

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STASI ELDREDGE

Defiant

JOY

TAKING HOLD OF HOPE,

BEAUTY, AND LIFE IN A HURTING WORLD



Defiant
JOY

Also by Stasi Eldredge

To come.

Defiant
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*TAKING HOLD OF HOPE,
BEAUTY, AND LIFE IN A HURTING WORLD*

STASI ELDREDGE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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ISBN 978-1-4002-0869-2 (TP)

ISBN 978-1-4002-0870-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP to come.

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Jesus, of course.
The fount and future of all joy.
It's all for You.*

*And those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

—ISAIAH 35:10 NIV

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Introduction

Why *Defiant Joy*? Why not read a book simply on joy? The answer is an easy one. In this world where we find ourselves living , having joy often feels both crazy and out of reach. That’s why the title of this book includes the word *defiant*. Defiant means to stand against the tide. It means to go against the flow, even when the flow is composed of a strong current of despair and difficulty.

To have joy in the midst of sorrow—or the current news feed—can seem impossible. And all on our own, it is impossible. But just as the angel Gabriel said after making his outlandish proclamation to Mary that she, a virgin, would give birth to the Savior of the world, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37 NASB).

Joy is meant to be ours, a joy that is defiant in the face of this broken world. Our hearts are to echo the heartbeat of our joyous God. Now, this isn’t about skipping around in the garden singing, “I’m so happy in Jesus every day.” This is

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about being present to whatever may be coming our way and, in the midst of both the goodness and the grief, knowing joy.

Believing that sorrow and loss do not have the final word takes defiance. It requires a strength of spirit that must be nurtured. It means engaging our lives fully but interpreting them by the highlight of heaven. Denying the truth of reality is not the answer; being fully present to it is.

The invitation from God to “rejoice, again I say rejoice”¹ comes to us in the middle of our lowest lows as well as our highest highs. How do we do that? Let’s find out together.

One

A Holy Defiance

Joy is the serious business of Heaven.

—C. S. LEWIS

It is a quiet morning. The house is empty save for our two resigned dogs—resigned because they sense this master will not be taking them on a walk anytime soon. They know it from my slow movements, which cause their natural exuberance to dim. This morning, I will not allow myself to be baited by their soft, desire-filled eyes. *Sorry, guys. The bed is just too cozy, and it's my day off.*

Suddenly the quiet is broken as my youngest golden, Maisie, still a puppy by every standard, dashes from my bedside and

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begins to bark indignantly. I can guess the reason. It is the bark she uses to alert all within earshot that some neighboring cow has trespassed onto her property. Looking out my bedroom window, I see a confused little black bovine, backside still raw with the telltale signs of a too-new brand, wandering along our side of the fence. Our offended dog will let this calf, separated from her lumbering mother, know her mistake. There will be no reunions on Maisie's front porch.

In the peace that returns after Maisie calms down, having barked the calf on her way, I notice the air smells of smoke. It is the height of summer now: fire season. There is a fire burning somewhere close. Too close.

The smell of smoke used to be one I liked. It is reminiscent of campfires and conversations, marshmallows when I was young. Now, though, I am too closely acquainted with forest fires. We've lived through three fires since moving to Colorado, but the Waldo Canyon fire that swept through Colorado in 2012, burning 347 homes and swallowing 18,000 acres of gorgeous forest, had come the closest. The hungry flames came within twenty feet of our house. The courageous firefighters and Vandenberg Air Force Base "Hot Shots" gave it up for lost, taking their stand across our street against the raging inferno. We evacuated in speed, shock, and tears, and for long minutes we did not know if we would live or die, swallowed up by flames ourselves. No. I no longer find the fragrance of smoke comforting.

Flames are licking all around us, aren't they? All the time. Saint Peter describes our life here on this earth as a "fiery

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ordeal” (1 Peter 4:12). Tragedies and heartache and pressures and illnesses and irritations grand and small show up indiscriminately, and they do not limit themselves to one season. I become very sick, but my husband becomes much more ill at the same time—and my children hit a crisis and the call comes telling us of a loved one dying and the letter arrives from the IRS telling us we are going to be audited and the plea for help arrives in our inbox from a friend because her son is suicidal and the deadline for a project is pending and another friend has found a lump in her breast, and all this occurs within two days.

