

# Engaging Joyfully

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"Joy is an affirmation  
of life, and a marker  
of our humanity;  
denying it  
dehumanizes us."

– Beautiful Trouble

# Whats Inside?

Introduction: Why Joy?.....	page 4
Definitions and Key Concepts.....	page 5
Joy, Pleasure & Rest as Resistance.....	page 9
Barriers to Joy.....	page 11
Anger and Joy.....	page 13
Joy as Intergenerational Legacy.....	page 14
Joy as Mutual Aide.....	page 15
Joy and the Nervous System.....	page 16
Joy and Collective Liberation.....	page 17
Joyful Actions.....	page 18
Reflection Questions.....	page 19
Reflections based on 8 Unitarian Universalist Principles.....	page 22
Creative Prompts.....	page 25
Ideas for Bringing in Joy.....	page 27
Micro-Toolkit for Joy During Crisis.....	page 28
Artists and Activists to be inspired by.....	page 29
Resources and Further Reading.....	page 30





## Introduction

Joy is not frivolous. It is a practice that reconnects us to ourselves and each other. In the context of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy culture, joy is an act of resistance. It makes survival more than bearable—it makes it meaningful. For Canadian Unitarian Universalists (UUs) and others on the path of justice and spiritual growth, joy can be a sacred compass for collective liberation.

This toolkit explores joy as a powerful strategy for disrupting oppressive systems, building spiritual resilience, and creating communities of abundance, healing, and play.

To engage joyfully is not to bypass grief, pain, or trauma. It is instead to surrender to radical acceptance and embracing duality that keeps us going. We are not ignoring, we are finding fuel to keep us going.





# Definitions and Concepts

- *Joy*: A deep, often spontaneous feeling of delight and connection. Joy is rooted in presence, community, and embodiment.

**Why it's important:** Joy is a form of resilience—it reconnects us to what makes life worth living.

- *Pleasure Activism*: A framework coined by Black activists like bell hooks and adrienne maree brown that affirms the power of pleasure and desire in the work of justice.

**Why it's important:** It reframes pleasure as a necessary and political part of liberation—not something to earn but something to claim.

- *Collective Liberation*: The understanding that our freedom is bound together. True liberation is collective, not individual.

**Why it's important:** Joy becomes a communal act—it ripples outward, strengthening movements and relationships.



# Definitions and Concepts



- *Radical Imagination*: The capacity to envision and desire worlds beyond oppression. Joy feeds this imagination—it sparks possibilities and fuels creativity in the face of despair.

**Why it's important:** We need joy to dream of better futures. Without it, our activism risks becoming purely reactionary.

- *Liberatory Embodiment*: The practice of inhabiting your body fully and lovingly in ways that resist the fragmentation and control imposed by systems of oppression.

**Why it's important:** Joy lives in the body—reclaiming our physical presence is a form of political power.

- *Intergenerational Joy*: The transmission of joy across generations through stories, traditions, music, and ritual—often a site of both reclamation and resistance.

**Why it's important:** Reclaiming joy that was interrupted by colonization or forced assimilation is healing and connective





## Definitions and Concepts

- *Sacred Irreverence*: The use of play, parody, and humor (like drag or clowning) to subvert dominant power structures and express deep truths with levity.

**Why it's important:** Humor and irreverence are potent tools for protest and help keep movements alive and creative.

- *Cultural Somatics*: A framework exploring how oppression lives in the body collectively, and how embodied joy can heal trauma and build community.

**Why it's important:** It explains why joy can feel dangerous or unfamiliar—and offers a way back through the body.

- *Covenantal Joy*: Joy that arises from shared commitment to one another's dignity and liberation within a beloved community.

**Why it's important:** For UUs, joy is not just personal—it's part of how we live out our covenants and support one another.



# Definitions and Concepts

- *White Supremacy Culture*: A set of societal norms that privilege productivity, perfectionism, control, and urgency. These values uphold systems of oppression.

**Why it's important:** Understanding these traits helps us unlearn them and make space for joy, creativity, and community.

