

Joy Clarkson: I think if we pay attention to things in our life, and I know that sounds kind of abstract, but it's really very concrete, like the sun and trees and waking up. ... All of those things, if we give them attention, can become resources for us describing our experiences and where we find ourself in life.

Brandon: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi.

Hannah: Hi, I'm Hannah Black.

B: And we're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University. On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: Hey, Brandon, how's it going?

B: It's going really well. Hannah, how are you doing?

H: I'm doing pretty well. I'm doing better than I was doing the other day when you had to, out of the generosity of your heart, call AAA on my behalf. Oh, God.

B: Oh, gosh. Yeah, I was happy to be in the right place at the right time.

H: I was happy to have the best co-worker in the world. Really, co-workers. There was like a consort of help.

B: There was a response team.

H: Yeah. So, I popped my tire right in front of the window of the Office of Student Affairs people, which is the best people to pop a tire in front of, because then they're all like, "Are you okay? Do we need to talk about this? What do you need?"

B: Yea, there were several prayer chains activated, I think. Not that any of us Divinity School people had any practical skills in actually knowing how to change the tire. But you were so loved in that moment.

H: Oh, my gosh. Well, another thing maybe the listeners should know is what I was doing in that moment that I felt needed so much haste and urgency, was I was transporting a bunch of mugs with St. Luke the winged ox on them, otherwise known as Lucas around the Seminary. And listeners and all of our social media followers are about to have an opportunity to win one of those mugs.

B: I just want to describe how good these mugs are. This is no joke. Think a campfire mug.

H: Right.

B: It is the perfectly sized mug. Let me just say, at the risk of oversharing, I've had several heated conversations with my dear wife over the years about my feelings about mugs. And that is that there are no more mugs allowed in the house.

H: Right. We have similar conversations.

B: There's no room. It's just ... it's appalling. But when I saw the Lucas mug, I issued a dispensation. I broke my own rule and I might allow more than one into the house. They're that beautiful. And I just want to give you a lot of affirmation for your mug design.

H: Like St. Luke, but make him a cartoon and slap him on a mug. Well, OK, speaking of things that are going on at the Seminary, we are also in the middle of planning for and accepting applications for the Leader's Way Certificate Program. So we're accepting applications for Leader's Way Fellows for 2024. I wonder, as the director of all the leadership stuff at Berkeley, if you could kind of give us the elevator pitch. What is ... I mean, we're here listening to the Leaders Way, but what's the Leaders Way Certificate Program?

B: I am far too excited about the Leaders Way to confine my comments to the elevator. So I'm breaking out of the elevator. This is really a project of the heart, meaning that so many of our board members and so many of our donors and our alumni came together for years and really prayed and reflected on the need to support leaders in the church and in the world. And so, together we created a residential program followed by six months of online learning that really supports leaders and growing into leadership in new and innovative ways.

And, you know, it's a bit of a paradox right now, right, because it's a really difficult time to lead, given the polarization in our country, given the dynamics in the church. And yet what we're finding is that leaders are really, really longing for a community, a fellowship of peers where they can gather, reflect, pray together, and really continue the lifelong process of studying and learning about what leadership means in constantly changing conditions. We focus a lot on innovation. We focus a lot on just theological updating. For many of us it's been a little while since the glory days of seminary, when we could learn from, you know, some of the most wonderful minds in the theological community.

So, you know, at best this is a kind of retreat. It's a kind of pilgrimage here to Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, and a time to reflect and renew and recommit ourselves to the original passion that ignited from receiving our call from God to be of service in the church and in the world. So this is our second cohort. We had 50 priests and lay leaders that began the journey last summer, six days here at Yale, and they're just finishing up their six months of online learning. They've developed an innovative ministry project, a kind of ministry experiment, so they can try something new.

So I'm really, really excited. In my own life, I have just such a heart and a calling to support leaders. Y'all are doing such incredibly important work; work that sometimes is really visible and sometimes work that's incredibly invisible. And so anything that we can do to nourish, support,

encourage, empower, and just cheer on leaders who are so needed is just a great blessing in my life.

So, yeah, thank you for teeing that up, Hannah. We will welcome applicants really all the way through May, but space is filling up. We have about 25 folks who are registered right now. News flash, we just got some really generous funding from a donor who heard about this work and wanted to make sure that financial support was available. So we do have some limited financial support available, so don't let any financial obstacle stand in your way. So apply! We look forward to reading your application and welcoming you possibly to Yale this summer.

H: Yeah. So if you're interested in coming yourself, or nominating a leader you know to come, you can visit us online at [berkeleydivinity.yale.edu](http://berkeleydivinity.yale.edu) and help us spread the word. From the feedback we got from the first cohort, it seems like it was a really life-giving program for people, which like you were saying is exactly what we need.