Life is hard, and it doesn't seem to let up.

I know that in comparison to most, my own life has not been so bad. I am not a refugee. I am not living in the middle of a drought-filled land, praying that my child will survive another day. My daily reality is not set in a war zone (well, at least not one that can be seen). I am not living on the streets. I have a roof over my head. I have running water that will not make me ill. When I put my feet on the floor after a night's sleep, there is carpet underneath them. I am a resident of the United States and living a life of luxury in comparison to 90 percent of the human population. I'm very aware of all this.

But such facts, though true and humbling, don't help me most of the time. Too often they serve only to shame me and keep me from being present to the sorrow in my life that threatens to swallow up everything, like a forest fire that looms near. Too near. Yes, I want to be aware of others in the

world. I do want to grow in compassion, but that will require me to feel my own pain, to not run from it through comparisons that only serve to diminish my own hard. When I do not have compassion for myself in my own trials, my compassion for others also goes down—both for those whose sorrows I have known in part and those whose sorrows I have not. Besides, the grace of God is not present in my comparisons. It is here for me in my moment. If I run from my reality, I also run from the presence of God.

So my heart scans the horizon in the quiet of the morning when the faint smell of smoke rises, and I ask, “Where are You, God?”

And the answer comes from deep within. “I’m right here.”

Defiance, Not Denial

Our home had been overtaken by fairy lights. Christmas twinkle lights, boughs of evergreens, ribbons of red, and the fragrance of pine filled the living room. It was the night of our annual Christmas party, and I was ready. I’d been decorating for weeks. Even the bathroom had a little sleigh in it.

Once a year our team gathers in our home to celebrate all that God has done through our little ministry. We reflect. We give thanks. We feast. We laugh. And we get all dressed up to do it. Plus, it’s catered, so there’s that. It’s planned two months in advance, and as it draws near the expectation of joy rises exponentially.

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That year, I had a spare moment on the afternoon of the party before I needed to get dressed, so, as is often the case, I went online to check out what was happening in the world. Take a look at emails. Update my Facebook status.

When I did, I learned what had transpired that day and wept with shock and despair. My soul was filled with anger and deep sorrow.

A lone gunman had opened fire on elementary school-aged children, killing twenty six-and seven-year-olds in a terrifying and horrific spree. Six adult staff were also shot and killed. It was the deadliest shooting at any school in the United States. After brutally taking these precious lives, the gunman had committed suicide.¹

I found my husband and told him of the tragedy. We wept and prayed together. Then, as we thought about all the people who were about to show up at our house, we wondered, How could we celebrate life in the face of such wickedness and loss?

And that's when the phrase "defiant joy" was born. We would not cancel the party. We would gather. We would not pretend that the shootings had not taken place, nor would we forget that a whole community was grieving the children lost, but we would proclaim that even so, *even so*, there was a reason to celebrate—particularly since it was Christmastime, when we gather to honor and remember the invasion of the kingdom of God. That's what Christmas is, you know. It's an *invasion*.

The battle between good and evil could not have been made starker on that day, and it looked like a victory for the

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kingdom of darkness. But we needed to remember that Jesus had entered the darkness and brought the light. His unending life signaled the end to the rule of evil and proclaimed the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God. Yes, a battle was raging, but Jesus had won it, and we were invited to proclaim it and enforce it.

Once everyone had gathered in our home that night, we paused and prayed and, in silence, honored the children lost and the families forever changed. And then we turned our hearts to the One who is our hope in the face of loss and untold grief. Because of Jesus—His death, His resurrection, and His ascension—we chose to honor Him and celebrate that He has won and is winning still.

We feasted. We talked long into the night by candlelight and Christmas music. We lingered in one another's presence, drawing closer to the fire of each other's hearts than we might otherwise have done *because* of the pain. We were defiantly joyful.

Defiant joy is different from mere defiance. And it is completely other than denial.



