**Joy changes everything**

**dr. Jim Wilder**

Joy levels are like the temperature of an oven. We can choose our ingredients carefully but the oven temperature will determine what our careful preparations will yield. Joy is the modulator of all positive transformations. Joy levels have huge effects on whether our efforts will be productive and lasting.  Are you skeptical? Why would a factor that powerful have gone unnoticed by most of the church?

Joy building is not usually considered a spiritual discipline and joy is rarely considered the modulator of character transformation even though Jesus gave joy as the reason for his teaching in John 15:11 and the central feature of his prayer for disciples in John 17:13. Yet, from a brain perspective, joy stimulates the growth of the brain systems involved in character formation, identity consolidation and moral behavior. If we are intent on changing the human brain then character change is best developed and maintained in joyful relationships.

We might not even mean the same thing by “joy.” Many definitions of joy are static descriptions of a “state” similar to what we might say for a flavor like “salty.” From the human brain perspective, joy is more of a dynamic relational experience. Joy is a “glad to be together” state amplified between two minds that are glad to be together at that moment. Joy is relational. High joy is found in smiles, play and love. Low joy is found in depression, aggression and shame.  Joy, like any powerful internal drive, can be combined with other experiences to provide many flavors but the signature of joy is that we are sharing the moment with someone who is glad we are there. Joy makes eyes sparkle and bonds form.

Joy is equally powerful when we are in painful states. We feel very keenly if there is anyone who is glad to be with us when we are hurting. When we settle into the arms of a friend who rushed to the emergency room while we waited to see if a loved one would survive, we weep with relief rather than bounce with euphoria but it is joy all the same. Someone is with us and we are not alone. Joy then, lets us rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep for we are deeply united. Perhaps it is the lack of appreciation for the relational character of joy or our tendency to view spiritual formation as a solitary experience that has kept us from including joy-building as a spiritual discipline.

**TWO REASONS FOR LOW JOY**

It is rare to see Christians building joy intentionally. While low joy can be due to a lack of building joy, more often it is the result of an inability to retain joy.  The joy that we build in the natural course of life is very prone to dissipate much as heat leaves an uninsulated house with open windows and doors. It is easy to fall in love but much harder to retain that joy and avoid divorce. It is simple to attract people to church and much harder to keep them there. What concerns us here is that the relational skills needed to prevent the loss of joy are much harder to learn than the relatively simple practices needed to build joy.

Since joy is relational, the longer a disruption in our relationships lasts the lower our joy becomes. Spending more than a few seconds in very cold water can be deadly but it does not matter how cold the water is if you do not stay in very long. The secret to staying warm is to reduce the heat loss and exposure. Swimming skill helps us get out quickly although at first swimming skill seems unrelated to heat loss. To retain joy we need the skills to return to joy quickly.

The skills that prevent joy loss return us to joy rapidly from anything that distresses relationships. We must practice keeping our minds in a relational mode where the relationship is always more important than the problem. We must be trained to keep love in first place while we are in pain, upset and facing problems – particularly problems caused by the people in our lives. A baby will simply scream with no thought for the relationship with others every time there is a problem.  We must learn to return to joy quickly. Blessedly, the same relational brain circuits that generate joy can help us learn to return to joy if we have models. Without models who can maintain joyful relationships in the face of problems, we find that joy dissipates and becomes useless for character formation.

**WHY HAVE WE NOT THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT JOY?**

On the theological side, American Christianity has grown up under the influence of Voluntarist philosophy that focused our attention on reason, will and choice in all discussions of salvation and transformation. The Puritans, heavily influenced by William Ames, were voluntarists and their attention to the will and choice can still be seen in American theology. Little wonder Billy Graham named his magazine *Decision.*

From a brain perspective, reason, will and choice are neurologically weak factors. The will is a fickle cortical function that starts to disappear as soon as we are a little sleepy. The will is well down the brain’s control hierarchy for making changes in character or identity and wired to have only a weak influence. Intentions are some of the first things to fade under strain for a low-joy brain. Under the chemical effect of two beers many people forget their intention to stop drinking after three beers. Intense emotions, fatigue, novelty and many other factors also derail the best intentions of the low-joy brain. When people do not do what they intended they display what we generally consider a lack of good character. The voluntarist solution is to renew the vision and intentions to do better next time.

Voluntarists took their lead from medieval notions of human nature and assumed that humans have only one will. Both scripture and the brain suggest we have more than one will at work in us. For example, in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) we are told to love the Lord with both heart and soul. There would be no logic to the command if the heart and soul did not have separate wills to some extent.  It is also clear that there are multiple wills in the brain. What one part of the brain wills is not necessarily shared by other regions that may have contrary urges, motives and choices. But even if our wills should agree, character change is extremely difficult to achieve from the “will” end of the brain. The brain is wired to change character directly from the “love and attachment” end of the brain. Love and attachment are hard wired to grow from joy. This joy-based change always moves us in the direction of being more like the one we love.