And speaking of life, here's a Hannah Black trademark transition: Our guest today, Joy Clarkson, talks in a new book about how in our lives, (this is a really tenuous transition, Brandon, I'm not going to lie!) In our lives, we're more like an organic life form, like a tree, than a machine. And if you think about it, we use machine language to understand ourselves so often. Like, "My social battery is running low," or "I'm not processing that." She lays them all out in the very beginning of this book called *You Are a Tree*, which is all about metaphors. And I think something that this conversation and the book will be a great resource, especially for preachers who are thinking about how we communicate really well about the Christian life, which is often hard to put into words.

B: I love that metaphor. And of course, it's right from the Psalm, from the very first Psalm—"planted like a tree next to a stream". So I love this conversation. I'm so—This is like a little gift that we unwrapped with Joy.

H: So let me tell our listeners a little bit about Joy. Joy Clarkson is the author of *Aggressively Happy* and she hosts a podcast called "Speaking with Joy." She's the books editor for *Plough Quarterly*, which is a magazine. You can find them online. And she's a research associate in theology and literature at King's College, London. Joy completed her PhD in Theology at the University of St. Andrews, where she researched how art can be a resource of hope and consolation, especially in the face of death. Joy is a really joyful person, a really deep thinker, and someone who I think people have drawn a lot of inspiration from online. So, you can also find her on Twitter or X, on Facebook, on Instagram, and on her podcast, "Speaking with Joy." So if you enjoy this conversation, you can follow those little trails.

B: Breadcrumbs.

H: That's what, yeah.

B: We hope you enjoy.

H: Welcome, Joy. It's so good to have you on the podcast.

Joy: I've been excited about this one.

H: So have I! So have I. In fact, I think I even mentioned in a previous episode that I was reading the book to prepare for this episode.

B: So, Hannah, you were diligently reading the book. I was diligently stalking your social media account, Joy.

J: That makes me very nervous.

B: And so, I'd like to start with something non-theological, but of course, everything is theological, right? And so I was thrilled to see that you were listening to Peter Gabriel's "So" album. Is this correct?

J: Of course I was. Yes.

B: Oh my gosh. This is iconic. Tell me about your Peter Gabriel journey.

J: Yeah. I really like Peter Gabriel. I think he's strange and wonderful in his many iterations and continues to be strange and wonderful. There's some really interesting stuff in the early days. I really love "Boy in the Bubble." When I listen to that, I think there's something that he captures about the existential strangeness of being a person in the modern world with technology. I love that he dresses up as a flower. Like what's, I don't know, what's not to love about Peter Gabriel? He is lyrically, personally, and musically fascinating.

B: I love this. So a few years ago, you may know that Peter Gabriel went on tour and performed the "So" album from front to back.

J: I know.

B: It was actually the first concert my kids attended.

J: Wow. Setting the bar hot.

B: He was wonderful and strange. It was incredible.

J: Well done.

B: But there's actually a deeper point that gets to a question that actually is theological. That is,

as I was reading about you, obviously you have a really active social media presence, which is not actually something that a lot of theologians feel committed to. And so I'm wondering about, you know, your public presence. You've written popular books on spirituality. You're also in the midst of writing scholarly things about theology. And I just wonder about how that works. And you seem to be bridging those worlds in a really beautiful, graceful way.

J: Well, that's a very kind thing to say. And I have to say, I think on some level, I don't have a super systematic way of thinking about this. I think I gained a systematic way of thinking about it because I kind of accidentally ended up being on social media for the really lame reason that when I was writing my PhD, I was just kind of bored.

And that was back in the glory days, I will say, of Twitter. And one could ask whether or not Twitter ever had glory days. But I think it did.

H: For theology, it absolutely did.

J: Yeah. And it was just it was a great place to connect with lots of other mostly graduate students. I think a lot of people found themselves on there. But also there was a point at which the algorithm on Twitter rewarded you posting really weird things. Like I feel like the Peter Gabriel tweet would have been bigger back in the day. And so there was just a period of time where my kind of slightly unhinged Ph.D. student brain was rewarded via this little app. But I also connected with a lot of interesting people through that. And I had the kind of weird experience, which I think a lot of people on the Internet do, of having an account that was quite small, and just tweeting about weird things that suddenly then became quite large. And then all of a sudden I had to start thinking about, oh my gosh, people people can read this. Like I know it's a public website, but like I post something, and then thousands of people read it. So that caused me to think a lot about persona. Not in just a negative way. But I think actually on some level, for me, it was helpful to realize that social media is a place where we project a persona.

