiritual health. It has become an important and delightful journey for me and is the central theme of *The Gift of Wonder*.

Awe and wonder, imagination and curiosity connect us to the God who is present in every moment and everything in a way that nothing else can. They enrich our contemplative core and expand our horizons to explore new aspects of our world and our God. Believing in a God who loves to plant gardens with dirty hands and make mud pies to put on the eyes of the blind, or who does happy dances and sings with joy over all of humanity and in fact all of creation has revolutionized my faith.

Ironically, my life has been filled with joy and satisfaction, though I have rarely linked this to my spiritual practices. My childhood in Australia was filled with fun family summer caravan adventures. I studied medicine and delighted in my years as a family physician in New Zealand. In 1981 I joined a fledgling part of Youth with a Mission called Mercy Ships and enjoyed the privilege of establishing a hospital on board the MV *Anastasis*, to perform cleft lip and palate and eye surgeries. Over the twelve years I spent on board, I facilitated surgical outreaches in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Africa. I worked with refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border, in Haiti, and in Ivory Coast. I saw thousands of lives transformed and had the intense joy and satisfaction of knowing my life had made a difference.

After I left the ship, my life took another direction, but I still find intense joy in what I accomplish as an author, speaker, and blogger. Helping people create spiritual pathways that lead them toward a deeper relationship with God is a delight.

My faithful companion over the last twenty-six years of this journey has been my husband, futurist and author Tom Sine. He is constantly

researching how our world is changing and how we need to change to be more creative in helping people imagine new possibilities for their lives, churches, and neighborhoods. He loves to cook, walk our dog, and garden with me, and has enthusiastically supported my writing. His insightful and often playful responses to my sharing of new practices have kept me on track throughout.

Tom and I live in a small intentional community in Seattle called the Mustard Seed House. We enjoy a weekly meal and check-in times, which have often provided space for experimenting with the practices I share in this book. We also love to share food from our garden with friends and sometimes strangers from all over the world.

I CHOOSE JOY

My understanding of spiritual disciplines has changed dramatically over the last few years. It continues to change as I delve into the characteristics of childlikeness and rediscover the joy of play and curiosity and awe.

It all began when I asked people, “What makes you feel close to God?” They responded with stories of sitting by the sea, playing with kids, turning the compost pile, washing the dishes, and walking in the local park. Even taking a shower got a mention. Hardly anyone talked about church or Bible study. Most people connect to God through nature, interaction with children, around the dinner table, or in their daily activities. However, they rarely identify these as spiritual practices.

These revelations started me on a journey. Encouraged by contemplative friends, I dived into the liturgical calendar and explored a range of ancient practices like *lectio divina* and labyrinth walking, which greatly enriched my faith and drew me closer to God.³ I wrote breathing prayers and liturgies to enhance my personal intimacy with the eternal One. A new depth of delight in God began to emerge. Some of these ideas I shared in my previous book *Return to Our Senses: Reimagining How We Pray*, but my horizons continued to expand.

When I started asking “What do you enjoy about God?” and “What about you gives God joy?” I ventured out beyond the bounds of these ancient but traditional practices to explore creative approaches to prayer, like rock painting and doodling, that stirred my imagination and connected my everyday activities to my relationship with my Creator. I planted prayer gardens and sketched colorful designs as meditative exercises. I had fun with my spiritual practices and invited others to join me on the journey. My inner child was stirring and my soul came alive in ways I never anticipated. I watched friends bubble over with this same enthusiasm for God while engaged in creative activities unlike the traditional practices we grew up with.

The more these practices increased my love for God, the more I wanted to understand what brings joy to God’s heart. I incorporated my questions, What do you enjoy about God? and What are you choosing that gives God joy? into my Sunday devotions, where I reflect back on my week and realized that now I needed to reshape my spiritual practices in response to these prompts.

Much to my surprise, many people I talk with are hungry for answers to these same questions yet rarely ask them. Some confess they are not sure anything gives God joy. They see God as a distant, judgmental figure constantly accusing and punishing them for their mistakes. To believe that God is full of joy and enjoys both them and creation is a totally foreign concept. Yet it makes them light up with delight when they begin to understand.

So much of what we learn about spirituality is negative. We believe more in a God of judgment and condemnation than of love, joy, and delight. Following God is about adhering to a long list of things we don’t do—no smoking, drinking, dancing, wearing jewelry, or sex before marriage. Alternatively, it is a list of rules that encourage us to color inside the lines and live inside our religious boxes. We live in dread of displeasing God or taking a wrong step that means we can

never find God's best for our lives. That God delights in who we are and what we do now is a wonderful but startling revelation for many of us.

