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Teaching Our Black Children to Know Joy

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TEACHING OUR BLACK CHILDREN TO KNOW JOY

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ABSTRACT

As a mother of two young Black children, we were faced with a new challenge, brought on by isolation of the pandemic, and the brutality of White supremacy. My daughter (Olivia) was now asking tough questions. Sickness she understood. Even at her age, she knew the importance of hand washing. But racism is a sickness we were not yet prepared to teach her. The purpose of this story is to share my experiences as a mother of my her 4-year-old daughter, and how I taught my daughter to have joy, through 1) memorized scripture, 2) exhibiting joy and 3) through prayer, even in the midst of fear and trials. Even though Olivia is just a child, I learned, through my four-year-old daughter's journal, that she is internalizing what it means to have joy in her heart, in all circumstances.

Keywords: Black Children, joy, pandemic, police brutality, race

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic and the ongoing brutality of White supremacy has brought forth many challenges and uncomfortable changes within society. Throughout this article, I will share my 4-year-olds journal entries that display her thought process during the pandemic and racism within the country. This article will also demonstrate how I taught my daughter to have joy, through 1) memorized scripture, 2) exhibiting joy and 3) through prayer, despite her fears or worries.

THE SHUTDOWN

Two and half months into a national shutdown due to COVID-19, my family had reached our limits, or so we thought. We were struggling to do everything in our ordinary routine. Grocery shopping, taking our kids to the park, attending church, or checking out the latest movie released were all our favorite mundane pleasures. At first, the shutdown was a relief, a break from the business of life and hectic schedules, towing two small children to and fro, and being active from work or social commitments. It was the timeout that we didn't know we needed. We binged on everything we ever wanted to see on Netflix, Hulu and Disney+. It was some of the greatest family time we ever had. We were also in the middle of a move so we could take our time to organize and pack. We caught up on sleep and overall bonded with our family. Our extended family became fluent in zoom. We now see them more than ever in our scheduled weekly chats. This was a blessing and a release during week one, two, three, and then four. Yet, as we entered the second month of isolation, a hard reality kicked in unexpectedly. This is not the new normal that any of us wanted. While we were immensely grateful to have our health, the tedium of boredom and the distance from physical and social interactions were taking a toll. I went from happy and rested, to suddenly feeling weary and depressed.

It was Memorial Day weekend. I needed a pick me up, a change of pace. At my husband's suggestion, we went for a family bike ride through a nature preserve. In the moment we felt so good, we decided we would surprise my parents (who lived down the street) and Olivia, by riding our bikes to their house and waving "hello." We knew Olivia wouldn't be able to go inside their house and play like she normally does when visiting. However, we believed seeing them and the joy on their faces, when they came out their house, would be exactly what she needed to feel a little bit of joy, too. I was dead wrong. What started out as a brilliant idea, soon spiraled out of control and became a complete disaster.

OLIVIA'S JOURNAL

For the last few months I have been encouraging my daughter to write in a journal. Since she is still learning how to write, I told her I would write down anything she wanted to put in her journal entries about her feelings. Her entries could include anything, for instance, when she was happy, sad, excited, afraid and could even include special moments she wanted to remember. At first, she did not understand why I wanted to record her words in a journal, but now (after a few months) sometimes she is excited to share significant moments. Personally, I was excited about Olivia journaling because it gives me a deeper insight on my daughter's feelings and concerns, it is also intimate time we can spend together and it helps me keep track of special occasions (good or bad) that may need to be revisited in the future.

That being said, I did not know the spontaneous bike ride to her grandparents' house would be at the top of her list for feelings of sadness, frustration and confusion. I will never forget the day she had me write this particular journal entry. I say I will never forget, because it was a clear indicator that my child was not OK and I needed to do something about her unstable emotions and fast! So, rather than going any further, I will let Olivia's two journal entries and my analysis tell the story instead. In addition, I will also share family resources to help children learn how to have joy.

Journal Entry # 1

(I used the pseudonym "Gloria", not her Aunt's real name).