And then thinking about, well, how do we do that ethically? And how do you not become overly identified with your persona? I think that's actually the main danger of social media, is it's not that you have persona; everybody has a persona. Everybody chooses what they present to the world to some degree. It's when you come to believe that what people believe about you is true, is really you. Sorry, there's, I don't know if you wanted that answer, but that is the answer.

H: I wanted that. Our listeners probably wanted that.

B: Oh, I'm a kid in a candy store. That was the extra large Snicker bar answer to this kid in that candy store. Thank you.

J: But I'll get the very swift answer that you're probably looking for, which is just that, when it comes to like my popular writing and stuff, I really love a lot of what I get to do and scholarship in the Academy. And right now, I work at King's College London, teaching on their M.A. in Christianity and the Arts. And I love that. And I think on some level, whenever I would go back to

the world that I came from where most people did not do graduate degrees, but they kind of wanted more depth and wanted to learn some of these things, but they just wouldn't have the time or the finances or just the place in life to be able to go and get more. And so I kind of like to think of my more popular writing and podcasting as just a way to kind of say, *These were some things that I loved and that I learned from, and maybe you would also enjoy them and they could also enrich your life.* So I think it's all kind of tied in. I don't think it's too disparate, but it mostly comes from my kind of ... enthusiasm of things I have enjoyed.

H: So how did you end up writing this book, *You Are a Tree and Other Metaphors to Nourish Life, Thought and Prayer*? Where did this come from?

J: I think at a particular point in writing my Ph.D., I was interested in how metaphors for things began to kind of change over time. So, you know, as like science progressed, you started to see a lot of language around the world being this intricate machine. And that wasn't actually a metaphor that *lacked* wonder; it was actually something that, as we grew to have a greater understanding of how the physical world worked, it was a way to describe the intricacies of things. But I was interested at that point in my Ph.D. about how that metaphor became operative and then shaped how we relate to the earth. So, we relate to earth as something that can give us lots of resources, like a machine that produces things. And then kind of seeing the impact of that on the natural world, that this metaphor shaped how we related to the thing that we were using the metaphor for.

And then also with human beings, with society. So that was just kind of like an offshoot of something I was interested in while I was doing my Ph.D. It was also just something that kind of impacted my personal life. So, you asked about social media. And I had this really weird experience where I went off of social media for six months while I was finishing out my Ph.D. And then I went on and the first day that I went on, I posted just kind of an off-the-cuff tweet about something that I had been thinking about during my Ph.D.: that you're not a machine. You know, you're more like a garden. Machines act the same way every day. They do the same thing every day. That's not what humans are like. We go through seasons, we have different needs. And the tweet went really viral. Literally the first tweet back from my hiatus and I was like ... *oh no, this is too much. I'm just signing off again.*

But it made me realize, that wasn't just my own kind of personal proclivity, to be interested in these metaphors. That, actually, the metaphors we use to describe ourselves have really practical implications for how we treat ourselves, how we relate to other people, and how we think of our relationship with God. And so I knew I wanted to write something about that. And then I sat with that for a long time. I read a whole bunch of books about metaphor, you know, as you do when you're a scholar and you get interested in something. And I settled down on wanting to do kind of meditations on seven metaphors that had lasted. Seven metaphors that have been with us and continue to be with us for thousands of years. They're largely metaphors that are in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. So I kind of put those into conversations with our modern metaphors and thinking about kind of the role of metaphor both in theology, but also just in practical living and spirituality.

B: I love a good metaphor. I'm a preacher, Joy, and I feel like it's a primary currency in preaching and obviously also in theology. And I wonder, for those listeners who may not have a deep theological education, may have not thought about a metaphor since sophomore year of high school ... I wonder if you could unpack how this works because it's always struck me as interesting that a metaphor is both similar to the original thing you're trying to describe, but it's also really different than the thing. Right? And so, you know, can you unpack for us the sort of metaphysics of the metaphor? How does it all work?

J: So, okay, I'll take you back to your freshman English class. There are metaphors and there are similes, right? A simile is something that talks about the similarities between one thing and another thing. So I always like to use the example of, you know, I did my Ph.D. in Scotland. So Bobby Burns says, "My love is like a red, red rose." A simile is saying, *well, this thing has these attributes and so does this other thing*. The operative word in metaphor is not *like*, as it is in a simile, but it's usually *like*, *is*. So a metaphor doesn't say "My love is like a red, red rose." A metaphor would just say "My love is a red rose." And there's something kind of strange in doing that, right? Because we intuitively are compelled by that, but also know that ... you're probably not in love with an actual flower, right? You're in love with a person. So what's happening when we do that? To think about that, the word *metaphor*, it comes from a Greek word and the "phor" in it comes from like "pharyn," which is the word associated with things like a ferry. So it's to carry something over. It's like a unit of travel. So when Aristotle defines it, he talks about it as *carrying the qualities proper to one thing over to another thing*. So I'm carrying what is proper to a rose to my love.