**JOY LINKS BRAIN SCIENCE TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

A small community of counselors, pastors, prayer ministers, teachers that included Jane Willard and the staff of Shepherd’s House began developing a model of transformation. The ensuing model, called the Life Model, focused on the need for multigenerational community, the interactive presence of God and a cluster of essential, brain-based relational skills. The Life Model was developed by examining why highly motivated people who were offered the same spiritual and psychological help did not all achieve or sustain positive changes of character. We found that those who lacked relationships with people who were glad to be with them did poorly while others prospered to the extent that they were bathed in joy. While we can only introduce this thought here, let me discuss how joy is the best measure of the capacity to sustain positive change using a model by Dr. Dallas Willard that is likely familiar to the reader.

For Dr. Willard, spiritual formation required *vision, intention*and *means* (VIM). A frequent discussion between Dallas and Jane Willard about this topic focused on the difficulty emotionally wounded people experienced making the *means* of spiritual formation work for them. Dallas was always tender toward weakness saying that spiritual disciplines were things we could do now about things we could not do now.

Spiritual formation and brain science overlap most in the category of *means*. Whatever *means* we choose must effectively change the way the brain operates to such a degree that what the brain considers its normal first response changes substantially. To avoid habitual worry, fear and stress the brain must change deeply wired patterns. Spiritual formation sustains deeper peace and joy to the degree it changes brain patterns. Since the One who formed the human brain also formed the human spirit, what is best for the spirit should also be best for the brain but we have not usually looked at spiritual formation as teaching our brain a better way to function.

Dallas possessed a great *vision* and his *vision* made him an award winning Christian author. Dallas also had a strong *intention* and his will to follow God was intense. It is my observation that for people of great vision and a strong will, even the most humble of *means* will accomplish transformation but, what of the many people with blurry *vision* and wobbly *intention*? Could it be that for them the *means* needs to be as elaborate as the *vision* that Dallas saw? Must the strength of relational joy sustain the weak with the same force as the *intention* Dallas maintained toward the disciplines? What we can be sure of is that whatever reduces our joyful relationship capacity will increase the need for the *means* of transformation to be joyful and tender with the weaknesses of the brain.

The more often our brain crashes when we try to think, forgets what we know and manifests conflicted wills, the harder it will be to change by intention. Let us consider the theological and neurological reasons why we have difficulty finding a solution that will change character for low-joy, unstable individuals.

**THE LIFE MODEL MAKES SPIRITUAL FORMATION “BRAIN FRIENDLY”**

In the Life Model, emotional maturity is a subset of spiritual wholeness rather than a separate phenomenon. Our joy-based relational model for spiritual formation and emotional character development is built around exercises that propagate and strengthen the relational brain skills.  Joy activates the brain’s social engagement system and prepares us to engage with God and others. Because the brain’s development is relational, relational activities are best suited for spiritual formation that transforms the mind.

We know that improper relational experiences create barriers to spiritual formation, now we can add that joyful relationships have implications for spiritual character formation as well as the development of fundamental relational abilities.  The mature physical brain is created through a functional sculpting of shape, ability and chemistry. Intimate interaction in our primary relationships transfers the brain’s “mother core” from one generation to the next through joyful, face-to-face interactions.  This “mother core” is a cluster of relational skills that we take for granted when we have them and often condemn as lack of character in those who lack one or more. This sculpting is the basis for character development and the motivation to change malformed character when necessary.

The following edited excerpt from *Joy Starts Here****[[1]](file:///C%3A/Users/user/AppData/Local/Temp/Joy%20links%20brain%20science%20and%20spiritual%20formation-2.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1)*** will help us understand why these joyful relational skills are suddenly becoming much harder to find and why, to be effective as a *means* for transformation we must consider intentionally introducing joy and the relational skills needed to maintain joy for transformations that will last in a low-joy world.

Manyskillshaveheadedtowardextinction.Spearhunting,cleaninggame,spinning,sharpeningsaws,milking,penmanship, canning,handsewing,topspinning,baking,woodworkingandevenkiteﬂyingwereallskillsthatalmostevery childlearnedoratleastwatchedandunderstood.Asusefulasthesesimpleskills wereatsomepointinhistory,mostwillnotbemissed.However,thereisasetof speciﬁcbrainskillsneededforhumanidentitythatdependuponhumaninteractionpatterns forsuccessfulpropagation.

