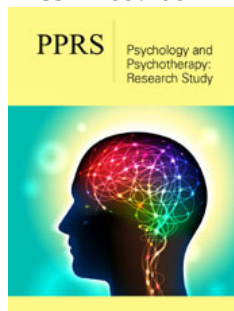


Sometimes Life is Sweet: The Vicissitudes of Human Moods

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ISSN: 2639-0612



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Submission: 📅 January 08, 2025

Published: 📅 January 20, 2025

Volume 8 - Issue 4

How to cite this article: Karl E Scheibe*. Sometimes Life is Sweet: The Vicissitudes of Human Moods. *Psychol Psychother Res Stud*. 8(4). PPRS. 000695. 2025. DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2025.08.000695](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2025.08.000695)

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Abstract

How might we understand the vicissitudes of human moods? (Figure 1) This inquiry is derived from the common observation that life is hard. Our lives are suffused with sadness and sorrow. The media provide a daily diet of conflict, danger, and decay. Professional psychologists seem focused mostly on mood disorders. However, the positive side of the mood cycle-joys as opposed to sorrows-is part of the common experience that occurs between birth and death. What do people say when they are asked to report on conspicuous sorrows and joys in their lives? How might we draw lessons from the results of such an inquiry? An analysis of what people say when asked about joys and sorrows supports the conclusion that it is normal for us to experience the entire range of human moods. However, joys and sorrows are not balanced: the extremes of joy are less intense and less prolonged than the extremes of sorrow. However, the main lesson of this analysis is that joy arises from grief and that grief emerges from joy. This cycle is the rule. Musical genres such as the Blues and music played during requiem masses exemplify the transformations of agony into ecstasy. Additionally, ecstasy is not a lasting condition. The music and poetry of life demonstrate the range and significance of the vicissitudes of human moods [1-13]. The drama of life is not static.



Figure 1

Keywords: Human moods; Mood cycles; Narrative; Opponent process; Wellbeing

Introduction

One of my sons gave me a book entitled *Life is Hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way* by Kieran Setiya [12] who is currently a Professor of Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as a Christmas present. I immediately began to read this book for two reasons: First, it was given to me by my son, and he would surely ask me what I thought about it at some point. Second, I have been attempting to develop an understanding of optimism and pessimism since my days as a graduate student. It seemed to me that this book promised to focus on the pessimistic end of the spectrum and, as such, would warrant my careful attention. In this case, I was not mistaken. This book highlights a normative position on human life: that life is dreary and full of hardship and difficulty. In the end, the author provides hope for some relief from what is posited as grievous and unremitting pain. The book starts with the

“Infirmity” chapter, followed by the “Loneliness,” “Grief,” “Failure,” “Injustice,” and “Absurdity” chapters, and ending with the chapter on “Hope,” in which the author offers us a soupçon of hope.

While this book provides broad generalizations about the pains and difficulties of the human condition, it is also quite personal and humane. It is evident that the author has experienced a fair amount of suffering in his life-illnesses in his youth and his mother’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease; it is a substantial catalog of woes. However, Setiya states that “Unhappiness is part of living well, of facing the truth and responding as we should. If we did not grieve, we would not love.” Setiya [12] One’s point of view might differ from that offered in this volume, but it is stated honestly and should be taken seriously. The following is a typical observation from Setiya’s point of view: “Just look at America’s past and present: the dispossession and killing of indigenous peoples, chattel slavery, the failures of Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, redlining, mass imprisonment, police brutality, voter suppression.”

No one can deny the legitimacy of this perspective. However, it is also plausible that the United States is a progressive and positive force in the grand sweep of history. We can, without embarrassment, claim to be the “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.” I am reminded of this wise statement from William James: “Each world is real whilst it is attended to; only the reality lapses with the attention [5].” None of us sees the world in an objective and disinterested fashion. We tend to praise or blame, but this selective activation of our own particular purpose does not negate the truth that divergent views of the same scene are possible. My opinion of *Life is Hard* is that it is a competent, enlightening, and humane work that does not present a universal or permanent truth. Life is hard, to be sure. However, life is also sweet. When I finished Setiya’s book, I found the phrase “life is sweet” welling up within me, begging to be proclaimed.

