

## On Joyful Activities

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“Pleasure is the starting point and end of living blessedly,” [Epicurus wrote](#) more than two thousand years ago. I agree with that statement, but I prefer to use “joy” instead of pleasure. For pleasure is a short, often momentary, feeling, which is “[conducive to sadness after the so-called peak has been reached](#),” to quote Erich Fromm. On the contrary, after doing joyful activities I feel content for at least a few hours, if not a few days. Eating lasagna is pleasing, but cooking that lasagna is joyous. Joy is present during the activity and perseveres afterwards—Fromm calls it a “[feeling state that accompanies the productive expression of one’s essential human faculties](#).”

But how to achieve joy? Thinking about what has brought me deep, long-lasting delight in the past 37 years, I have come up with four common themes. Recounting them helps me understand myself better and offers a deeper intro than a biographical one. And when I meet someone—a date, a friend, or a colleague—discovering what brings them joy fascinates me the most.

The first joyous theme is *creating*, interpreted broadly to include developing and making. This includes making something from scratch, or growing and improving an existing object, like rearing a plant, or even following a recipe to cook a meal, transforming the raw ingredients into something delicious.

A creation need not be physical—it can be a group or a community. When I started the radio class in journalism school, I was one of a group of individuals trying to put together a weekly radio newscast. We were focused on our own tasks and didn’t notice or care much about other classmates’ troubles. During the term, the instructor Paul Gott turned us into a team. In the last weeks, we were helping each other and filling each other’s gaps; one of my classmates introduced her boyfriend to me as an interview subject, and I helped edit other classmates’ work right after sending in my piece. Growing these lost individuals into a closely-knit squad must have been a fascinating experience for Paul.

Nurturing a human relationship, be it a family, friendship, or a romantic relationship, resembles growing a plant and is quite satisfying, as is computer programming, wherein one creates a simple function or a complex software system out of nothing.

Often, creation has many layers. Publishing a mathematical article, for instance, involves devising a mathematical proof, akin to planning a building, and articulating that proof in a mathematical paper, which parallels executing the architect's plan.

Effort is a crucial ingredient in creating. For each episode of [my podcast](#), I put together a story, a narration, and pieces of music, then edit them together and advertise it on social media. A tiring, time-consuming process, which I go through for the bliss I experience while doing it and the satisfaction I feel when listening to the result.

A few years ago, I went to a ceramic cafe with a friend and spent two hours painting a small angry-bird plate with red, black, white, and yellow. I have other plates that look more beautiful to others, but I use this one every day because it reminds me of the quality time spent with a friend. It's as if I have embedded parts of myself and my life into the plate. Similarly, as I'm writing this essay, turning my fuzzy thoughts into text, I am leaving traces of myself in it. I can imagine one reason rearing a baby is so delightful is that you save a version of yourself in them, injecting parts of yourself into who you develop.

I enjoy creating because of the effort I invest in it and the traces of myself that I leave in the world. To explain why his rose is special, Antoine de Saint Exupéry's [Little Prince](#) says, "Because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars...; because it is she that I have listened to."



*The angry-bird plate I painted in 2019 reminds me of the quality time spent with a friend.*

The qualities of what I create are also important; it should be valuable—useful, beautiful, or high-quality in some way. Take photography, for example: turning a view into a picture that I can save on paper and cherish forever. A photograph I take shows how I view the world, so it has traces of me; it requires considerable effort to get the lighting and composition right; and if the result is a beautiful picture, it's satisfying to look and share.

To create beauty, we must first encounter beauty, which holds its own delights. Spending time in the Rockies and listening to Mozart bring joy, yet I think creating beauty surpasses these pleasures. To create beauty, one needs to master the art of creating, which leads to my second theme, *mastering*.

Mastering a skill doesn't necessarily mean achieving expertise but rather involves continuous self-improvement. In the summer of 2021, I devoted myself to long-ride biking. Starting in early May—when summer starts in Montreal—with a 50km ride, in every subsequent ride I increased the distance by 10 kilometres or so, reaching 186km by the end of summer. I was slowly mastering long-ride biking, and every time I could break my own record, I experienced immense joy.

When I was a student, solving mathematical problems was my greatest pleasure, starting from easy problems in high school and solving growingly harder problems as I went to undergraduate and then the PhD. My thirst for problem-solving has transformed into solving chess puzzles today.