Psalm 18:19 tells us we are rescued because God delights in us, and Psalm 147:11 affirms that the eternal One takes pleasure in those who put their hope in God's unfailing love. Even the Westminster Shorter Catechism states that the chief purpose of humanity is "to glorify God and to *enjoy him forever.*"

What if finding joy in the divine presence is the greatest way to glorify God and become who God created us to be? What if becoming like a child is the pathway, and what if we reshape our spiritual practices with this in mind?

WHAT IF FINDING
JOY IN THE DIVINE
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GREATEST WAY TO
GLORIFY GOD AND
BECOME WHO GOD
CREATED US TO BE?

THE SHAPE OF THIS BOOK

What are the childlike characteristics that bring God joy and make us fit for the kingdom? *is* the question that shapes this book. Asking it in my own life opened hidden doorways for me, a little like Lucy in C. S. Lewis's classic *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She steps through the wardrobe into the magical world of Narnia, where animals speak and creation dances. She gazes on it with awe and wonder and a delight, which grew as she met its inhabitants and burst into life as the great king Aslan approached.

My own magical doorway took me into a mystical world of awe and wonder walks, joy-spot sightings, nostalgia trips, compassion games, and playdate adventures. I relearned the arts of gratitude and curiosity, as well as the delight of living in the present rather than the past or future. Here too creation speaks, relationships are strengthened, and my love for the God revealed in Jesus Christ has taken on new vibrancy and depth, which I hope to share with you.

This book will teach you to pay attention to childlike characteristics that shape us into kingdom people. Each chapter addresses one characteristic we need to embrace:

- delight in God
- playfulness
- sharing our stories
- imagination
- curiosity
- awe and wonder
- love of nature
- the ability to live in the present
- gratitude
- compassion
- hospitality
- the intrigue of looking with fresh eyes
- trust

The Gift of Wonder explores how to reshape our spiritual practices so that giving God joy and drawing closer to our loving Creator becomes their primary purpose. The last chapter is on trust. Here we will braid together the lessons from previous chapters into a strong, unbreakable cord that revitalizes our faith.

Chapters include stories of others who follow this path. I am not the only one exploring new and meaningful approaches to spiritual disciplines or experimenting with creative ways to bring joy to God as I express faith. Nor am I the only one relishing a growing delight in God as a result. Many people I know are creating fresh ways to pray, imaginatively reshaping and adapting time-honored liturgical practices to their current lifestyles and making them uniquely their own. They

are hungry for vital faith but bored with traditional practices. They are exploring experiential approaches to spirituality that integrate everyday activities into their faith. In the process they, like me, are discovering the delights of childlike faith that draws us into God's kingdom.

Each chapter concludes with a creative exercise that invites you to awaken your inner child. These exercises encourage you to apply your newfound knowledge to your faith as you reflect on what you have read. Some draw on fun-filled childhood activities like coloring, doodling, and reading children's books, which reduce our stress and free us to enter more fully into our enjoyment of God. Others adapt practices that have existed in the church for centuries, like contemplation and labyrinth walking. Still others are based on totally new ideas of how to practice our faith and draw close to our delightful God.

Build a toolkit. Start by gathering

- a notebook or journal
- some crayons
- colored pens, pencils, or paints
- a coloring book
- your favorite children's book
- your camera (or phone) if you enjoy taking photos
- your favorite musical instrument
- your Bible

This toolkit incorporates elements that appeal to most learning styles. What else should you add? Do you already use creative tools that cater to your learning style? Are you a visual learner inspired by images, maps, or graphic designs? You might like to add photos. Perhaps you are an auditory learner stirred by music, podcasts, lectures, and listening situations. You might want to include a drum or singing bowl. If you learn best through words, loving to take notes and read, a

journal and some of your favorite books might be your primary tools. Tactile learners who love hands-on projects and figure things out by putting them together might like to add whittling tools, a puzzle, or your knitting.

JOURNEY WITH OTHERS

This is not a journey you want to attempt alone. Recruit a group of fellow searchers as companions. Plan weekly meetings where you can give each other permission to have some fun, become like children, and explore the creative exercises together.