But another aspect of metaphor, which you very aptly pointed out, is the kind of absurdity of it. The theologian philosopher Paul Ricoeur talks about how one interpretation of the metaphor always has to be absurd. You have to be like, *No, my love is not a red, red rose*. But by putting that together, by saying "My love is a red rose," we intuitively start to see things about the love that *is* the red rose. But we also kind of reject it and say, "That's absurd." So, it's *not* a red rose. But in the very process of doing that, we have to kind of pay attention to both the rose and the love to notice the qualities that are not like it.

And so in my mind, a metaphor is really fruitful because it invites us to pay attention to what things are like and what things are not like. And so I think it makes you pay better attention in my mind than a simile. But a part of the pleasure of metaphor is knowing it's not the thing, but taking pleasure and kind of knowing the ways in which it's like a thing.

And then there's also all these theological things that go along with metaphors, right? Because we seem to use a lot of metaphors for God. We talk about God as a bear, and a rock, and a castle. And I will say this was one of the things with writing the book that I joke about, which is that I'll be describing, you know, like safety as a castle. And then I would end up being like, "But the true castle is our Lord Jesus Christ!"

But I think there's something that makes sense about that, because if we believe that God is the source of all being, then in every thing that we use to describe Him, God is kind of at the root of it. And so we find that even in these weird metaphors, you somehow stumble your way back to a Creator.

H: Is there one metaphor in particular that you would want to share with us?

J: From the book?

H: Yeah.

J: I'll pick one. And this was actually kind of a family of one. One of the ones I had a fun time writing about was love is a disease.

Some people, when they hear that, they're like, "What? That's weird." But if you start to think about it, a lot of the metaphors we use for love—falling in love—are either like, disease-oriented or something bad happening to you. You *fall* in love, you're *crazy* in love. You know, *he's crazy for her*. They're *lovesick*, right? We talk about being lovesick. There's a lot of writing about this. So like in that one, I wrote about, you know, the *Phaedrus* where we're describing, like whether it's better to have a lover or not. 'Cause love makes you crazy. It makes you neglect all your obligations. But I loved thinking about ... why do we use that metaphor? What is it about love that *is* like a disease? And I think a lot of it is this sense is that it's something we *catch*. It's something that kind of affects us in ways that make us feel out of control. It can be destructive force. And so I liked thinking about that, but I also liked thinking about like, in a way that metaphor takes agency out of our hands. It makes love this thing that happens to us.

So I also liked thinking about ... what are other metaphors we use for love? Love is a home. So we feel like we belong with someone. You also talk about shutting someone out or letting someone in, you know, like you're a house where someone could belong, feeling at home with someone. So that was one I really enjoyed writing, was kind of thinking about what are the implications for the metaphors we use to describe love. And what kind of posture do they invite us to take towards how we love and how we think about love.

H: Toward the beginning of the book, you talk about feeling like a potted plant, kind of going from place to place, and you're unable to put down roots. And then you start panicking. *Could I even put down roots if given the opportunity?* And you and I have led these academic careers that have brought us from, you know, one place to Southern California, to the UK, to who knows where next. You're on the move right now. Is there a way to not feel like a potted plant?

Help me, Joy. Your words have been haunting me in the best way possible.

J: Yeah. No, that was a really personal one for me. You know, I wrote that, end of my studies when I was going off to start a job and I was sitting in my garden and I was at the flat that I'd been living in. They have these really old trees. And I had been kind of looking after this plant during the last year of my Ph.D., and I was trying to decide what to do with it, because it was kind of getting a little scraggly. And I thought, *Do I give it to someone? Do I plant it?* I don't know if I can plant it because sometimes you plant plants and then they shock and die. And then I was like, *oh my gosh, what if I'm the plant? What if I'm getting scraggly because I'm too big for my pot?* But if you planted me, I might die because my roots aren't used to that.

And I don't know that I have a total answer to it, but I think just being able to articulate that

feeling of fruitlessness, of growth that felt too big for what my life was allowing. There was some relief just in being able to say it out loud, I think.

H: Yeah.

J: And I think it also helped me identify some things that I needed. I think being able to describe your discomfort gives you, again, more agency because you can kind of think, well, if my discomfort is caused by something like not having enough space, having a place to put down roots, then I can think about what I need to do in my life to move towards that. But I think the other thing that helped me was, once I started kind of thinking about the language of rootedness and how pervasive that is in scripture and in theology, and then realizing that the kind of mirror of that or the ... kind of the other metaphor that is almost as pervasive, is the metaphor of *journey*. And that, these seem kind of in conflict, because I can't be a tree that's rooted and also be on a journey, right? Like the one thing we know about trees is that they tend not to move. Like ... that's kind of what they *are*.

