

During this season of Thanksgiving as we reflect upon our relationships, temporal blessings, and many other things for which we are grateful, I wanted to share with you another application of gratitude that can have a deep impact on our daily lives: practicing gratitude when we find ourselves moving away from joy. You might ask, “Who would want to move away from joy?” Joy is inherently a vulnerable emotion, and being vulnerable can feel very risky for all of us at times.

Brené Brown addresses the connection between joy and gratitude in her book, *Daring Greatly*. She writes, “In a culture of deep scarcity—of never feeling safe, certain, and sure enough—joy can feel like a setup. We wake up in the morning and think, Work is going well, everyone in the family is healthy. No major crises are happening. The house is still standing. I’m working and feeling good. Oh, crap. This is bad. This is really bad. Disaster must be lurking right around the corner.”

Has fear or anxiety ever robbed you of a joyful moment – as you watched your children or grandchildren play, shared a loving moment with your significant other, gotten the promotion you were hoping for from work, or finally got the “all clear” from the doctor after a major illness? Often in moments that should be joyful, we find ourselves preparing for the potentially bad news that “must be coming next.” “Foreboding joy,” as Brown calls it, is a method of minimizing vulnerability. It’s the continuum that runs from “rehearsing tragedy” to “perpetual disappointment,” described by those who practice it as this: “It’s easier to live disappointed than it is to feel disappointed. It feels more vulnerable to dip in and out of disappointment than to just set up camp there. You sacrifice joy, but you suffer less pain.”

Brown further explains, “Once we make the connection between vulnerability and joy, the answer is pretty straightforward: We’re trying to beat vulnerability to the punch. We don’t want to be blindsided by hurt. We don’t want to be caught off-guard, so we literally practice being devastated or never move from self-elected disappointment.” Many of us will have our own stories of how this process robbed us of joy. One story shared in Brown’s book describes this loss: “A man in his early sixties told me, ‘I used to think the best way to go through life was to expect the worst. That way, if it happened, you were prepared, and if it didn’t happen, you were pleasantly surprised. Then I was in a car accident and my wife was killed. Needless to say, expecting the worst didn’t prepare me at all. And worse, I still grieve for all of those wonderful moments we shared and that I didn’t fully enjoy. My commitment to her is to fully enjoy every moment now. I just wish she was here, now that I know to do that.’”

Hopefully we don’t wait for tragedy to strike before we make the commitment to enjoy life. But how is that done? In particular, how do we fully enjoy moments of joy? Brown’s research revealed that gratitude was the antidote to foreboding joy. “If the opposite of scarcity is enough, then practicing gratitude is how we acknowledge that there’s enough and that we’re enough.” Tangible gratitude practices such as keeping a gratitude journal or implementing family gratitude rituals help us develop a general attitude of gratitude that can shape our daily experiences. When you find yourself “rehearsing tragedy,” you can stop and acknowledge your fear or anxiety then choose to practice gratitude: “I’m feeling vulnerable and I’m so grateful for _____.” Here are a few more ideas:

- Keep a Gratitude Jar: write down what you’re grateful for and read it at the end of each month/year
- Take turns sharing what you’re grateful for at the dinner table with your family
- Write a gratitude letter to someone who has had an impact on you
- Make a Gratitude Collage and hang it in a prominent place
- Keep a Gratitude Journal of specific things for which you are grateful; add to it daily
- Say a prayer often only expressing gratitude
- Express gratitude for the challenges you have had: what have you learned?

Joy can be found in big, grand events, but mostly, it comes in the ordinary moments of our lives. Feeling stressed, sad or afraid? Practice gratitude and step into the joyful moments of your life that can be found in abundance when sought.