- *Transformative Justice*: – Approaches to harm that prioritize healing, accountability, and community care over punishment or shame.

**Why it's important:** Transformative justice is a relational approach to accountability and joy is a huge part of that. A desire for transformative justice is a desire to see the humanity and protect each other's right to growth and joy is fundamental for growth because it gives us something to work towards.





# Pleasure, Rest, and Resistance



Choosing joy, rest, and pleasure in a world that profits from our exhaustion is a spiritual and political act. White supremacy culture demands overwork and emotional repression. It punishes softness, embodiment, and connection. Resisting these forces by prioritizing pleasure, healing, and creativity allows us to reclaim our dignity and humanity.

Rest disrupts capitalism.

Joy interrupts trauma.

Pleasure heals generations of harm.

- Joy builds resilience and capacity for long-term justice work.
- Rest helps us disconnect from toxic productivity forced onto us by capitalism
- Pleasure reclaims the body and challenges shame based control.





# Pleasure, Rest, and Resistance



## How Supremacy Culture Affects Joy:

- Equates worth with productivity and perfectionism
- Frames joy as indulgent or unserious
- Discourages emotional expression, spontaneity, and softness
- Encourages urgency, fear, and control over curiosity and play

## Signs You're Caught in These Patterns:

- Guilt when resting or playing
- Feeling unworthy unless "doing something productive"
- Emotional numbness or repression
- Difficulty receiving pleasure or delight

## Counter-Practices:

- Practice stillness or play without goals
- Affirm your worth even when inactive
- Reframe rest and joy as spiritual and political needs
- Spend time with youth, animals, or art without performance pressure



# Barriers to Joy

Joy is powerful—but for many of us, accessing it can feel distant or unsafe. Trauma, oppression, and grief often block our capacity for joy. Colonization, white supremacy, and capitalism have taught us to dissociate from our bodies, deny our desires, and distrust our own needs.

## **Common Barriers to Joy:**

- Unprocessed grief: Ongoing losses—personal and collective—can create numbness or avoidance.
- Internalized oppression: Messages like "you don't deserve rest" or "you have to earn joy" linger in our bodies.
- Hypervigilance and trauma responses: When your nervous system is always bracing for harm, joy can feel unsafe.
- Isolation: Disconnection from community can make joy feel hollow or unreachable.
- Religious or cultural guilt: Some of us were taught that pleasure is sinful or selfish.
- Political trauma: if you come from a history that has been effected by war, forced migration, colonization, imperialism, enslavement, gender apartheid, or other external political forces either personally or in your family history that challenge your dignity...joy can feel impossible at times.

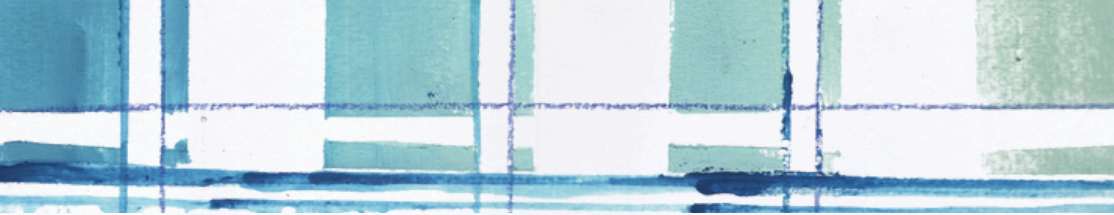


# Barriers to Joy

## What Helps?

- Normalize grief and joy coexisting. You can laugh while mourning. You can play even while fighting for justice.
- Practice consent with yourself. Ask: Do I want joy right now? What kind feels good today?
- Lean into community. Joy is relational.
- Honor ancestral grief and ancestral joy together. Our ancestors likely experienced both in resistance.
- Find containers for expression; art, ritual, community, therapy, sports.... find or create spaces where you can give yourself the permission you need to express and integrate.





## Anger and Joy

Anger is a natural and valid emotional response. So is joy. They are not opposites—they are co-conspirators. Both can ignite transformation, especially in the face of injustice.