Parker Palmer in *A Hidden Wholeness* comments, “To understand true self—which knows who we are in our inwardness and whose we are in our larger world—we need both the interior intimacy that comes with solitude and the otherness that comes with community. . . . Together they make us whole, like breathing in and breathing out.”⁴

Part of what I love about community is the way we spark each others’ creativity and imagination. Creativity gives birth to more creativity. Shared awe and wonder grow until they fill the horizon. Sharing our stories ignites creativity, sparking something new within us *and* others. Like a wildfire spread by the wind, creativity jumps from place to place, bursting into flame, burning away the old to make way for the new. “And in the sharing we experience the joy a second time.”⁵

Each creative exercise provides special instructions for group interaction. Reflect on your responses to the exercises at the end of the chapters. Create new practices together. Laugh, eat, and have fun together.

So let us choose the joy of unleashing our inner child today. Let us begin the adventure of reshaping our spiritual practices to delight in God and appreciate the delight that God takes in us.



DELIGHT YOURSELF IN GOD

Stop, pray and listen.

*Open yourself to the eternal One
present all around.*

*Take time to notice the markers
of God's abiding presence
and rejoice in God's enduring acts.*

*Pause to acknowledge
how far we have come
on this journey toward life.*

*Hold on to the signs
that nudge us onward along the path
that leads into the loving heart of the One
who is making all things new.*

What about me gives God joy? When I first asked myself this question, my mind went blank. I sat in silence for five minutes trying to think of one thing that I thought God liked about me. I knew God loved me, after all love is the essence of who God is. To love is God's nature, almost, one might think, God's duty. That God might actually enjoy who I am and love me because of that enjoyment rather than out of a sense of obligation was a new concept.

So I pulled out a blank sheet of paper and some gel pens and began to create. I wrote the words "What about me gives God joy?" in large

letters with a colored pen. I paused, recited the words, picked up a different colored pen and wrote over my first set of letters. One color followed another until my words were a rainbow of delightful images. Each time I wrote the words, I recited them slowly to myself.

Finally, I sat and prayerfully looked at my lettering. *What about me gives you joy, Lord?* I asked again. *I am fearfully and wonderfully made, and God delights in me,* I thought. I pulled out my Bible and read Psalm 139.

Suddenly God's presence embraced me in a tangible way I had never experienced before. I was reminded of Eric Liddell, Scottish Olympic gold medal winner in the 1920s whose life was highlighted in the film *Chariots of Fire*. At one point he tells his sister, "[God] made me fast. And when I run I sense His pleasure."

What do I enjoy doing that makes me sense God's pleasure? I pondered as the joy of God bubbled up inside me. It was as though God had been waiting for me to ask this all my life.

The words started to flow:

I sense God's pleasure when I let go of my busyness, sit quietly and allow God's presence to permeate my being and lodge in my soul.

I sense God's pleasure when my creative juices flow and I express my love for God by painting rocks, planting contemplative gardens, and writing prayers.

I sense God's pleasure when my husband and I sit together in the evening and take time just to enjoy each other.

I sense God's pleasure when I pull weeds, plant, and prune in the garden, even when I just admire its beauty.

I sense God's pleasure when I help others along the pathway toward a more intimate relationship with God and enable them to become more of whom God created them to be.

I sense God's pleasure when I speak out against injustice and oppression and commit myself to wholeness, peace, and shalom.

God doesn't just love me, God delights in me and who I am created to be, I realize. It was a revolutionary and transforming idea.


I now use this exercise regularly when I journal on Sundays. I might focus on the day or past week. Sometimes I reflect back over several months or a whole year. It is wonderful to be reminded of what God delights in about me and how my daily choices can increase that delight. It has brought a joy and closeness to my relationship that I never anticipated.

The prayer at the beginning of this chapter came out of this process. It encourages me to slow down and notice while focusing my attention on my growing understanding of what it means to not only delight in God but to recognize God's delight in me.

What do you enjoy doing that makes you sense God's pleasure?

According to Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, "the human brain is uniquely constructed to perceive and generate spiritual realities."¹ I suspect this innate spirituality is part of our DNA, deeply rooted in our identity as children of God. Perhaps it is also because this is where our joy in life is rooted. We are designed to draw pleasure from our spiritual practices and interactions with God.

WHAT DO YOU
ENJOY DOING THAT
MAKES YOU SENSE
GOD'S PLEASURE?



When we pray, our brains are changed. Meditation makes us more compassionate and caring toward others. Worshiping together activates pheromones in our bodies that strengthen community. Faith tempers anxiety and fear. We are created to live in love, enjoy God, and bring joy to God not alone but as a united global family.