The Bike Ride to my Grandparents House

When you [mommy] said, "Do you know where we are going today?" I said, "where?" [Olivia was so excited at the thought of going someplace during the pandemic. A few moments later we parked our bikes in front of my parents' house.] "I felt happy when they [her grandparents and great Aunt Gloria] came outside. I felt surprised, because they loved me. I love them and they care about me, and I care about them. When I was talking to them, I was happy. Then, I was sad because I wanted to hug them. I wanted to hug Aunt Gloria, but you [mommy] said, "move back" because you don't want me to get close to her. Then I got really sad. [When her grandparents noticed she was starting to get tears in her eyes, they immediately tried to put her sadness to an end by singing her favorite songs, dancing, and eventually promising they would be able to play, hug and kiss her soon.] My grandparents tried to cheer me up, but I didn't cheer up. I was sad because I wanted to kiss Aunt Gloria and couldn't. I started to cry because I was very sad. Then we went back home and I felt better because we ate pizza. I wanted to relax in my house with my grandparents. But I can't see them, [instead] we rode to grandmaMa and Papa's house and I cried. I didn't have fun because you [mommy] said, "move back." Then we went back home.

When my family returned home, it took several minutes to calm Olivia down, and convince her that she would see her grandparents again. In hindsight, I did not imagine our spontaneous detour to Olivia's grandparents' house would take away from our already "isolated" festivities. However, we did the best we could and as the day moved forward, and all the melancholy emotions were gone, our two children were making the best of the day by enjoying the splash pad in the front yard. However, on the same day we were fighting for a small moment of joy, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police.

The news coverage of his death spread like wildfire and both interrupted and erupted racial relations in the country. I could not bring myself to watch the nearly nine minutes of torture he endured before he called out to his dead mother and died. COVID-19 was terrible, but as a healthy person, Floyd was my tipping point. I could not stomach the thought of simultaneously combatting a pandemic and police brutality. Floyd could have been my husband, my father, my brother and to many people, he was the above. In America, when you're Black and a part of the community, you're kin. This felt like both a political loss and a personal loss. When autopsy reports revealed that Floyd had also contracted COVID-19, it reminded me of the double jeopardy that so many Black Americans face, police brutality and poor health.

As a parent of two young Black children, we were faced with a new challenge. We faced, not just the isolation brought on by the pandemic, but the brutality of White supremacy. My daughter was now asking me tough questions. Sickness she understood. Even at her age, she knew the importance of hand washing. However, racism is a sickness we were not yet prepared to teach her. My three-year-old (at the time) asked us, "Are police officers good or are they bad?" Olivia wanted to know specific details about the purpose of a police officer's job. I did not lie. I told her that some police officers are good, and some are bad. But it's difficult at times to know the difference, so whenever we encounter police officers, we

pray. We pray for good police officers. She asked me why some police officers are bad. I told my daughter they don't like us because our skin is brown. Olivia replied, "Well my skin is brown."

"Yes," I encouraged her, "It's brown and its beautiful."

I redirected her to another topic, however, I knew more questions would come. I knew at some point she might see news coverage or protests. I knew her inquisitive mind would ask me what signs that read "Black Lives Matter" means. I knew that she was emotionally fragile. Two months into COVID-19 even my sweet rambunctious social butterfly was getting fatigued by not seeing her friends. She missed her grandparents terribly. She began to have tantrums and anxiety over things that never would have bothered her. I could not distract her with the park, play dates, or her favorite spot, Kidtastic. I now, had to teach my child about a virus and the vicious nature of racism all at the same time.

I was constantly looking online to find tools to help me in assisting her with all that was happening in the world. In my search, I stumbled upon a tweet which read, "Some of us fight racism by raising our Black children to know joy. This matters too." (Simpson, 2020). I didn't need happiness, something fleeting or short-lived. I needed a sustainable and renewable source, like joy. Joy, in the Christian faith is more than happiness, it's a tool of resistance against suffering, pain, and insurmountable obstacles. Joy is faith and perseverance to push past our current trials and still see the goodness of God. I didn't want to just make my daughter happy. I needed to teach her joy.

