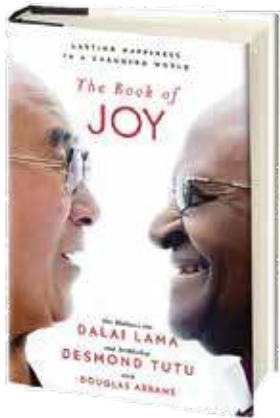


The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World

Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Carlton Abrams
Avery; September 20, 2016; 384 pages

Reviewed by Dean Gianakos, MD



In *The Wall Street Journal*, there was the article “Venezuelan Riot Police Tire of Front-Line Duties.”¹ It tells the story of Ana, a young policewoman who patrols the slums of Caracas at night. During the day, she gears up to confront government protestors who are angry about food shortages and the lack of jobs:

On those front lines, she and her colleagues use tear gas and rubber bullets against increasingly desperate protestors armed with stones, Molotov cocktails and even bags of feces. The showdowns take place in scorching heat, and she says authorities provide her with no food, water or overtime pay.¹

Many American physicians also tire of front-line duties. Some are burned out, depressed, or suicidal, and we absolutely need to find ways to help them. However, most of us are grateful to be practicing medicine in our offices rather than fighting protestors on the streets of Caracas. Cultivating gratitude is one way to promote physician well-being.

Today’s physicians spend many hours on their computers completing documentation requirements and administrative tasks. Since the patient-physician relationship is the primary source of joy for most physicians, it’s no wonder many are burning out. They are asking themselves existential questions: How should I live my life? Is it time to cut back on my work hours, downsize my home, and pursue other passions? Should I work to change the office flow in my practice, hoping it will make a difference in my professional satisfaction? Should I advocate for health care change at a local, state, or national level? Should I return to teaching to give back to the next generation? Will devoting more time to these non-clinical activities paradoxically renew my energy, restore joy, and provide an antidote to

my malaise? Should I just suck it up and keep grinding?

It is with these questions in mind that I turn to the book, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*.

Douglas Abrams spent five days with the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the exiled home of the Dalai Lama. As Abrams notes in the introduction, there are three layers to the book:

- 1) The Dalai Lama’s and Archbishop Tutu’s teachings on joy;
- 2) The science on joy, provided by Abrams; and
- 3) Abrams’ impressions and stories about these joyful men.

These layers are explored in three chapters: “The Nature of True Joy,” “The Obstacles to Joy,” and “The Eight Pillars of Joy” (perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity).

At the end of the book, there is a section on “joy practices” for readers to incorporate into their daily lives: breathing exercises, meditation, prayer, silence, journaling for gratitude, fasting, humor, physical exercise, and reflection exercises.

Abrams takes notes and make observations as the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop share Buddhist and Christian perspectives on suffering, adversity, and joy. They have remarkably similar views:

Joy, as the Archbishop said during the week, is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not. This state of mind—and heart—is much closer to both the Dalai Lama’s and the Archbishop’s understanding of what animates our lives and what ultimately leads to a life of satisfaction and meaning.

Abrams adds:

And the more we turn away from our self-regard to wipe the tears from the eyes of another, the more—incredibly—we are able to bear, to heal, and to transcend our own suffering.

Of course, if we spend too much time wiping away tears, we risk burnout. There is only one passage in the book on compassion fatigue. The Dalai Lama said, “We have to take care of ourselves without selfishly taking

care of ourselves. If we don't take care of ourselves, we cannot survive."

I suspect he would refer fatigued physicians to the back of the book to experiment with joy practices. Abrams might point to the section on Sonja Lyubomirsky's scientific work, where she explains the three keys to happiness—expressing gratitude, reframing situations in positive ways, and showing kindness and generosity.

This book will not help physicians to solve the system issues in medicine—office inefficiencies, electronic health record burdens, regulatory and reimbursement demands. These are huge contributors to the physician burnout crisis, and most likely will not be going away any time soon. However, physicians can reflect on the wise words of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu to help them find joy in their life and work.

No matter how stressful situations may seem, physicians always have a choice regarding how they will respond. After reading this book, perhaps more physicians will choose to change their lives in significant ways, each one "becoming an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all of those around us."

References

1. Kurmanaev, A. The Wall Street Journal, May 18, 2017.

Dr. Gianakos is the Director of Medical Education at Centra in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is a member of *The Pharos* Editorial Board. His address is:

1901 Thomson Drive
Lynchburg, VA 24501
E-mail: deangianakos@yahoo.com