No wonder even nonreligious people crave spirituality. No wonder our exploration of spiritual practices has the potential to light up our brains and delight our hearts as they open doorways into God's eternal world of love and peace.

Unfortunately, we often allow what someone else enjoys, rather than what delights us, to shape our practices, and that doesn't always

bring joy to us or God. Consequently, many lose their way and find no joy in the journey.

“Spiritual but not religious” is used to describe a growing number of people, especially young people for whom church and traditional spiritual practices and worship are no longer satisfying. Many guiltily confess they experience more joy and feel closer to God in nature, yoga, social entrepreneurship, or community service than they do in their Sunday worship service. Some quietly leave church because they get little help in connecting these joy-filled moments to their faith. Others embrace contemplative practices such as lectio divina, labyrinths, and meditation, but receive little encouragement to venture into new pathways. Church activities like prayer stations can tap into this hunger and provide inspirational and experiential practices to bring to our traditional services. Other personal practices, from poetry, knitting, or whittling while praying and meditating while gardening, show an emerging world of creativity for individuals and communities of faith that bring joy to their lives and to the heart of God.

We are all unique expressions of our loving God. How we relate to God says something of who we are and of who God is. Yet we are rarely encouraged to explore or nurture that uniqueness and how it can draw us into God’s presence.

What do you enjoy about God? and What are you choosing that gives God joy? should be at the forefront of our spiritual exploration. When I suggested this to a friend who attends Bethel Church in Redding, California, she told me that this church has a similar understanding and encourages people to ask God, *What do you enjoy about me, Lord?* or even *What do you think about me, Lord?* They then prayerfully write down whatever comes to mind.

REJOICING THE HEART OF GOD

My greatest joy as a medical doctor was the thrill of delivering babies. I gazed in awe as the baby’s head emerged and held my breath as I

waited for its first cry. I delighted in holding the small, squirming body in my hands and loved watching the tears of joy stream down the mother's face as I passed the newborn infant to her. The grin spreading across the father's face made me want to dance and shout with the thrill of it all. I imagine God looked over my shoulder with this same delight.

I experienced that same joy when I was reborn as a child of God. I still vividly remember sitting on a rock on a warm summer's afternoon looking out over the Lane Cove River in Sydney. As I bowed my head in prayer, the fragrance of gum leaves filled my senses, and my heart sang to the joyful shouts of parrots and the deafening sound of cicadas. My world exploded in joy.

In the weeks that followed I really did feel as though I had been born again. Everything was new and fresh. I couldn't stop smiling. Awe and wonder, a glimpse of the magical kingdom of God, surrounded me. No wonder Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3 NIV). To enter the kingdom we must be reborn into the delights of childhood.

The disciples get the same response when they ask what it will take for them to enter the kingdom of heaven: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4 NIV).

On another occasion Jesus becomes elated and prays with joy, "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. Thank you for hiding Your mysteries from the wise and intellectual, instead revealing them to little children" (Luke 10:21).

It is easy for us to dismiss this as a metaphor, even if our conversion experiences brought a sense of childlike exuberance. However the great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that we need to take it literally. He believes that our alienation from God has buried in oblivion much of who God created us to be. He sees conversion as a rebirth into a truly childlike mentality in order to participate in God's kingdom. "This

demands of Jesus' listener a reawakening to his true origin, to which he has turned his back, a spiritual turnabout (unless you convert and become like children) that will enable him to become aware of himself."²

Balthasar sees childlikeness particularly in terms of dependency. Only in once more recognizing our total reliance on God can we enter the kingdom.

However, I think it goes much further than that. God's kingdom is a new world with a totally new culture, new language, customs, values, and purpose. To delight in God, enjoy God's eternal world, and enter the fullness of life it offers, we must be reborn and learn to delight in this very different world where the language, culture, and customs are summed up in the words, "You shall love—'love the Eternal One your God with everything you have: all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind'—and 'love your neighbor as yourself'" (Luke 10:27).

Love permeates everything God is and does. It entwines our souls. It should be what fires our imaginations and schedules our time. It should determine what breaks our hearts and what we celebrate with joy.

What unveils this love in us? Not our intelligence, theological knowledge, or spiritual maturity but our childlikeness—curiosity and questioning, and willingness to make mistakes, live with ignorance, delight in stories, love nature, have fun playing, and be blind to color, creed, age, and social strata in those we associate with. This rejoices the heart of God and makes us fit for the kingdom. So why don't our spiritual practices always reflect that?