I found this really poignant, in that, it's actually those two metaphors are in Psalm 1. So Psalm 1 talks about, you know, "Blessed is the man who does not..." And it's all language that has to do with *being on a path*. And that's language all through the Psalms, is about the path you take and the way you walk and the way that God illuminates the path and the paths that you avoid. So that language of ... kind of path-of-life imagery is all through the Psalms.

But then in the second half, it switches to a tree. So the blessed man is both somebody who's on a path and somebody who's a tree. And that's this kind of conflict in the Psalm. But I also think that's kind of just a conflict inherent in being a human being; that what it looks like for us to thrive looks a lot like rootedness, and that that's something we can get in life. We can find ways to root in places, and in people, and in worthy work. But then there's also this kind of itinerant nature of being a human being that is always at conflict with that. I think, for me, I found relief in realizing that those things always kind of live together in my experience of the world. At least that's what I'm saying for the moment.

H: Well, and I'll add that reading you thinking through that metaphor gave me such a sense of calm and ... whatever the opposite of feeling crazy is. Because I thought, "Oh my gosh, this feeling I've been carrying for all these years of hopping around is something that somebody else is experiencing." And I think that's something that metaphors do really well, is they can explain intangible feelings or ideas in such a way that we can go, *yeah. I relate to that*.

B: Well, and I think what's really helpful in your presenting us with *several* metaphors is, in fact, we need more than one. And often, more than one is apt to describe like how we might be showing up in the moment, if we're using metaphors to describe ourselves. And I'm thinking about the seasons. And I think one of your posts was describing winter, and you're trying to sort of relish the winteriness of winter. And the seasons of the year have often been a helpful way for me to think about where I am in life. And what I often realize, when I'm trying to sort of peg myself in one season, is actually I'm in several seasons at once. And maybe, you know, my home life is in one season, my work life in another, friendships or my relationship with play and fun is in yet another season. So I wonder, Joy, how you think about the multiplicity of metaphors

necessary for life, and in your role as a theologian and writer to sort of remind us that there's other metaphors that could be used.

J: Hmm. That's a great question. I think a big part of it has to do with the, you know, you pointed out the little (brackets) "not" that I have in all the chapters, right? So people are *not* trees, you know. And I think metaphor does this for us, because inherent in it is like, the understanding that whatever we're describing is not *just* the metaphor, right? That you are not just a tree. So I think actually metaphor is really helpful in this. But I think keeping in view that we are just *just* using metaphors, to use that phrase, right? It's that what this is is *not*.

I think actually a lot of problems in life come when we forget that we're using metaphors. So something I've been thinking about recently is, sometimes people talk about, like, a *battle* with mental health. And, you know, I've had my own kind of experiences of that. But if you describe coping with or dealing with mental health as a battle, sometimes it can feel like battle. Sometimes you have to be strategic, and eliminate some things, and approach it. But, if you forget that that's a metaphor and it becomes really operative, then you might have this very aggressive sense of ... almost like your own mind is an enemy that you need to attack.

H: Yeah.

J: But whereas if you remind yourself, *No, that's a metaphor and maybe it's a metaphor that's not working for me. Maybe I need to try another metaphor.* Then I think that's really helpful. And I think that, when it comes then to needing lots of different metaphors, part of that is having a lot of metaphors in your mind to draw from.

H: Yeah.

J: And I think something that helps us with that is, in the book, at the end of every chapter, I have kind of like a collection of poems and images and movies that I think kind of help give us more metaphors for various things in our life. So that's an element of reading and listening and having kind of those metaphors in our world to draw from. But then I also think just paying attention to life. Because most of the metaphors we use come from visible, tangible things that happen in our life, right? If I say you're a tree, it's because I've seen a tree, and I've seen a tree blossom, and I know what a tree is like. And so, the more I've paid attention to that tree, the more I kind of know what a tree is like and how it relates to me. So I think if we pay attention to things in our life, and I know that sounds kind of abstract, but it's really very concrete. Like the sun, and trees, and waking up, all of those things, if we kind of give them attention, can become resources for us describing our experiences and where we find ourselves in life. That's why I included in the kind of epigraph to the introduction a quote from Billy Collins poem, which is where he's writing about, I think, a romantic partner. It's a really funny, kind of playful poem and he says, you know, You are ... and then he names all these different things, you know, the breeze and the orchard, the apron, all these things. And then he goes, "But you're definitely not all these other things." And I really believe that the world offers us many, many images and many, many metaphors to use to describe our lives. And so I think it's helpful to keep in view that we are using metaphors. And that's part of the point of this book, to remind people that

you're using metaphors all the time and the way that you're using them shapes how you live. And then if you need different metaphors, try on different metaphors by reaching for your experiences of the world and sometimes reading beautiful things and saying beautiful things and listening to beautiful things.