*FACE-TO-FACEINTERACTIONS AREBECOMINGRARE*

It takes no imagination at all to see the diﬀerence between our world and the world one hundred years ago where families ate together and spent much of their time in the same room. It was a world where relatives lived nearby. People spent most of the waking day interacting with people face-to-face. Although there were plenty of low-joy places in the world, the sheer number of face-to-face interactions gave the joy skills a decent chance to spread.

Every child entering the world starts with a near total absence of relational ability. Where even sixty years ago children spent virtually all of their time interacting with others, playing and comparing abilities, they now spend the majority of their time focused on machines that have no relational skills or awareness of the child’s presence. Babies are watching television; they have movies in pre-school, day care, church, at home and with baby-sitters. The average person in the United States now spends five hours a day watching television and another five hours engaged with other digital screens.

Brain requirements for successful transmission of joyskillsarequitestrict.Television,computers,movies,booksorvideo gamescannotspreadrelationalskills. Joyskillsdonot propagate through media, internet, webcams or even telecommunications. Wecannotraisebabiesintohumanbeingsbyinternetortelevisionanymore than we can make babies that way.

Relational skills are rarely taught in most churches, because most Christians are rarely together in a way that promotes relationships and transformation.Most people in church are staying in their comfort zone. Most people who consider themselves Christian do not even see church as a resource for relational skills.

*OUR PREFRONTAL CORTEX IS THE PIVOTAL POINT FOR JOY AND RELATIONAL SKILLS*

Located above our eyes, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex has the very important job of ﬁguring out the least harmful solution to every situation.**[[2]](file:///C%3A/Users/user/AppData/Local/Temp/Joy%20links%20brain%20science%20and%20spiritual%20formation-2.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2)** This damage-control system in our brain needs to be trained with the full range of joy skills. Part of damage control is our ability to return to joy. Returning to joy is how we go about saving our relationships when others are not glad to be with us. When a classmate says, “Your hair looks stupid,” we feel our joy leave the room. Now, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex will have to look at what we have learned from our role models at home, school or church and then decide what to do. We could answer rudely, we could withdraw and we could tell the teacher or our mother. Our brain’s identity center here in the prefrontal cortex considers the examples we have seen and tries to ﬁgure out the least painful solution. This control system is non-verbal so it does not consider what our parents told us or what they said in church; it considers examples it has known and observed. Our brain might never have learned that the best solutions bring us back to joy. So we might shoot back, “You are too stupid to know,” and our friends might laugh.

But, did we act like our true selves and reach shalom by shouting back? Did we open the door to return to joy with the classmate who insulted us? Did we restore joy? If we did not learn to think about our identity in those terms, our ventromedial prefrontal cortex damage-control computer did not consider those options. However, this clever system can be taught to look for options it does not yet have. Even when we do not havetheentiresetof return to joyskills, wecanpositionourselvestoﬁnd new solutions with an identity that says, “I respond tenderly toward weakness.”Whenwearepeoplewhoaretendertowardweakness,thenevery encounter with weakness makes us want to learn better responses, provided our prefrontal relational circuits are running.

Even without proper return to joy skills we can think to ourselves, “There must be a kind and tender way to respond.” If God is always here with us, an Immanuel experience will help us acquire a new response. We can acquire these skills from God because Jesus will redemptively bypass the gaps left by our families, schools and churches to teach us the way back to joy so that we can then practice this skill with others.

Suppose that we totally forget to check with God or our relational circuits go oﬀ as soon as our classmate says our hair looks stupid? Perhaps when we get home, we can ask our family how they would have answered or sit down with God for a quiet time of review to learn a better way. We can learn skills before, during or after an event when our identity wants to be joyful and we do not yet know how.

*WHAT CAN WE EXPECT AS RELATIONAL SKILLS DISAPPEAR?*

As relational joy skills decrease we can expect a long series of shifts in how people relate. Theseshifts will remain fairly invisible to the generation where the shift happens. For them, “this is just how people are.”Without relational skills, power will become more attractive and the phrase “that was powerful” will justify almost anything. Increased interest in power will result in lower joylevelswhilepeoplewillﬁghtfortheirrights.Revengecrimeswillincrease because without relational skills, people become problems rather than the peoplewelove.Lowerjoy skills will always mean increased violence and predatory behavior.

Emotional intensity will increase in whatever people do together, from how they dress to how they speak. People will “display” their emotional intensity and aggression without shame. Self-control will decrease along with commonsense.Ofcourse,joylevelswilldropastheabilitytoquietoneself islost.Thewealthywillbegintoﬁnd“quiet”retreatstodemonstratetheir wealthasquietbecomesincreasinglyrare. Atthesametime,powerfulpeople will rise above the “common laws” and become increasingly exclusive. Autistic-like behavior and reactions will increase and maturity levels will drop. Attachments to food and other addictions will increase along with weight andhealthissues.Familymealswilldisappear.Medicationsand other non-relational solutions will increasingly be needed to control emotionsandfocusattention.Peoplewillhavelittletonoideawhatsatisﬁesthem or how to sustain joy, so joy levels will drop.