It is possible that the force of the argument that life is hard has been augmented by conditions within the United States in recent years, particularly since we have had to cope with the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID) pandemic. David Brooks has argued that American culture has become more sad and less optimistic with respect to the last generation¹. Most indices of social pathology—suicide rates, school absentee rates, drug overdoses and the like—have increased. Brooks also argues that we, as a people, have somehow become more mean and less charitable than we were a decade or so ago. Therefore, the salience and availability of the phrase “life is sweet” is arguably diminished by our current circumstances. In my vocabulary, “life is sweet” is reflected by an event I experienced approximately 50 years ago. Ten years after my appointment to the faculty at Wesleyan, I was newly appointed as chair of the Psychology Department upon my return from a sabbatical year in Brazil. Within a year after I returned to campus, the former chair of the department became ill and was diagnosed with liver cancer. He was a person with immense intellect and

knowledge who was 58 years old and dying as a result of chronic alcohol abuse.

I admired him and cared for him. He was largely responsible for my appointment to the Wesleyan faculty. I vividly remember my visits with him in the hospital for a period that was not prolonged. I tried to be supportive, to commiserate, to do or say anything that might alleviate his agony. I remember sitting by his bedside at Middlesex Hospital and talking, with some enthusiasm, about a book I had been reading, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown [3]. It is a rendering of the persistent genocidal campaign of White America to eliminate Native Americans. I remember passing on the words of Dee Brown, who, despite his experience of massive suffering, could say, “life is sweet.” I passed on the words of this noble man to my dying colleague, thinking perhaps that they might console him. I was met by this reply: “Life is sweet? My life has been anything but sweet.” My colleague went on to mention some details of his upbringing as a young boy in Oregon, where he experienced various forms of abuse. Even while enjoying the advantages of having a Ph.D. from Harvard and completing challenging assignments in a position with the Office of Strategic Services immediately after World War II, he considered his brilliant professional beginnings to be fraught with disappointment and, using his term, failure. All of this was news to me, for I knew little of his personal suffering. However, I certainly felt foolish proffering him the empty phrase “life is sweet.” What in the world was I thinking?

I was thinking, of course, of a version of what many empty-headed people were thinking in an age dominated by books such as Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking*. I regretted my thoughtless show of cheer to my dying colleague. However, the phrase, “life is sweet” was now lodged in my mind. While I did not reject it as a proclamation, I did learn at least to be more cautious and sensitive in how I used the phrase. To return to my point of telling this story, my first reaction after finishing the book *Life is Hard* was this: Yes life is hard, but it is also sweet.

Obtaining fresh information

I found myself wondering about sorrows and joys. Clearly, Setiya [12] presents a well-formulated case for concluding that sorrows are prominent in our lives. However, joys are also present in our lives. Can it be that the opinion that one has about the relative importance of sorrows and joys in our lives is largely a matter of differing personal opinion—depending perhaps upon the varying extent to which the pathways of our early lives have been strewn with thorns as opposed to flowers? Isn’t it the case that our lives are replete both with sorrows and joys and that the relative importance of sad and joyful moods is adventitious over the course of time? Why should a philosopher or psychologist take the position that either of these moods is primary or dominant?

At the level of abstract theory, it makes sense that this matter might be clarified by resorting to the classical Hegelian progression

¹See Brooks (2023).

from Thesis to Antithesis to Synthesis. Let us say that pain is primary in both development and importance. Babies cry, and a good deal has been said of "birth trauma." However, pleasure soon makes its appearance in infants, even if crying is the first evidence of mood. With patience, cycles of smiles and tears even out. By the time we reach adulthood, it seems that the sauce of human experience is distinctly sweet and sour-and if anything, we seek and find more sweetness as we mature².

All of this is, of course, mere speculation. In addition, at this point, I hear a whistle that says enough speculation. Why do we not ask questions? What questions should be asked, and of whom? It occurred to me that I might simply ask people some questions about the vicissitudes of human moods-ordinary people who might be found on the highways and byways of my life-or in my email list. Additionally, what questions should be asked? Here, it occurred to me to simply ask people to give me examples of joys and sorrows in their lives. I could then examine the results of this inquiry to see whether these people revealed anything that was not already obvious.