H: I mean, I ... it's a lot for one podcast episode, but I do want to hear a little bit about *Aggressively Happy*, and about the children's book that you wrote.

J: Oh, yeah. So I'll start with the children's book. That, I wrote with my brother.

H: It's just so cool!

J: ... Which was really fun. And it was actually based on a poem he wrote when he was like nine years old that we found in a shoebox. And he was writing about, at that age, like all the different things his treehouse could be as a kid. And he was like, "That's a really, like, lovely thought. You know, as a little kid, I was thinking consciously about what I could do with my imagination." And, you know, we thought about how so much of our childhood has been enriched and shaped by a lot of ... kind of boredom, having lots of free time to just do stuff. And that was such a valuable thing for us. And I think there can be a temptation to kind of avoid boredom now. We kind of don't have to ever be bored. Kids don't have to ever be bored. There's something to do all the time. We have handy little screens, or you feel like you need to be like, learning something or being, doing some kind of task. And so the book was kind of our little way of remembering and hopefully encouraging other people, children and also the parents, to let kids be bored in a good environment. And seeing how when you do that, it allows your imagination to kind of roam, and you can become all these different things. And that's actually a really important part of development for kids as well. And it was illustrated by this incredible artist who did kind of like a Where's Waldo style; very, very detailed. And he has certain items that are on every page. So there's the dog that's in every page. The cat is in every page. The bowl of macaroni is in every page. So kids also have fun looking for those things. And the book would not be what it was without Joshua Timothy Taylor's beautiful illustrations.

H: Okay, before you talk about *Aggressively Happy*, I need to jump in and say it's striking me that in *The Clubhouse*, you're inviting children to do this practice of nothing, using their imagination. And in the metaphor book, you're kind of asking us as adults to do the same thing. You never would have thought, *Oh, I'm a potted plant*, unless you were just sitting there, letting your mind wander and looking at the world around you, paying attention, being still. Yeah, there's something very profound in that.

J: Well, it is something I love. And confusingly, the program where I did my Ph.D. is the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts. And no one ever really knows what the "Imagination" part of it means. But for me, I think ... if it means anything, it means that kind of attention to the ways in which our thoughts can shape the world we live, the way that we are always imagining that metaphor and imagination are not kind of *extras* to thought. They're *integral* to it. And so being conscious about how we nurture and cultivate our imagination matters. Yeah. And then

*Aggressively Happy*. That was really fun to write. That was partially a fruit of my having been on the Internet too much.

Which was just that I noticed, and this was, you know, I don't think it's exaggerating to say the last few years I think have actually made life tangibly harder for a lot of people I know. But I noticed that even before that, people had this tendency to, if I posted something, like, *happy*, I would get really angry comments. People respond really negatively to happiness. And they usually assume that you haven't ever suffered if you're happy, like, that you're just kind of like a shallow person or that you're unaware of the sufferings and injustices of the world. So that you're ignorant or that you're just callous that you're just out there for your own advancement. So ... kind of that way of thinking about happiness or positivity kind of makes it seem like you can't ethically be happy. Like the happiness in this world is ethically wrong or just unintelligent.

And I really profoundly disagree with that. I think if you take that posture, and you deny yourself various joys and happiness, then you're just a more unpleasant person for everyone in your life. And that doesn't actually help anyone. It just makes you feel more righteous. Sorry, I'm being very polemic. But I think that is true. But then I think also it forgets the fact that all the reasons we should feel sad or angry in the world are kind of underlying this sense that life is meant to be good, that we're meant to thrive, that we're meant to have good relationships. And I think if you lose touch with that kind of undercurrent of joy, you just become bitter. It's not a productive anger. It's just a kind of cynical anger.

H: Yeah. Yeah.

J: So anyway, so ... the book is actually much lighter than it sounds. It was kind of like ... it's a collection of essays on kind of different facets I think that it takes to be happy in the world. The title is actually taken from someone who responded to some very innocuous tweet of mine and said, "This is disgusting. You're so aggressively happy." And I was like, "You know what?"

H: Yes, I am.

J: And I literally was like, "Thank you. I'm adding that to my Twitter bio." And to be fair, like, I don't resent this person at all. I sent them a copy of the book. Anyway, so that's it. It's ten essays, I hope humorous. I did try to make them humorous. But about ... kind of a case for happiness, and how to be happy, and why it actually does make a difference.