### ***Why We Need Both:***

Anger tells us where the wound is. It clarifies boundaries and motivates change. It tells us there is something here we want to protect.

Joy shows us what we're fighting for. It provides vision and sustains us for the long haul.

Supremacy culture often labels anger as irrational or dangerous—especially when expressed by marginalized people. It also treats joy as unserious or naive. In truth, both are sacred.

### ***Reflection Prompts:***

Where in your life do you feel righteous anger? How do you tend to it?

What brings you joy even in the midst of grief or rage?  
What would it look like to integrate joy into how you express or channel your anger?



# Joy as Intergenerational Legacy



Joy is not only personal—it is historical and ancestral. Many of us carry joy that has been passed down through songs, recipes, rituals, and laughter. Others of us may be the first in our lineage to reclaim joy after generational trauma. This section invites reflection on the kinds of joy we inherit, interrupt, and recreate.

## ***Reflection Questions:***

What joyful memories do you carry from your family or chosen family?

What traditions bring you joy? How might you revive or reimagine them?

Are there ways that colonialism or assimilation disrupted generational joy in your community? How can it be reclaimed?

## ***Practice:***

Interview an elder from your life about a joyful tradition from their life.

Create a small ritual that honors joy passed down (e.g., cooking, singing, crafting).



# Joy as Mutual Aid



Mutual aid is often seen as serious, survival-focused work—and it is. But joy has always been a part of it. From community potlucks to dance parties to collective art builds, mutual aid rooted in joy sustains us. It builds trust, invites people in, and transforms care into connection.

## *Ways Joy Appears in Mutual Aid:*

Sharing food with laughter and music  
Birthday celebrations in encampments  
Colourful signage, affirmations, and art in aid stations

## *Reflection Questions:*

When have you received care that felt joyful?  
How can you invite joy into your organizing work?  
Where can you build collective care that feels abundant rather than transactional



# Joy and the Nervous System



For those who've experienced trauma, joy may feel unsafe, unfamiliar, or fleeting. Trauma can impact our capacity to feel and hold joy. Learning how our nervous systems respond to pleasure can help us gently expand our capacity for joy. Reclaiming joy and understanding how to navigate joy with your nervous system, rewires our brains and bodies to unlearn and relearn safety.

## ***Somatic Practices for Reconnecting with Joy:***

**Orienting:** Gently notice what is beautiful or interesting in your space

**Temperature play:** Hold something warm or cool and notice the sensation

**Voice:** Hum or sing to stimulate the vagus nerve (calming)



## ***Reflection Questions:***

What does joy feel like in your body?

Are there sensations, emotions, or situations that block it?

What tiny practices help you feel safe and open to joy?



# Joy and Collective Liberation



We often focus on surviving systems of oppression—but thriving is a form of resistance too. Collective liberation depends on the capacity to imagine beyond pain. Joy expands those possibilities.

## *How Joy Supports Liberation:*

- It fosters relational resilience and trust in communities.

It interrupts trauma cycles, especially when experienced collectively.

- It models the future we're working toward—free, abundant, and grounded in love.
- When we organize, heal, and create with joy, we build stronger, more sustainable movements. We remember that the revolution must be pleasurable to be irresistible.





# Joyful Actions



Mobilizing and healing through joyful action is a practice that goes back to time immemorial. That means, it's so old it pre-dates written records. We know this because we have songs, dances, legends, recipes, rituals, and more that have been carried through our lineage and passed down to us. There are joyful cultural practices found all around the world, each taking their own flavor to serve the unique but also universal needs of those around.

Art in particular has been a tool for creative, joyful and powerful outlets for justice and connection. Whether visual, tangible, or performance based the arts offer us a space to tell stories and connect the dots of our humanity. In that action of connection, we build up our capacity for compassion for each other and reverence for the human experience. We also create tools for education that moves beyond verbal or written language acting as bridges across cultures and across time.