Obtaining fresh data on emotional extremes

It is known that humans experience variations in mood over the course of ordinary life. A good deal of clinical attention is devoted to mood and to mood variations and extremes. If we were to ask people to provide examples of their sorrows and joys, would their experiences be mostly episodic or chronic? Would one of these extremes appear to be more dominant? What would a list of examples of sorrows and joys reveal in terms of their social, familial, or individual settings? What might we learn about the readiness or hesitancy in offering examples of these two emotional extremes? What about the links between sorrows and joys? In the drama of our common lives, it is quite clear that one cannot experience the joy of Easter without the agony of Good Friday. Are links of this kind common?

Instrument and method

To produce material that might be examined for some answers to these and other queries, I designed a simple questionnaire, a copy of which is provided below. The method of sample selection was informal, comprised of people who were near at hand. The original questionnaire follows.

A Sorrow and a joy an exercise

Human moods are notable for their range. Over the course of our daily lives, we experience moments or periods of sadness, loss, and sorrow as well as moments and periods of elation, satisfaction and joy. Most of our time is spent not at these extremes but in the range between them. You are invited to participate in an exercise wherein

you write an approximately 50-word note with one example of sorrow and another of joy. You may describe your example of joy before your example of sorrow or your example of sorrow before your example of joy. These are separate notes that do not need to be connected in any way except through you. Your selection of these illustrative events is a matter of your own discretion. Select them in a way that seems right to you. They will not necessarily be the most extreme or pronounced examples, but they should seem right to you and for you. You should not include your name with the reports. However, I may record a number to allow me to match people with reports. In addition, I would like you to complete the several items included at the end of this form. Your name will not be included in any description or report of this exercise. Your report might be submitted to me via email or handed to me as printed or legibly written text.

Thank you,

Karl E. Scheibe

Professor of Psychology Emeritus

A sorrow

A joy

Age__

Sex Male__ Female__ Other__

Number of siblings__

Highest Level of Education Completed None__ Primary__
Secondary__ College or University__

Post-Graduate__

Please rate yourself as optimistic or pessimistic (circle a number)

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	

Pessimistic Optimistic

Date Submitted: _____

Testimony, part 1

I formed my sample simply by contacting likely prospects from my email contact list-starting with my wife and me, followed by my sons, then colleagues, former and present students, and friends in the community. The result of this happenstance selection of a convenience sample was unusual and not representative of any larger universe of people. The final sample consisted of 34 people, including 21 males and 13 females³. The average age was 69 years-

²The "paradox of well-being" is the observation that self-rated well-being increases notably in later years of life. (See "Paradoxes of well-being: A dramatic analysis", Scheibe (2017)).

³I was amused and a bit surprised that my sample contained so many more men than women. I think this reflects the ecological fact that I have closer male than female friends, perhaps because I have always been a bit wary, if admiring, of women. I think I am more relaxed with men. However, this is the first time I have had this thought. It is good to conduct research.

clearly, my frequent contacts are older people. They are highly educated, with all but four having obtained a postgraduate degree of some kind. An initial observation was that all participants within this sample readily produced the requested examples of sorrow and joy-most exceeded the suggested response length of 50 words and provided multiple examples where only one was requested.

The average number of words per report was approximately 92. The average number of words for sorrow was 97.5, and that for

joy was 86.7. However, the direction of the difference supports the suggestion that people might have more to say about their pains than their pleasure. The more likely scenario is that people have plenty to say about both. Few people stayed within the suggested limit of 50 words for either example.

The content of the reports, the major themes of the responses were identified, and a rough tabulation of the reported topics was formed. The list of paired responses is as follows (Table 1):

Table 1: Paired responses of joys and sorrows.