I have spent many years traveling in countries not my own, feeling uncomfortable in the cultures, unable to understand the language. Even now, though I have lived in America for twenty-five years, I struggle to understand some aspects of the culture. It is hard. It's not just that my accent is different or that I interpret words differently. At times I feel as though I am on a different wavelength. My humor falls flat. The fun things of my childhood have no meaning. I have had to be born again in order to fit in.

No wonder we need to be reborn to enter the kingdom of God. To learn this language of love, trust in this God of love, and live into God's culture of love, we must enter as infants and move slowly toward childlike maturity. Children learn new languages and cultures far better than we adults do.

It was reading *The Book of Joy* by the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu that really connected me to God's joy and the rebirthing pathway I should follow to embrace it. These two amazing men, who survived more than fifty years of what could have been soul-crushing violence and exile, are some of the most joyful, loving people on the planet. "Joy is a way of approaching the world," says the Archbishop Tutu.³ Our greatest joy, he contends, is when we seek to do good for others, share generously, and show compassion. The more we turn toward others, the more joy we experience; and the more joy we experience, the more we can bring joy to others. The goal is not just to create joy for ourselves but as the archbishop poetically phrased it, "to be a reservoir of joy, an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you."⁴

My own spiritual journey toward a God who delights in life, love, and beauty also emerged in a place of deep pain about thirty-five years ago. Two months working on the Thai-Cambodian border with Khmer refugees who had fled the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia turned my faith upside down. Starving kids died in my arms. Their mothers told horrifying stories of rape, violence, and atrocity. *Does God care? If so where is the God of love I believe in, and what does this God expect of me in the midst of these horrors?*

Following this painful experience, I began exploring the biblical concept of shalom and God's desire for the restoration of the wholeness, flourishing, and prosperity of the original creation. As I melded this into my understanding of Sabbath, my desire to make life choices that brought joy to God really began to come into focus and reshape my spiritual practices.

In his book *The Sabbath*, Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel tells of how ancient rabbis puzzled over Genesis 2:2, “On the seventh day God finished his work,” which implied to them that there was an act of creation on this day too. They concluded that what was created on the seventh day was “harmony, peace and repose—*menuha*—the world of shalom, wholeness and abundance, the world as God intended it to be.”⁵ Then God looks at this world and proclaims, “It is very good.” Theologian Norman Wirzba suggests that what is expressed here is God’s excitement and enthusiasm for what is being created. God finds the whole of creation to be not only good but delightful, “the occasion for intense and sustained joy.”⁶

To top it off, God digs a garden, “*a place of utter delight*” (Genesis 2:8) and creates humans as its caretakers. God not only delights in creation but loves to share that world with us and rejoices over our appreciation of its beauty and our acceptance of our role as its stewards. My vivid imagination has God walking through the garden with Adam and Eve pointing out plants, insects, and furry creatures to them saying, “Did you notice this one, see how perfectly it fulfills its part in my plan? I had such fun creating it.”

Can you imagine the grief God must have felt at our disobedience? We no longer delighted in our Creator but hid in fear instead. We no longer saw God as delighting in us but viewed the Eternal One as an authoritarian, judgmental, punishing God we could never please. We no longer found joy in the stewardship of this beautiful creation either but saw our labors as toil and struggle, and ourselves as conquerors rather than preservers.

Fortunately, the gospel story offers us hope. In *A New Heaven and a New Earth* Richard Middleton says,


Many recent studies of the garden of Eden in Genesis suggest that this garden, in its relationship to the rest of the earth,

functions as an analogue of the holy of holies in the tabernacle or the Jerusalem temple. The garden is the initial core location of God's presence on earth; this is where God's presence is first manifest, both in giving instructions to humanity (2:15-17) and in declaring judgement (3:8-19). The garden is thus the link between earth and heaven, at least at the beginning of human history. The implication is that as the human race faithfully tended this garden or cultivated the earth, the garden would spread, until the entire earthly realm was transformed into a fit habitation for humanity. But it would thereby also become a fit habitation for God.⁷

What if the goal of our spiritual disciplines was to restore the intense joy and enthusiasm God experienced on the seventh day of creation? Imagine what our lives would look like if our deepest delight was to transform ourselves, our neighbors, and the earth until all becomes once again not just a fitting habitation for humanity but also for God.