Here is what we may expect with lower joy-skill levels:

* *Functionality replaces relationship.*
* *Managing problems replaces restoring joy*
* *Schools manage problems rather than raise human children*
* *Self-justiﬁed behavior is the norm*
* *Pseudo-identity becomes the ideal*
* *Narcissism increases*
* *Unresolved conﬂicts increase*
* *Addictions increase*
* *Churches lack relational skills*

Churches implode in one of three ways when return to joy skills are missing. First, the inability to return to joy means leaders lack the skills to manage what they feel and still stay relational while they recover from upset. Emotions quickly become ampliﬁed and problems spiral out of control. Second, without relational skills people set up rules instead of exploring useful, relational, joyful solutions to solve problems. During times of crisis and transition, those who make and follow the rules best will win but at the expense of having large numbers of people leave the church. Third, fear propagates under the guise of spiritual guidance, service and ministry. An inability to return to joy shows up as a lack of consistency and may even appear as a lack of integrity. In the end, the church will neutralize itself trying to keep everyone happy and comfortable. This church will stay in their comfort zone until they die.

Theresultofallthreescenariosisalackoftransformationinpeople’slives. Withoutrelationalskillsthe weakandstrongdonotsharelife,andthefaithful are left wondering if there should be something more to their faith. Ultimately, young people lose faith in the church as a real resource. When people are unable orreluctant toact protectively while feelinganger,sadness,fear, shame,disgustordespair they get stuck on problems and forget relationships.  Herearethestormcloudsthatbringlow-joy. Whenwesee low-joy as the weakness it really is, we can become joy starters and look for others who will join us.

**JOY AND TRANSFORMATION**

In his last few months Dallas and I talked about how the brain is more deeply changed by who it loves (who brings me joy) than by what it thinks. Perhaps this is the real reason we have not seen the connection between spiritual formation and brain science. Is transformation more about right thinking or right loving? Is one saved (transformed) by right choice or right attachment? Too often we forget that the deepest brain change comes from our loves and not our thoughts. I am not suggesting that we abandon right *vision* or *intention*, but rather than we consider adding joy to the *vision, intention* and *means*.

Spiritual formation practices will be very different depending on whether the mind grows into the image of Christ primarily because of *what one believes* or because of *whom one loves*.  The first approach exercises the will and corrects thoughts.  The second approach focuses on removing barriers to love.  If transformation is about forming a new attachment with God built on love, joy and shalom then who becomes our joy will determine who forms our character – perhaps even whether we will change character at all.

Joy is the modulator of lasting, positive transformation. Another way to say this would be that the lower the joy level, the more specific the *means* must be. In low-joy environments the strength of the method would outweigh the strength of the vision. Think about the Wesleyan revival in low-joy England. The transformation was set around a clear method, hence the mocking name “Methodists,” that brought people into genuine joyful relationships. Where joy is low, the means of transformation must produce a rapid increase in joy as we become more eager to be together with God and others. In fact, our eagerness must extend beyond those who are being transformed with us to include those in need of transformation. Joy spreads. In his book *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis seems to believe that joy is the way the gospel should be spread.

Perhaps you might reflect on the place relational joy has played in your enduring transformations. Consider what a higher level of relational joy would do for the *means* we use to help others transform. You can continue this conversation by checking your joy levels and those of your church, school or group with the JoyQ test we are developing. The JoyQ looks at ten factors that build, impersonate or poison joy. Check your joy level often at joyq.joystartshere.com. I think we will agree with our Lord that our joy should be the fullest possible joy.

Dr. Jim Wilder is an international speaker, author and developer of the Life Model at Shepherd’s House. His interest is neurotheology and self-propagating transformation as the normal function of the church.

**[[1]](file:///C%3A/Users/user/AppData/Local/Temp/Joy%20links%20brain%20science%20and%20spiritual%20formation-2.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1%22%20%5Co%20%22)** From the chapter “Saving Joy Skills from Extinction” in *Joy Starts Here: the transformation zone*, by E. James Wilder, Edward M. Khouri, Chris M. Coursey and Shelia Sutton, 2013, East Peoria: Shepherd’s House Inc. Copyright 2013 by Wilder, Khouri, Coursey and Sutton, P.O. Box 2376, East Peoria IL, 61611. Edited and reprinted by permission.

**[[2]](file:///C%3A/Users/user/AppData/Local/Temp/Joy%20links%20brain%20science%20and%20spiritual%20formation-2.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2%22%20%5Co%20%22)** For more detail see *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* by Allan N. Schore, 2003. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. Copyright 2003 Allan N. Schore.