H: It's so important. It's something that's come up on this podcast before. We had the Reverend Winnie Varghese saying a congregation can only be as happy as its leader. And to me, that seemed revolutionary, because I think academics and priests have this tendency to think, "If I'm not really busy and suffering a little bit, then I'm not doing enough, or I'm not taking things seriously enough." I was just talking to one of our ordinands about this the other day, who was so grateful for that line from Winnie kind of dignifying his feeling that, *Actually, like, it's okay and good for me to be happy as a leader.*

J: Yes. Yeah, absolutely.

H: But it's funny that that's actually a controversial stance.

J: Yeah.

B: No, I mean, thank you for naming this, Hannah. It seems to me like divinity school types can sometimes fall into a kind of gravity, you know, the seriousness that you describe. And I think we need to be reminded of joy. And I'm so thankful for the reminder in your writing. I'm recalling Resistance Revival Chorus out of New York City, and they formed shortly after the election of Donald Trump. And I think their hope was that they would cultivate through the singing of mostly spirituals, African-American spirituals, though they're a secular chorus of women, that they would catalyze a community of resistance, but one that was rooted and fueled by their own joy. Because they really wisely saw that cynicism and anger *only* was not adequate fuel for the work of transforming the world. There's plenty to be angry about. There's a kind of sacred anger that's really important that I think we should not repress. And it's a powerful fuel, but it can't be the only fuel.

And so thank you. So for just sort of raising this up. And as a self-professed golden retriever, I mean, it is my natural disposition to be joyous. And so I do need to hear from time to time the kind of toxic positivity critique. I'm open to that. But I don't hear you preaching that. I hear you sort of lifting up, kind of holding a bow if I'm hearing it right.

J: I have also occasionally been, whether or not it's accurate, I have been described as a golden retriever as well.

B: I'm wondering, Joy, what's the hardest part of your work as a writer and theologian? And I mean, I sense lots of joy and the creativity, you know, manifold ways that you're sort of expressing yourself and connecting with folks. But I mean, what's the challenge of all of this beautiful work?

J: I think for me, perhaps having a bit of that golden retriever energy, I have a hard time saying no or closing doors. I don't just mean like, you know, have boundaries. I mean, like, there are all these wonderful things in the world we could do. And I'm at a stage in life where, especially when I mean, Hannah, you know, this: when you, when you finish the studies, there's this like the world is my oyster, you know, if not in an acquiring-income way, at least in a "the possibilities are," you know, "exist." Yeah ... I should have taken another career if that was that was the intention.

And so I think that I have a tendency to get quite close to burnout, I can exhaust myself, and then feel like I don't have the energy to give the things that I love the attention they deserve. So I think, yeah, that's something that I think I'm growing in. But I have always had kind of like a cycle where I would take on too much, get to the point of like, physical burnout. Usually my body gives up before my brain does. What could that possibly be? I know, that's wild. Definitely some metaphors in that. And then I say no to everything. And then I'm like, "Oh, I'm a little more rested now. I'll say yes to everything!"

I think below that is kind of a need to have discernment. You can't do everything in the world. So part of it is about discerning ... *What are the things that I'm actually good at, that I actually*

*love that I actually do have to give the church or other people?* And then also some element of kind of faith and trust that saying no to things is closing a door, but trusting that there will still be other doors open, and that there's not a kind of zero-sum game, that actually making choices in the direction of health and enthusiasm and sometimes saying no to things that seem really valuable that you feel like only you can do—trusting that somebody else will take care of that. And actually, there are many people in the world who are gifted and good. And so if you say no, someone better than you might say yes. And that would be a good thing. And also trusting at some level that God is leading you and will help you go through the right doors and say no to the right things and not just say yes out of kind ... of an anxiety to do everything. That's probably one of the things I struggle with most.

B: If I can put you on the spot, because I know lots of seminarians are listening and discernment is one of those words, right? That they hear a lot about, or think a lot about, or pray for, like, how do I know? What is my path? And do you have any wisdom either for seminarians, aspiring theologians, or lay folks who have stumbled upon this podcast—teachers, lawyers, doctors, plumbers, your average believer, who is maybe a little frustrated. Like, *God, just tell me what it is that I'm called to do!* I mean, I can think of so many moments in my life where I just wish that God would be a little clearer and just give me a map. But like, can you say a little bit about what discernment means for you sort of practically? How do you discern? Are there various types of prayer or practices that help you discern?

