

Commentary:

It's difficult to find joy in the here and now

By **TIM O'TOOLE**

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GOSPEL, n. from Old English g dspel (g d good + spell tale)

The other day, as I hiked the wooded trails of [Five Rivers](#) (Environmental Conservation's nature center south of Albany), a thought occurred to me. Do ducks feel joy when they fly? No need for my wife to warn me about anthropomorphizing this time. I am not talking about an inanimate object. Just speculating on what it must feel like each time a mallard stretches its wings, then hurls itself into the sky, for mile after mile of strenuous exercise.

Hummingbirds, geese and monarch butterflies must also be beneficiaries of some secret delight when they cross the Gulf of Mexico. (No 13.1 or 26.2 stickers adorn their bumpers trumpeting their annual accomplishment.)

I checked a few reliable sources about joy — something in short supply these days, with Ebola and ISIS monopolizing the post-election news cycle.

One familiar source, Mother Theresa counseled: " The best way to show your gratitude to God and people is to accept everything with joy ...We may not be able to give much but we can always give the joy that springs from a heart that is in love with God. All over the world people are hungry and thirsty for God's love. We meet

that hunger by spreading joy. Joy is one of the best safeguards against temptation."

A lesser known sage, Dr. [Alice von Hildebrand](#), philosophy professor at New York City's [Hunter College](#) posited "We are made for joy. But this joy can never be fully experienced here on earth. God's joy is ultimately realized in eternity."

It would be nice if I could fully experience joy in the here and now, but it is hard for me to feel elated when my neighbors are cold and hungry, working minimum wage jobs (if they are working) while tuxedoed "swells" dine elegantly courtesy of corporate expense accounts.

It is hard for me to feel joy when our fragile democracy is for sale to the highest bidder. It is hard for me to feel joy when women's reproductive health is treated as a political football. It is hard for me to feel joy when charter schools embrace a "divide and conquer" philosophy, undermining public education. Don't ask me about fracking, which seeks to appropriate New York's pure water resources in the name of pure profit.

Let me not forget global warming and America's crumbling infrastructure. No joy there.

And it is extremely distressing when Boko Haram enslaves young women in Nigeria, while ISIS beheads aid workers and journalists in Syria.

Mother Theresa knew how to spread joy amidst the extreme poverty of Calcutta. Perhaps it is more difficult to spread joy amidst American affluence. Especially an affluence that is not shared with lowly employees who helped create such wealth.

"Joy is one of the best safeguards against temptation." There are many temptations to choose from — including self-indulgence, indifference to the poor, delusions of grandeur or superiority over other human beings. Not to mention over-indulgence in food, drink, drugs, reality TV and sexual debauchery.

To that list I would add the continued alienation of gays, minorities, immigrants and women-in-general by religious, political and government institutions that have no interest in spreading joy to counter hunger.

It is a little early to sing "Joy to the World." Advent doesn't begin until Nov. 30. Perhaps the world will be able to avert a crisis or two before that date. If so, I will count on the Times Union to deliver the "good news."

Tim O'Toole of Albany is author of a sci-fi satire, "Sullivan's Travels," and a current-events thriller, "The American Pope."