April 26, 2001, 11:00 a.m. My mother had just died. Her passing was a holy one. My sisters, aunt, and I were gathered around her bed in her home, singing her into eternity. It was a precious and sacred time, made even more so by our sharing it together. At 1:00 p.m., the somber, respectful men in their

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dark suits came with a stretcher to take her body away. It was at this moment that the reality of our loss hit one of my sisters and hit her hard. She needed more time with my mother. Years of being physically and emotionally distant caught up with her. Now she refused to let the chagrined men do their work. They eventually had to leave empty-handed.

That turned out to be okay, though, because it allowed time for my aunt to take pictures. It must be a North Dakota thing. An old-world thing. I don't know. It's not my thing. My aunt carefully placed flowers around my mother's lovely departed self and snapped away. When forty-five photos of my dead mother arrived a month later, I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do with them. Frame one?

Hours after the terrified funeral workers left, they returned, stretcher again in hand. My sister would have none of it. The rest of us thought we might have to resort to drugs. Or a straitjacket. Whether those devices would be for her or for us, we weren't sure.

A body without the spirit does not linger well. My mother's body needed to be lent into the care of others. Fortunately my brother was in the house. Strong. Firm. Determined. And angry. He had chosen not to view my mother's body after she had passed on to her forever home, but my sister's pain forced him to. He had to go into my mother's bedroom and convince my sister to let her go.

It was with sorrow, with unabsorbed grief, and with a camera snapping that I stood by as they finally wheeled my mother's body past.

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What is one to do after such a moment but acquiesce to my aunt's offer to go get some dinner?

Okay. You betcha. Super. Besides, she had already chosen the restaurant.

In shell shock, we all piled into her car as she drove us to a teppanyaki restaurant. Do you know the kind I'm talking about? It's the one where diners gather around a common table while the chef awes the guests with his prowess with cutlery. Up in the air goes the zucchini. Down come the chopped spirals. I had no words.

There we were, reeling from the trauma not only of my mother's passing but from my sister's heart-wrenching grief, and we were supposed to be cheering for an onion volcano. Suffice it to say, we were not the chef's best audience that night.

I tell you this story in its somewhat macabre humor as an illustration of denial. Going to a festive dinner that night was very different from our Christmas celebration years later. One was honest, somber, and present both to the reality of the day and the reality of eternity, and the other was numbing and dishonoring, increasing our sorrow by diminishing it. We don't want to live in denial. We want to embrace defiant joy.

The evening after my mother's passing was simply not a time for cheering; it was a time for weeping. It was a time to allow our hearts the quiet, the rest, and the repose they needed to begin to absorb the loss. Beauty would have helped. A quiet walk in the woods or along the shore would have been good. But instead we got blades, flames, and suppression of

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the sorrow filling our hearts. Trying to diminish the pain only increased its potency.

Ignoring reality does not breed joy. Pretending that what is true does not exist is not holy defiance. The seeds of joy can only be firmly planted in the pungent soil of the here and now while at the same time being tethered to eternity. Joy is fully rooted in the truth. Joy embraces all the senses and is fully awake to the laughter, the wonder, and the beauty present in the moment as well as the sorrow, the angst, and the fear. Joy says, “Even so, I have a reason to celebrate.”

Crazy, right? Sounds like God. A God who laughs at the sneers of the enemy, stares suffering in the face, and proclaims with fierce love, “You do not have the final word.” And as He does, He captures our deep hearts with a hope that defies death.

Defiant may not be a word we would normally associate with the living God, but it can actually be quite fitting. Defiance means resistance, opposition, noncompliance, disobedience, dissent, and rebellion. And when it comes to things that would destroy our souls, that is exactly the right response.

We are called to resist the lies of the enemy. Like Christian on his pilgrimage, we do not comply with the Vanity Fair offerings of the world. We are instructed not to obey the clamoring of the flesh. We are urged to rebel against sin. By the life of Christ in us, we oppose death and destruction. We dissent by casting our vote against the belief that sorrow and endless suffering win.

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Instead we welcome life, love, and the full work of Christ to bring all of His goodness into every aspect of our and His domains. We comply with truth. We obey our God. We respect His authority and His final say. We overcome evil with good. We defy hatred by embracing love.

We choose joy.