Serial No	Sorrow	Joy
1	Death of my brother	Engagement to be married
2	Serious fall	Marriage to husband
3	Memorial service for a colleague	Son sets a school record at a swim meet
4	My mother's fall and injury	Moving to Switzerland
5	Death of my dog and of family members	Celebration of a published book
6	My father's death	Acquisition of a dog after father's death
7	Seven years of failure to become pregnant	Birth of a child to be adopted
8	Death of my parents	Finding her soulmate
9	Death of my father	Feeling the presence of God
10	Death of my friends	Cooking and eating
11	Mental breakdown of my younger sister	Learning of pregnancy with my first child
12	Estrangement from my father	Finding a partner of a husband
13	Death of my younger brother	Handicapped daughter's college graduation
14	Discouraged by the challenge of college	Parents witnessing their child's graduation
15	Separation from my wife and family	Meeting the adopted son of my son
16	16-year-old niece committing suicide	Wedding ceremony
17	Absence of grandparents for children	Witnessing my two sons' growth
18	Death of best friend from cancer	First words spoken by injured son
19	Breakup with my high school boyfriend	Laughing with a group of high school friends
20	Death of my aunt who lived with my family	Camping in the wild with two older brothers
21	Hearing of my wife's cerebral stroke	Birth of my first son
22	Death of my mother from pancreatic cancer	First visit from my three-day-old grandson
23	Four-year-old son received heart transplant	When my son took first steps after illness
24	My son became angry and violent with me	Playing with a music ensemble
25	College girlfriend suddenly cut him off	Birth of my first-born son
26	The loss of my beloved dog	The love of a child
27	Anticipation of aging	Being outside in nature, blue sky
28	Anticipatory sorrow for aging parents	Playing with my grandchildren
29	Acute pain and hospitalization of my sister	Building a company, buying a home
30	Bad choices during the breakup of marriage	Meeting my stepdaughter
31	Disrespect from son in the back seat	Invited by my son's school as model mom
32	Anticipating the end of a relationship	Listening to joyful music alone
33	Falling out of love, ending a relationship	Falling in love, making myself vulnerable
34	The death of an old friend	Connecting with my daughter, being a mom

Testimony, part II

Caveats and limitations: The sample of 34 participants in this inquiry is unique. All participants were known to me, many of

whom are friends or family members. The conditions of the survey were only semi-confidential because all of the participants knew that I would be seeing their reports, and I promised that I would

not reveal them by name to a larger audience. The participants were uniformly highly educated and rather advanced in age—only two people were younger than 46 years old, and only five of the participants were younger than 60. Most were retired but still actively involved in the lives of their families and organizations. Additionally, the administration of the modest questionnaire was limited to direct written responses with email as the primary vehicle of response. No interviews were conducted. The most casual follow-up to the initial invitation was employed. Just about everyone whom I asked to participate agreed to do so, and only a few participants required prompts and reminders. Many of the respondents expressed satisfaction with having participated in the study and described the task as instructive and useful. Given these limitations, caution should obviously be taken in generalizing the results. Even so, there is something to be learned from this modest exercise.

Identifying emotional extremes: Many of the participants reported that the task of identifying examples of sorrow and joy was enjoyable and satisfying. To be sure, this exercise of self-presentation is subject to all of the biases that social psychologists have reported—good impressions, impression management, and a positive response set. This exercise is designed to reveal the core qualities—positive and negative—that people are comfortable presenting. The final truth value of the reports is open to question, but surely the results can be considered to represent the sort of identity that people wish to project. Below, I list some generalizations that emerged.

Separation and joining: Death—usually of a family member but sometimes of a dog or a friend—was a major theme in over 1/3 of the sorrow reports⁴. If we consider separation from a romantic partner or family member as a death-like ending, then well over half of the sample would be included. If we then include cases of anticipatory loss, such as the onset of a serious illness or aging, then all but a few participants would be included. Examples that are not related to separation include “discouragement at the difficulty of college” and “disrespect from my son in the back seat.” In both of these cases, the paired statement of joy described a positive resolution of the problem. The list of joys features many cases of finding a spouse or partner and of births and marriages. Joining is the dominant theme for joy, which is the opposite of the sorrow of separation. Some joys were simply celebrations of victories, such as a party for a published book or a son winning a race. Almost all of the joys were, in some sense, social, such as “playing with my grandchildren” or “playing in a music ensemble.” Some joys were what might be described as “oceanic,” such as “being outside in nature,” “seeing the blue sky,” and “feeling the presence of God.” An atypical joy is not social and does not involve joining. The only clear example in our list is “cooking and eating,” but even here, I expect that eating is socially enhanced.

Both sorrows and joys are predominantly but not exclusively social, and most are episodic experiences. However, the episodes of sorrow are dominated by events such as death or permanent separation, whereas those of joy tend to be time-limited. In reading through the reports, I made a simple 5-point rating of evident impact or power for each case—a sorrow rating and a joy rating for each person. On the high-impact side, the death of a parent or a sibling was often cited as transformative—as a blow for which recovery is slow and incomplete. A low-impact sorrow was considered a sassy remark from a son in the back seat. A high-impact joy was “finding the love of my life—a paragon of kindness and competence.” A low-impact joy was “My son sets a school record in a swim race.” On average, the episodes of sorrow are more impactful than the corresponding episodes of joy.