According to Heschel, "The essence of the world to come is Sabbath eternal."⁸ Sabbath is not a rest of exhaustion but of delight. When the

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Jews looked forward to the Sabbath, they looked beyond the pain of a broken world to the glimpses of wholeness in the past week. The greeting that ushered in the Sabbath day, "*Shabbat Shalom*," basically meant, "May you live in anticipation of the day when God makes all things whole again." This was the culmination of their week, a preview of the world in which Sabbath eternal would reemerge and all God's creation would live in harmony, peace, and abundance.

Jesus and his announcing of God's new creation fulfills this dream. As I comment in my previous book *Godspace: Time for Peace in the Rhythms of Life*:

No wonder he healed on the Sabbath and constantly criticized the legalisms and restrictive rules the Pharisees inflicted on the people, robbing them of their joy and freedom. He wasn't downplaying the importance of Sabbath as a holy day, he was showing the Jews what Sabbath was meant to be—a glimpse into the wholeness and abundance of a *shalom* future when all will be healed, fed and provided for.⁹

When I look at Jesus, I see a man with childlike enthusiasm. He loved life, relished the beauty of God's creation, played with children, and enjoyed friendships enthusiastically. I see him rejoicing as he feeds and heals people and breaks down barriers of power and injustice. As I watch him walk through Palestine with his friends, it is not just a love of freedom, justice, and generosity that I sense God loves. More playful images come to mind. *God loves to have fun and surprise people*, I conclude as Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding. *God enjoys a good meal*, I surmise as I watch Jesus eat with his friends. *God loves to celebrate and party*, I imagine as I see Jesus going up to Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts.

What difference would it make to our spiritual practices if we approached life with childlike enthusiasm and made modeling glimpses of God's shalom world our goal? How would we reorder our lives if we started each day by asking, *What does God enjoy about me, and what could I do today to bring joy to God?* How would we reshape our spiritual practices if we saw them as tools to draw us closer to God, to each other, and to God's beautiful world? I suspect this would cast a different view of the day ahead and for the purpose of what we do.

PRACTICE

Choose Joy

This first exercise is adapted from the prayer of examen, a contemplative practice created by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century to examine our days, detect God's presence, and discern God's purposes.¹ He referred to those elements of our day that bring us closer to God as *consolations* and those that distance us from God as *desolations*. I reshaped this concept to focus on our enjoyment of God and God's joy in us. This is a great way to start our journey into the delight of God.

Gather a blank sketch book or journal and some colored crayons, pens, or pencils. Write "I choose joy" on the first blank page in bold colored letters.

Each night for the next week prayerfully think back over your day.

- What did you enjoy doing? What made you smile, laugh, dance, or shout out loud for joy today?
- How did you respond to these joyful moments?

Use your colored pencil to decorate the words you wrote. If you feel inclined, embellish your reflections with sketches, photos, or words of praise. Perhaps you would like to dance around your room in response or "make a joyful noise" on a drum or guitar.

Imagine God entering into your joy.

- In what ways did these joyful moments make you sense God's pleasure and draw you closer to God?
- In what ways did they draw you closer to others?
- What creative impulses or responses did they stir within you?
- What could you do tomorrow to cultivate and grow that joy?

Name the tensions.

- What destroyed your joy today and made you feel distant from God?

- What distanced you from others and perhaps destroyed their joy?
- What adjustments could you make to overcome the tensions and restore your joy?

Reward yourself.

Each evening, reward yourself for the creative responses that enhanced your joy. Give yourself a special treat for each tension that turned into a joy-filled moment where you sensed God's pleasure: eat a chocolate, listen to your favorite song, spend a few extra moments playing with your children. Laugh at yourself. Toast yourself for being a person who is able to overcome tension and create joy spots. As you laugh I hope that you will sense God's approval of your contemplation.

At the end of the week take extra time to relax and look back over your week.

- What gave you the greatest joy?
- What do you think gave the greatest pleasure to God?
- What could you do this coming week to expand your own joy and the pleasure you brought to God?

As a reward, plan a trip to a place you enjoy—an art gallery or museum; a garden you love; the beach or mountains; the oldest, most beautiful, or unusual building in your town; the local nursery or fabric store. Have some fun, enjoy life, and enjoy God.

HAVE FUN WITH YOUR FRIENDS

If you are meeting as a group, get each person to share their joys and distractions from the week. Talk about their responses and where God seemed close or distant. Laugh together. Have some fun. Reward the person who related the most joy-filled moments with a prize or special treat. Give another reward for the one whose response made you laugh the most.

Reflect on your time together. Where did you as a group sense God's pleasure? What new practices might come out of this experience?