TEACHING JOY

In this paper, I want to share how, in the midst of a pandemic, racial violence and social isolation I was able to teach my daughter how to know joy. Three ways I taught my daughter about joy were 1) I taught her to memorize scripture; 2) I tried to exhibit joy in front of her, on a regular basis; and 3) I taught my daughter the importance of prayer when we prayed together every day. One of the first scriptures that I taught Olivia was 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God did not give us the spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind" (New International Version, 1978/2011). I initially gave her this scripture to help her whenever she had bad dreams. This scripture has been indispensable during COVID-19 when she became anxious and needed to feel love and peace. Even though she is only 4 years old, I want her to know there is power in scripture and to hide it in her heart whenever she needs reassurance. In the last few months, I have witnessed my daughter become braver, less afraid during obstacles and more verbal about feeling joy. Another indicator I have noticed is she has started to sing a little bit more each day. Before the pandemic, she would sing all the time, but as our isolation from others began to increase her singing stopped. In fact, the more we talked about the goodness of Jesus and memorized scripture; I began to see the hope in her eyes become greater, praying that this too shall pass. It makes me think of Psalms 30:4-5, which says, "Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (New International Version, 1978/2011).

When I teach my daughter about joy, I tried intentionally to model it in everything that I do. For example, if she is playing with her little brother (and she doesn't want to because she misses her friends), I will say, "Oooh Olivia, I love watching you play with your brother. I can tell he is having so much fun and loves you very much! Watching you two gives me so much joy." Now, sometimes she is not trying to hear my overly zealous banter about joy and why she should love playing with her baby brother. However, other times, I will simply smile at her while we eat dinner as a family. Often times she will ask, "Mommy why do you keep smiling at me and KJ (her younger brother), I said, "It is such a blessing and a wonderful feeling seeing my family at the dinner table eating together. I love you so much, it gives me joy when we spend time together." Some people may believe I sound fake when I say these words, or I am being "extra" with my word choice, but I am trying to demonstrate that joy is a mindset, not an unstable feeling that can change in an instant. The beauty of joy is that it focuses on the small details that most people overlook, take for granted, or push to the side because of a difficult situation. Most importantly, I wanted her to know she should be joyful because her family is all together, we are healthy and safe.

Lastly, I taught my daughter about joy, through prayer. It does not matter if my daughter is happy, sad or frustrated we still need to, "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). One night my daughter came to me crying and she told me she was sad because she didn't have any friends, she couldn't go to the park and overall, she didn't understand why this, "virus", something she couldn't see, was interfering with what she wanted to do. I told her we should pray and ask the Lord to help us, so we prayed together. When we finished praying, she asked me if she could pray for a new friend. Her prayer was, "Dear Lord, help me to have friends...and be safe...and go to the playground and eat pizza tonight." She continued and, "thank you for mommy and daddy and KJ, Amen."

Now I am not an expert on prayer, but I know for a fact that my daughter can get a prayer through because (we did end up eating pizza that night) and within the same week we met a family in our new town. Not only were they a young family, and new to the area like we were, but they had a 5-year-old son and a 12-month-old daughter. After a random, three-hour conversation in the park, turns out they were also praying for a “quarantine family” to have playdates with their two children. Furthermore, it was an answer to my prayers, because I too had been praying for a friend in our new town. But not just anyone, living in a predominantly White town, I specifically prayed for a person of color to connect with on multiple levels. I also prayed that they would be just as strict as we are about social distancing in public as well as in our homes. What can I say? God answered both of our prayers and he is faithful. After our encounter with the new family, that would eventually become our friends and “quarantine” buddies, my family was so excited. The next morning, I asked Olivia to tell me about how her day went at the park (so I could write it down in her reflection journal). This is what she told me to write.

Journal Entry # 2

(I used the pseudonym “Nino Rayo”, not his real name).

Olivia’s New Friend in Nacogdoches, Texas

I met a boy named Nino Rayo at the playground. I like Nino Rayo because he is my friend. We played so much until the lightening bugs came out! We were making a BIG donut out of woodchips and we played tag. Nino Rayo is five and I am four. Nino Rayo is nice, he put woodchips all on my pretend donut! It was my favorite thing when he said, “I’ll meet you here (tomorrow at the park) on the slide. I want to have more playdates with Nino Rayo, he is my best “boy” friend...Oh and Saturday we are going to the zoo, and we can get on the TRAIN RIDE! I am happy and excited! I have joy in my heart.

MOVING FORWARD WITH JOY

A few days after Olivia asked me to write down her journal entry for the week, I realized just how important teaching our children about joy is, in the society we are raising them in today. So, I began to pray for the Lord to help me teach my 17-month-old son the same principles. Initially, I did not put emphasis on my son knowing about joy, but I was wrong. My son was smart and could know if I simply teach him and continue to demonstrate this attribute in my home, just like I did with Olivia.