What is absent

Neither sorrows nor joys were self-centred. That is, almost all of the responses were social-involving events and interactions with others, most commonly family members. That is, examples of suffering centered on one’s own internal condition were absent in this exercise. No participant mentioned being diagnosed with a disease or suffering from depression. On the side of joy, there was one case of enjoying great success in economic terms and one of receiving public acclaim. Money and sex are two notoriously powerful foci of pleasure and pain in our world, and yet, both of these domains are virtually absent from these examples of sorrows and joys. One must be cautious in view of these limitations. Even so, I advance some tentative conclusions.

Connections and symmetries

Of the 34 cases, seven display a clear connection between sorrow and joy—the Good Friday–Easter phenomenon. Examples include experiencing years of infertility and then adopting a child or breaking up with a romantic partner and then falling in love. However, in most cases, the cited sorrows and joys were from different domains of life. For example, a serious injury might be paired with finding a soulmate.

Examples of sorrow and joy from the arts

In addition to direct experience, our lives are suffused with powerful manifestations of the extremes of mood in music, literature, drama and poetry. One might observe that the major themes of our developed arts are representations of human sorrow and joy. The next part of this essay is an attempt to draw some examples from this domain as a way of illustrating the significance of our quotidian experience with the large domain of artistic culture. As a psychologist, I have devoted myself to enlarging and exploiting the connections between psychology and drama over the last few decades of my career⁵. This discussion is intended to illustrate the dramatic significance of joys and sorrows in our culture. Music is

⁴Dogs were mentioned in a half-dozen reports. Cats were mentioned in no reports. I think of Kipling’s “Just So” story “The cat who walks alone” or an aphorism of more recent coinage, “Stop telling me what to do. You are not my cat.”

⁵See, for example, *Mirrors, Masks, Lies and Secrets* (Scheibe, 1979), *Self Studies* (Scheibe, 1990), *The Drama of Everyday Life* (Scheibe, 2000), *The Storied Nature of Human Life* (Scheibe and Barrett, 2017), and *Deep Drama* (Scheibe, 2017).

one of three domains of human activity that is relatively universal and immediate in its communication of meaning and mood (the other two domains are mathematics and mythology). Music can be used to convey moods from the depths of sorrow to the extremes of joy. This is a large topic that cannot be fully developed in this paper. However, I can present some illustrative examples. I think of

“The Blues” as centered on human sorrow and misery. However, in performance, singing and listening to the Blues can lead to utter joy, filled with poignancy. Here are the lyrics of “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow”, as performed by the Soggy Bottom Boys in the film “O Brother, Where Art Thou (Figure 2).”



Figure 2

Man of Constant Sorrow
 I am a man of constant sorrow
 I've seen trouble all my days
 I bid farewell to old Kentucky
 The place where I was born and raised
 (The place where he was born and raised)
 For six long years I've been in trouble
 No pleasure here on earth I find
 For in this world, I'm bound to ramble
 I have no friends to help me now
 (He has no friends to help him now)
 It's fare thee well my own true lover
 I never expect to see you again
 For I'm bound to ride that northern railroad
 Perhaps I'll die upon this train
 (Perhaps he'll die upon this train)
 You can bury me in some deep valley
 For many years where I may lay
 Then you may learn to love another
 While I am sleeping in my grave
 (While he is sleeping in his grave)

Maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger
 My face you never will see no more
 But there is one promise that is given
 I'll meet you on God's golden shore
 (He'll meet you on God's golden shore)

As this song describes death, separation, loss and grief, it is remarkable that when performed, these themes can bring about not only smiles but also tears of joy. Perhaps the most singular and powerful example of the profession of joy through music is provided by the famous 4th “Chorale” movement of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony (Figure 3). This movement is a musical setting of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy.” The German original and the English translation are as follows:

Schiller’s Ode to Joy

This is the familiar version of the poem used by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony:

Joy! A spark of fire from heaven,
 Daughter from Elysium,
 Drunk with fire we dare to enter,
 Holy One, inside your shrine.
 Your magic power binds together,
 What we by custom wrench apart,
 All men will emerge as brothers,
 Where you rest your gentle wings.