J: Yeah, I think, take this with a grain of salt. And on some level, it may not sound very spiritual, but I think it's trusting more in the fact that everything is spiritual. And so spiritual isn't kind of a special thing that we do when we have a tingly feeling. I get this more and it's kind of a terrifying thing to get, because I teach graduate students. And so they come with these big questions about their vocation, and who they're going to be. And I think that a lot of discernment is actually kind of just practice of, *What are the actual options in front of me? What am I good at? What do I consistently find myself doing? What do I need?*

Increasingly, what I tell people is kind of, just think practically about how to support yourself, how to be in a place that will make you happy enough to be able to be a resource of love and generosity to other people. Think about what kind of life you want to have and think about where you consistently find yourself. Not everything that you need to discern will be easy, right? There are things that I do in my life that I think I am called to that are not easy. But I think that there is a sense that we are called to the things that we continually are drawn to. And kind of looking at our desires, I think, is also important, and not feeling guilty about going in the direction of desire.

And also just... I don't know, this is advice I give people a lot. This is the part that you can say, "No, Joy, that's bad. That's not spiritual!" *It doesn't really matter.* Like you are, you know ... read a little Ecclesiastes. We are all tiny little dots. We are little blips on the face of time. And God cares about the little blips that we are. But you are not going to mess it up if you decide to do this internship instead of that internship because you wanted to.

H: Yeah, yeah. Louder for the people in the back.

J: Just kind of relax. Do what you want, do what you can do to support yourself. Go in the

direction of relationships and health and happiness. Just remember that you are not a big deal.

B: So Augustine is just popping up in my mind, I am hearing so much Augustine in terms of the desire. But also, like, *Love God and do what you will*. Ultimately, we trust that God's providence is even bigger and has even more sovereignty than ... sort of the whim of the moment or our sort of ... you know, walking this path or that path. So thank you for the, sort of, the reminder, and to trust in providence.

J: Yes, amen.

H: Yes and amen. Yeah, I like to think God doesn't need me to do anything. It could just happen without me a hundred percent of the time. But like, being part of the song and dance is kind of fun. And I can do it over here or over there.

J: I know. And I was also thinking recently, like, I think God guides us and we trust providence, but also, we get to make decisions, no matter how much that actually influences the course of our life.

H: Right.

J: And so on some level, I think that's pretty cool. I can look at something and say, this one sounds like more fun, it's closer to my family. And, you know, you can *choose* that. And kind of also on some level relishing the fact that you can choose and that there's not some imaginary one that God's like, *Ah, you picked the wrong one*. You know.

H: Yeah. *You went through the wrong door*.

J: *Now, what's my plan now?* You know, God didn't miscalculate so that your small decision in the other direction would actually mess up his plan.

B: I'm so sure that I've said this before on this podcast and I'll say it again, but I'm thinking of Thomas Keating, the founder of the Centering Prayer Movement, Trappist monk, and Yale student for a year anyway. He used to say, "Your spiritual life is none of your business" for precisely this reason. So like, God is sort of working in your life and we can really, really overthink, you know, what God might be asking us to do. It's brought me a lot of relief sometimes to remember the providence of God in all of this. And in the power of my own choice, and at the end of the day, God's going to make even my imperfect choices somehow better.

J: Yes. Yeah.

B: A tradition of ours has been to land the plane by thinking about hope. And so I'm wondering, Joy, as you think about the work ahead, the challenges of the world, the urgency of so many issues, and amidst what feels like a dumpster fire, simile alert, um, What gives you hope, uh, amid all of this?

J: The very first thing that came to mind, so I shall just say it, are the faces of my nieces and nephews. So I dedicated *Aggressively Happy* to my namesake niece, Lilian Joy. And I think there is something about children and their innocence that is inherently hopeful. They haven't grown cynical yet. But I think there's also something about children that makes me recalcitrantly hopeful because if you look at a child and you say, No matter what happens to me, you know, my life will be shorter than theirs, they have to live in this world that we live in. And so I have to be hopeful that we can change things, that we can give them the tools they need to live well, that we can continue to nourish and pass on the faith to the next generation, or else I'm betraying them.

And so hope is both something that they inspire in me because there is something hopeful and promising about children. But there is also this sense in which they remind me that it's kind of almost my duty to hope so that I can, in my adult way, help make the world a better place for them.

B: Oh, this has been such a beautiful conversation, Joy. I'm so, so thankful. And we, you know, we covered the great Peters and Pauls of Christian history. Peter Gabriel, and Paul Ricoeur. And we ended with hope. Like, this is a full conversation in my book. I'm so, so happy.

H: How long have you been waiting with that one?

B: About 40 minutes.

H: That's beautiful, really beautiful. Oh my gosh. Thank you so much, Joy. It has been a joy. I can't wait to keep talking, keep reading, and I'm looking forward to our listeners grabbing a copy of *You Are a Tree* and enjoying it as much as I have. So thank you so much for this. Thank you.

B: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at [berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/podcast](http://berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/podcast).

H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley at Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time.

H: The Lord be with you.