The bible does not specify an exact age when it states in Proverbs 22:5, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,” (New International Version, 1978/2011). I took a leap of faith and began teaching my son what I knew and prayed for guidance and for will to be done with me and my son. Well, to my shock, the Lord answered my prayers, not in the way I could have ever imagined. I received a call from my First Lady at church and she told me that she wanted me to be the leader of a “Mommy and Me” group for mothers and their children, for ages zero to four years old. For the most part, she had the vision, which I seemed to fit; a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction; a teaching background; skills in developing lessons; and leadership in conceptualizing the format of the group. In other words, everything. Rather than tell her I was a busy mom and really didn’t have the time, I took it as an opportunity to share Christian principles with my son (since it is his targeted age group) and other mothers that are eager to share the gospel with their children. Once I began to fellowship with other mothers, through this ministry, I can honestly say, I felt joy! Why? because, despite the pandemic and injustices in the world, the Lord allowed me to share the gospel with children, fellowship and connect with their mothers, and spread joy to other families that face the same challenges that I do. Even now, as I write this story, I have hope these words will reach other parents and encourage and uplift them, knowing we may have reached our tipping point, but joy will come in the morning.

FAMILY RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN

Before I conclude this story, I would like to share a few ideas that may be of assistance to parents and their children when discussing joy or any other biblical information.

Memorizing Scriptures

- 1) Share with your child the importance of learning of scriptures and why we should memorize them. For example, when Olivia was having bad dreams and did not know what to do when she was by herself at night. I told her to recite her memory verse, and ask the Lord to help her during her time of need.

- 2) Find songs that recite scriptures so it's easier for your child to remember. Some songs even have hand gestures and sound effects that make learning scripture interactive and fun.
- 3) Invest in literature (or find free downloads online) with bible verses and pictures that can help your child visualize the word of God. Tangible and colorful items are always helpful when children are learning something new, like scriptures. Furthermore, read to them daily, post scriptures on the wall, in your child's room, refrigerators, or other places in the home.

Demonstrate Joy

- 1) Be intentional. Be intentional about things that may seem insignificant or easily overlooked. For example, we should not take for granted that we woke up this morning. Share with your child the joy of waking up in the morning.
- 2) Enjoy the outdoors. I do not know about your children, but mine are copy cats. Whenever I do something they want to participate in the same thing. So, try going for walks and pointing out the beauty of the trees or, the sky and how they bring joy. Your children will begin to repeat the same things you do in life.
- 3) Value family. Always be intentional about valuing your family. COVID-19 reminded us that death is inevitable and people we care about can be gone in an instant. Help them cherish the times they have with siblings, grandparents and friends.

Learning to Pray

- 1) Demonstrate praying. Allow your child to see you pray on a daily basis. When you demonstrate the importance of prayer more than likely your child will want to imitate you. Share with them that talking to God is just like talking to their mother or father.
- 2) Get creative. Prayer does not always have to be on our knees or in a prostrate position. You can show your children how to pray with puppets, or writing them in a journal and sharing them during story time. Its best to remember that smaller children learn best through play and simple interactions.
- 3) Be repetitive with everything. Children are smart. The best way to forge something in their heart (with adults too for that matter) is to repeat the process of prayer. Sing your prayers, write them down, or have your child draw pictures of their prayers.

I am fully aware that the pandemic and Black Americans unjustly dying are far from over, and in some ways, will continue for many years. Even though my daughter is four-years-old she knows the pandemic has altered her life. She cannot hug her grandparents and has to practice social distancing with her friends. To add further concern, at age four, she questions the role of law enforcement (not knowing if they are good or bad) because she hears about how some police officers treat people with brown skin unjust. All of these issues that I have, unfortunately grown accustomed to, is new and scary for my daughter. As a Christian mother, I know the power that comes with my faith in Jesus as well as the comfort of joy. That is why I have taught Olivia about joy despite the pandemic and police brutality among people of color.

Initially, I created a journal for my daughter to record her words about feelings she had when she was happy or sad or to document special occasions she wanted to remember. But now, in addition to her feelings of concern or moments of joy, she has something greater to contribute. Now, she has specific tools she can incorporate in her journal such as memorized scripture, visuals of what joy looks like, no matter how small, and personal prayers.

My daughters journal entries have taught me so much about how she is internalizing what it means to have joy in her heart in all circumstances. Now, moving forward, I can honestly say I have joy and my daughter has joy too!

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