If you've mastered that great challenge:
 Giving friendship to a friend,
 If you've earned a steadfast woman,
 Celebrate your joy with us!
 Join if in the whole wide world there's
 Just one soul to call your own!
 He who's failed must steal away,
 shedding tears as he departs.
 All creation drinks with pleasure,
 Drinks at Mother Nature's breast;
 All the just, and all the evil,
 Follow down her rosy path.
 Kisses she bestowed, and grape wine,
 Friendship true, proved e'en in death;

Every worm knows nature's pleasure,
 Every cherub meets his God.
 Gladly, like the planets flying
 True to heaven's mighty plan,
 Brothers, run your course now,
 Happy as a knight in victory.
 Be embracéd, all you millions,
 Share this kiss with all the world!
 Way above the stars, brothers,
 There must live a loving father.
 Do you kneel down low, you millions?
 Do you see your maker, world?
 Search for Him above the stars,
 Above the stars he must be living.



Figure 3

Notably, in this celebration of joy, a background of death and evil is presented as necessary to our appreciation of the power of bliss. It is instructive to think of Carnival as it is celebrated in Brazil as a powerful example of sorrow and joy in everyday life. The following is a reference point composed for the film *Orfeu Negro*. Poor people from the favelas live and work in miserable conditions throughout the year to produce a pre-Lenten celebration-in dance, music, costumes and parades-of the joy of life. The lyrics I have chosen are a simple reflection of the major distinction between

sadness and joy: sadness has no easy end, and joy is transitory-but both are essential in giving meaning to the central values of our lives. This is the first verse from *Felicidade* by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luis Bonfá.

Happiness
 Sadness never ends
 Happiness does

Happiness is like a drop
of dew on a flower petal
It shines quietly
And then swings lightly
and falls like a teardrop of love.

The notion that sadness is somehow more lasting than happiness is not confined to Brazil. Witness these lines by Yeats, drawn from his poem, "Vicissitudes":

"My 50th year had come and gone.

I sat, a solitary man, in a crowded London shop.

An open book, an empty cup on the marble table top,

As on the shop and street I gazed,

My body of a sudden blazed;

And twenty minutes, more or less,

It seemed so great my happiness,

That I was blessed and could bless."

Joy can appear in our experience as a kind of seizure and can be more evanescent than sorrow.

Discussion

A cyclical model for human moods

It is evident from this inquiry that both sorrows and joys are of notable importance in our everyday lives. The proposition that life is hard must be acknowledged. However, it is equally obvious that life is also sweet. If the sweetness of life requires less time and attention than do difficulties, an appreciable difference in the magnitude of time and importance is not obvious. Borrowing from what is known as "opponent-process" theory in psychology⁶, it is reasonable that sorrow can pave the way for joy. The opposite is also prominent in our lives when joys give rise to sorrows. More generally, sorrows and joys are cyclical, alternating with each other over days, months, and seasons. Despite the lyrics of the song, no one's days are of "constant sorrow" nor of constant joy. Additionally, sorrow can turn to joy. The song "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow" becomes an object of joyful appreciation when artfully sung. Singing the Blues is redemptive for both the audience and the singer.

At a minimum, we must recognize that "The Blues" can produce paradoxical feelings of truth and joy. Elsewhere, I have defended the proposition that "transformation is the essence of drama" and that our storied lives, replete with drama, gain significance and meaning in cycles of change⁷. As a seasonal event, Carnival is a secular feast based on religious premises. Religion is a junction point between sorrow and joy. Religious ceremonies provide a way of

acknowledging and celebrating the miracle of birth and the tragedy of death. Along the way, there is a plausible means of combining two completely unrelated people into a single functional unit—a married couple—that then functions as a nucleus for the growth of families. Family bonds are obviously sacred fictions—and as such function as powerful sources for both the joys and sorrows of human life. Families are not experienced as constant entities but as structures that are located within cycles of birth and death, celebration and mourning, and growth and decay. Families provide the settings in which the most powerful dramas of our lives are realized—and they are not constant but fluid.

A Final note: a response to Joseph Conrad and his "...wrestling with death"

Approximately 25 years ago, at the urging of my philosopher friend, Philip Hallie, I read Joseph Conrad's book, *Heart of Darkness*. I found it to be of significance and lamented that I had not read it earlier in my life.

