

Examples of Small moments of joy and gratitude (discussed in article Balance 2)

One night, I came home from the hospital after doing an incredible emergency case. I went into work that day thinking it would be a light day, but there was a child with a rapidly evolving problem and by noon it became clear he needed urgent surgery—something I wasn't so certain we could get him through. But I did the case, the child did terrific, and I came home still in the grips of all the adrenaline and processing the events and outcome and just, frankly, in my own world of feeling simultaneous relief (that the child had done so well), pride (that I actually was able to do what needed to be done and with such a good outcome), gratitude (that it all worked out and I could go home happy) and appreciation (for my team for hanging with me through this difficult decision). I get home and Jamie begins to tell me about her day—fairly mundane stuff to me considering where my head was at but then, she had been having her own day, separate from me, but getting some things done that needed doing. Oh, and by the way, she said: “I knew you were in the OR all day, so I got you some watermelon (I love watermelon after a long day in the OR) and some Gatorade (for some reason, probably based in fact, Jamie is convinced I don't hydrate enough). And I just looked at her and it all made sense how blessed I am. Now, we've done a lot of training, done a lot of learning (meaning we've made a lot of mistakes) and I was able to look at her and just say: “Thanks. Wow, that is really wonderful. I need some time to just decompress. I want to hear about your day and I just need some time to let my body and mind re enter. And we hugged—we turned towards each other.

In our book, we describe this experience shared with us by a colleague (P. 221)

A busy and prominent physician colleague described being surprised one morning by joy (ironically not knowing of the book by that title by C.S. Lewis). He had created an inflexible, intense, and rigid schedule focused entirely on the context of his work life. He would wake up a 5:00 am, drink a cup of coffee, shower, dress, and be out the door by 5:45 to get to the hospital. One morning prior to walking out the door and for reasons he never understood, he leaned over and kissed his wife, who was sound asleep, on the forehead. He was certain he didn't awaken her, but she responded with the gentlest, most ethereal and relaxed smile lighting her countenance in the darkness of the predawn. He stood there in place, stunned and moved, and he felt an enveloping, overwhelming sense of gratitude and joy. It was for him a transcendent experience, (a veritable “wake up” moment for both of them). The power was in the fact that it was unscripted, unplanned, unanticipated, and totally and completely genuine.

When he returned home that night, he shared his experience with his wife, who recalled nothing of it. He recounted how that moment of joy created a shift in him, in his priorities and in the way he decided to value the treasure of each day. The warmth of the joy he felt at that moment lives with him to this day. He says the meaningfulness of that experience has improved his connection with his patients, colleagues, and most importantly, with himself. That is the unfathomable power of joy.