*A photograph I took in 2021.*

Mastering goes hand in hand with learning. That learning a new language, a new instrument, or a new sport is blissful—regardless of one’s age or occupation—is not a mystery; there are books written about [the joys of lifelong learning](#).

There is also joy in trying something new without aiming to master it. This leads to my third theme, *exploring*. Exploring means discovering new places, new people, new activities, expanding one’s comfort zone and tasting the various flavours of the world. Mastering a skill means continuously improving, but exploring means trying an activity just for the sake of experience. Both have their own, distinct joys.

Travelling is the most obvious example of exploring. I agree with Alain De Botton that “[few activities seem to promise us as much happiness as going travelling: taking off for somewhere else, somewhere far from home, a place with more interesting weather, customs, and landscapes](#).”



*I love travelling on trains. I took this picture when transitioning through Munich Central Station in 2017.*

In [The Happiness of Pursuit](#), Chris Guillebeau writes about his quest to visit every country in the world by the age of 35. Why? Because exploring Earth is a natural human joy. I have lived in Tehran, Waterloo (Ontario), Melbourne, Toronto, Vancouver, and Berkeley (California) before coming to Montreal in 2017, because I love to explore and live in different cities.

But exploring isn't limited to travelling. By watching a documentary about a different place, you can explore it without physically moving there. You can explore your city and find new neighbourhoods and cafes, read new types of books and listen to new types of music, or explore in the realm of careers. I studied journalism for a year to experience a work very different from my prior work as a mathematician. That year was the most satisfying period of my life, and exploring a new career was [the best decision of my past decade](#).

Some of my exploratory activities, which I have no plans to pursue or master, were riding a truck in Waterloo, backpacking in Australia, taking an Azeri dance class in Vancouver, and working as the sound manager for a play in Montreal. This last experience was joyful from another angle too. I created strong bonds with the theatre team and they felt like a family after three months of rehearsal. This brings me to my final theme, *bonding and connecting*.



*Creating a piece of art, a play in this case, can form strong bonds. We performed in Montreal in 2019.*

Human relationships come in a variety of types: romantic, parent-child, coworking, acting in the same theatre team, and so on. Developing deep connections in any of them is delightful. To connect with someone means to *get close* to them emotionally, which is the very verb used in Persian for bonding—*nazdik shodan*.

[The longest in-depth study on human life](#) has a one-sentence conclusion: “[Good relationships lead to health and happiness](#)”. But “[those relationships must be nurtured](#),” add the study directors. Deep, close connections not only are joyful but also lead to better physical health.

Pleasure also exists in connecting to non-humans such as pets and flowers—remember Little Prince’s rose?—and nature in general. Hence my love for long hikes and camping.



*Long hikes nurture my connection with nature. Taken in 2017 in Laurentians Parks.*

Another type of connection is with myself, which is cultivated when I do yoga. I have been journaling since high school, and by reading these diaries I connect to my former self.

I experience yet another type of connection when I listen to a beautiful piece of traditional Iranian music. The music takes me out of this material universe to an ideal one, and I feel connected to that unworldly world. All forms of art—especially film, music, and theatre—can connect us to that ideal universe.

Connection is listed as my last theme not because it's the least important but because it's so evident. In [Lost Connections](#), for instance, Johann Hari lists nine major causes of depression and anxiety, seven of which result from losing connections.

Building connections makes other activities more satisfying as well. Charitable acts feel better when a connection is made—it's difficult to find joy in helping someone to whom we're not connected; The favourite episodes of my podcast are those after which I hear "I connected to that story" most often from my audience; And the most fascinating moments of travelling happen when I connect with someone who doesn't speak my language.

It's not always easy to embody these themes of joy into real life with all its demands. Although my purpose in life is to spend time doing activities that bring me satisfaction as opposed to achieving things, I have learned that some achievements are necessary to ease access to joyful activities. I needed to get that PhD degree to do my current job, which provides me with the financial safety and the peace of mind (which I'm privileged to have, I acknowledge) to pursue the activities I delight in. I aspire to maximize the time I spend on the latter, but in reality, most of my time is spent on satisfying the basic needs of life, eating, sleeping, and working to earn an income. C'est la vie.

My happiness formula has evolved as I grew and gained new experiences, and I believe every person has different themes of joy, shaped by their character and circumstances. Thinking about them may lead to a more joyful life. So, I'll leave you with this question: What brings YOU joy?