# Joyful Actions

The list of examples for this is endless, but a few specifically political artistic movements and groups I'd like to uplift for you to explore are;

- **Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army:** a movement of civil disobedience that merges the ancient art of clowning with non violent direct action that started in the 2000s
- **Clowns Without Borders:** Bring joyful performances and workshops to children in need of immediate emotional first aide internationally and in the UK with a focus on children dealing with forced migration.
- **Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence:** A now international collective of queer and trans nuns who use joy and absurdity to advocate for queer and trans rights.
- **Bread and Puppet Theatre:** A collective that uses giant puppets and theatre to create community art spaces and engage in political story telling to resist war and capitalism.





# Joyful Actions

All art is political- from story telling to ceramics and murals to drag shows because it is a practice of resistance against systems that demand our lives look a certain way, take a certain pace. The next time you're moving through your community, look around and ask yourself;

- What kinds of art or creative practices do you see showing up in your community? How are they shaping relationships or movements?
- Are there forms of art you've overlooked or dismissed in the past that you now see as powerful tools of resistance or cultural storytelling?
- How can we better support and celebrate everyday artists in our lives — including ourselves?
- How might we decolonize or de-commodify our relationship to art and creativity?
- What would change in your life if you began to see cooking, dancing, or gardening as art — not chores?



# Reflection Questions

These can be used for journaling, small group reflections, or to guide larger conversations.

## For Individuals:

- When was the last time you felt pure joy? What made it possible?
- What kinds of joy feel most accessible to you right now? Which feel out of reach?
- What messages have you received about rest or pleasure? Where did they come from?
- What would it look like to center joy in your activism or caregiving?

## For Groups:

- What brings us joy together?
- How do we make space for grief and joy to coexist in our community?
- Are there ways we unintentionally reproduce urgency culture?
- What are our joy rituals? What new ones can we create?
- How do we celebrate resilience, not just productivity?



# Reflection Questions

*Based on the 8 principles of Unitarian Universalism*

- **The inherent worth and dignity of every person;**
  - How does joy affirm your dignity? Your worth?
  - How do we create environments where everyone feels worthy of joy?
  
- **Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;**
  - Can you recall a time when joy emerged during a struggle for justice?
  - How does your compassion deepen when you allow room for joy?
  - How do we practice justice with joy and not just outrage?
  
- **Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;**
  - What role does joy play in your spiritual journey?
  - How do you encourage others' joy as part of their growth?
  - Are we making space for people to explore what joy looks like on their own terms?
  - What brings spiritual delight or playful discovery into gatherings?



# Reflection Questions

*Based on the 8 principles of Unitarian Universalism*

- **A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;**
  - What truths has joy revealed to you?
  - How do we use joy and curiosity in our truth-seeking?
  - How can pleasure and delight be part of your spiritual discernment?
  - What truths about ourselves are only available when we're at ease?
  
- **The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;**
  - Where does joy appear in your decision-making or community engagement?
  - How can meetings or decision making processes include more celebrations and play?
  - How can joyful values inform how we gather and organize?
  
- **The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;**
  - What would a joyful world community look like?
  - How can joy help build bridges across barriers?



# Reflection Questions

*Based on the 8 principles of Unitarian Universalism*

- **Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.**
  - How do natural joys (sunlight, birdsong, food, animals) help you feel interconnected?
  - How can we co-create joy *with* nature and not just *in* nature?
  - What joy practices help you feel your place in the web?
  
- **Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions**
  - How can joy be a form of accountability?
  - What role does joy play in dismantling supremacy cultures?
  - How do we sustain long term justice work with practices of joy, rest, and celebration?
  - What communal joys strengthen your commitment to justice?
  - How can you create space for joy for others in your life or congregation?