As I began to think more seriously about "joy and sorrow," I remembered a quotation from Conrad's book, but I did not have it recorded anywhere. I had to reread the book, a short work, to find and report the quote accurately: "I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary" (Conrad, 1899/1996, p. 87). First, I judge this statement to be eloquent, complete and irrefutable.

However, it also invites a contrasting statement: Of course, death will eventually win in the struggle with life. This fatal outcome can dampen interest in the struggle. However, this does not keep life from being filled with the possibility of glory, honor and excitement, pro tempore. It is a misfortune not to be born. However, once born into the human condition, one begins to enjoy the blessings of both being and doing. This blessing is redoubled with the invaluable discovery that it is possible to have conversations with others that are real and hypothetical. We can converse and act with other creatures—all under a magnificent canopy of brilliant blue. Life can be sweet while it is lived. This sweetness can be transmitted to future generations through the vehicle of living history. I hope my children and students know this.

We, the living, enjoy the sweet fruits of the genius and brilliance of previous generations of humankind in the poetry, literature, music, art and architecture and mythology they have bequeathed to us. We tend to take this legacy for granted, but we should, from time to time, pause to recognize the treasures all around us and to be humbly grateful. We are not relieved from suffering—that is

⁶War is a preparation for peace, peace for war, sorrow is a preparation for war and vice versa (Solomon, 1980).

⁷See Scheibe, 2000, and Scheibe, 2017.

sure. However, the ongoing cycle of sorrow and joy ensures our engagement in life until its end. Life is love. Love is life. It is blessing enough, a gift outright.

Coda

I began this essay by reporting on the impact of a presented book on my thoughts about this project. Now, as I near the end of this report, it is appropriate to report on the importance of another book, one given to me as a birthday present from my wife. I refer to the recent posthumously published book by Robert Richardson, my erstwhile Wesleyan colleague: "Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives [1,6].

Richardson published three definitive biographies of the authors mentioned in the title of his book. In his final published work, he described how each of these giants recovered from the loss of a beloved young person. Emerson's young bride died from tuberculosis at the age of 19 years. Thoreau lost a brother, aged 27 years, to lockjaw. James lost a young female cousin, Minnie Temple, aged 24 years, also to tuberculosis.

Richardson's book traces the course of recovery for each of these victims of profound and sudden loss. In so doing, he has provided us with what a reviewer describes as a treatise for our time-wherein we are called to marshal our resources for resilience in the face of discouraging losses. These accounts can serve as support of our own capacity to cultivate reasonable hope.

Conclusion

This essay began with the observation that sorrows are strongly present as a background condition for human life. Nothing has been encountered in this essay that would challenge the assertion made by William James that the prime rule of consciousness is this: "troubles first." But what we can say after a broad and patient inquiry into the vicissitudes of human mood is that joys are also frequent and prominent and worth the wait. The rule is that human beings commonly experience a broad range of human mood-from extremes of sadness to extremes of exhilaration. The drama of human life participates in this range of feeling throughout its course from birth to death.

This exercise concludes by hazarding to list some general and remarkable propositions about human moods. This listing is meant to be more provocative than definitive. It might comprise an agenda for further inquiry.

- A. Sorrow can be a preparation for joy-and joy a preparation for sorrow. The prototype is resurrection on the positive side and a painful hangover as the negative counterpart.
- B. Joys and sorrows provide much of the material for the drama of our lives. Since the essence of drama is transformation, the variations in our moods constitute major themes in our lives. The important point here is that variation is the rule and stasis the exception. Happy and sad events are common; people who are permanently sad or happy are infrequent.

- C. Much of the vitality of the arts-poetry, music, drama and literature-is based on exhibited transformations of sorrows and joys.

- D. The themes of separation and joining emerge as of major importance in the array of joys and sorrows. A prototypical joy is falling in love. A prototypical sorrow is the death of a family member or friend.

- E. The extremes of sorrow appear to be stronger than the extremes of joy. Periods of sorrow are also more prolonged than periods of joy.

- F. Both reported sorrows and joys are predominately social and not individual.

- G. The worst form of punishment that human beings have devised for each other is solitary confinement. without the luxury of exposure, direct or vicarious, to human culture. Paradise on the other hand, whether real or imagined, is never marked by solitude.

About the Author

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