In the midst of all the suffering in the world, it can feel irresponsible, even frivolous, to have joy. And yet, and still, we are called to it. Certainly there is a time to grieve. There is a time to mourn. To wail. To sigh. There is a time to know our loss and not have to cheer the teppanyaki chef, but that doesn't mean we can't have joy even in that painful knowing. Joy is the heartbeat of the kingdom of God. Joy is what sustains us; it is our strength. We can be resilient. We can be filled with the expectation of good things.

And we can have joy in the midst of the lamentations of our lives.

Joy, Not Happiness

What exactly does it mean, though, to have joy? I think we know instinctively that joy is different from happiness. Both are great. But joy seems higher, doesn't it? Better somehow. Rooted in more reliable things.

Happiness is circumstantial. I'm happy when I wake up and realize it's not Monday but Saturday—I have a day off! I'm happy when someone brings me a cup of coffee. I'm

happy when I get a birthday card. I'm sad when a vacation is over. I'm sad when I mishandle the heart of a friend. I'm sad when no one remembers my birthday.

I love being happy. But happiness is unpredictable; it feels vulnerable because it is tied to my circumstances. And don't we all know it. One day you're up; next day you're down. Circumstantial happiness is an emotional roller coaster; it can really take you for a ride. It makes us heartsick in the way rolling seas and careening decks make us seasick.

Joy is something else altogether. It feels firmer, richer, less vulnerable somehow. I'm happy when my family goes out for ice cream, but it seems a little overblown to say I was filled with joy because of it. I was joyful at all three of my sons' weddings. I was filled with joy over the birth of our granddaughters. Joy flooded my heart when a dear friend was cleared of cancer. I don't think it was merely happiness; the joy felt rooted in the presence of God. His hand was so evident.

Joy is *not* happiness on steroids. It is not happiness squared. Every healthy human being has the capacity to feel happiness, but joy is something entirely different, made up of its own unique substance. It doesn't come with the price of admission. Joy is connected to God and reserved for those who are tapping into His reservoir, who are connected to His life.

Joy is rooted in God and His kingdom, in the surety of His goodness, His love for us. It is immovable. Unshakable. Joy is available at all times, day and night, because God and

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His kingdom are always available to us. I'm ready to get off the roller coaster of happiness; I want my heart grounded in the higher place of joy. I bet you do too.

Who among us does not want more joy in our lives? In our work. In our marriages. In our relationships. With our children. In our quiet moments alone. If joy is a fruit of the Spirit (and it is), then we are meant to experience and enjoy it, regardless of our circumstances. Whatever may be swirling around us, the eye of the storm is joy. But how do we get there? The simple answer is we need to come to know God more deeply. When we do, we can believe and rest in His faithful, immovable, immeasurable love for us in every moment we are in.

Joy *is* the heartbeat of heaven, the very light that emanates from Jesus' heart, so as we grow closer in relationship with God, we'll also grow in joy. We'll see that He is not spending His moments wringing His hands, as we are sometimes prone to do. He is not braced against the future or overcome by serious hardship. His joy is never up for grabs. Rather, His joy is immovable, just as He is. It is an essential part of His very person.

Meister Eckhart wrote:

Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity?

I will tell you.

In the heart of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son.

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The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit.

The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us.²

We are born from the laughter of the Trinity. What an amazing thought. As image bearers of the Living God, surely joy is written deep in our very hearts. So it should come naturally, right?

Time for a confession. I am not a naturally joyful person. My battle in life has not been needing to be pulled back into reality because of my Pollyanna worldview. My battle has been with depression. Ranging from debilitating to a mental-health low-grade fever, the struggle to get out of bed in the morning is one I am acquainted with. I know what it feels like to spend your days walking through sludge up to your knees with a heavy cloak on your back. But I also know the incredible feeling of having it replaced with a sense of hope and promise leading to a deep, untouchable joy. I'm learning. I do want to get off the emotional rollercoaster of circumstantial happiness. I do want to be rooted and grounded in joy. Sometimes, though, it takes more intentionality to pursue it in our lives. Sometimes it's hard to take hold of. But it's worth it.

That's what I'm after. That's what I believe God is calling us to. It's what I am calling us to as well.