## Creative Prompts

Nature offers us daily lessons in joy, resilience, and presence. Many animals and non-human beings hold wisdom for how to relate to the world and ourselves with more compassion, curiosity, and creativity. Use these prompts inspired by other species and natural phenomena:

- **Be a Magpie:** Magpies are drawn to colorful, shiny things. What beauty are you drawn to? What objects, sounds, colors, or textures spark joy in you?
- **Be a Sunflower:** Sunflowers turn to face the sun. What helps you orient toward joy or warmth? Where can you find your light?
- **Be a River:** Rivers move with flow and persistence. Where in your life can you let go of control and trust the current?
- **Be a Tree:** Trees rest in winter, bloom in spring, and remain rooted through storms. What season of life are you in? What does joy look like here?



- **Be a Bee:** Bees are communal and hardworking, yet follow joy by seeking sweet things. What sweetness are you drawn to? How do you balance work and nectar?
- **Be a Dog:** Dogs show excitement without shame. What would it look like to express your joy more freely?
- **Be Moss:** Moss thrives in stillness, in shadow, on rocks. How can you find joy in quiet, overlooked places?

### *Looking for more creative prompts?*

- **The Joy Collage:** Use paper, photos, text, and found objects to create a visual altar of joy.
- **Rest Rituals:** Create a rest altar, commit to daily naps, or pick a day to engage in rest as a joyful protest against urgency.
- **Somatic Practices:** Dance, hum, stretch, and breathe deeply. Embodiment returns joy to the body.
- **Pleasure Journaling:** Use prompts like:  
“Today, I found joy in...” “Joy helps me grow by...”



# Ideas for Bringing Joy In



Joy is not only a feeling—it's a strategy. Here are ideas for individuals and communities:

## **In Congregations and Spiritual Spaces**

- Host a joy altar where people can add items or memories that bring delight.
- Begin services with a joy check-in alongside prayer or meditation.
- Celebrate seasonal transitions with festivals of light, food, and music.

## **In Activist or Justice Work**

- Include movement breaks or storytelling circles at organizing meetings.
- Bring bubble wands, stickers, or chalk to protests as disarming tools.
- Use collaborative art-making as a form of visioning.

## **In Daily Practice**

- Create a “joy menu” of activities that nourish your spirit.
- Notice and name one thing of beauty each day.
- Turn rest into ritual: light a candle, play soft music, and speak an affirmation as you lay down.



# Micro- Toolkit for Joy During Crisis



When crises hit—personally, locally, or globally—joy can feel impossible or inappropriate. But even in crisis, micro-practices can help us survive. This section offers quick, grounding ways to connect to joy.

## **Crisis-Friendly Practices (5 minutes or less):**

- Name 3 beautiful things you can see right now
- Find a plant or piece of nature to focus on for 2 minutes
- Sip warm tea while placing your hand on your chest
- Listen to a song that moves you and breathe with it

## **Mini-Rituals:**

- Write a gratitude note and tuck it into your wallet
- Text someone a memory that makes you smile
- Light a candle and name one thing that still brings you hope

## **Affirmations to Repeat:**

- "Even now, joy is possible."
- "I am allowed to feel delight and grief at once."
- "Joy is a right, not a reward."



# More Artists, Activists, and Inspiring Content to Explore:



- The Unitarian Universalist Hysterical Society
- adrienne maree brown
- Bayo Akomolafe
- Alix Garcia
- Amrita Dhaliwal
- The Raging Grannies
- Beautiful Trouble
- Tonia Jo Hall
- Beautiful Trouble
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clowns
- Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence
- Clowns Without Borders
- The Nap Ministry
- The Glean Network
- The Faithful Fools
- Deeper Joy Youth Resource with the Unitarian Universalist Association



# Resources:



## *Books*

- Pleasure Activism by adrienne maree brown
- Rest is Resistance by Tricia Hersey
- Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown
- The Uses of the Erotic by Audre Lorde
- All About Love by bell hooks
- Falling Back in Love with Being Human by Kai Cheng Thom
- Hope in the Dark by Rebecca Solnit

## *Podcasts/Other Media*

- The Nap Ministry Podcast
- How to Survive the End of the World
- Finding Our Way (with Prentis Hemphill)
- Other Tool Kits from CUC Dismantling Barriers Lead
- Beautiful Trouble
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clowns
- Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence
- Clowns Without Borders



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