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**Subject:** Special Edition Teaching Toolbox: Finding Joy, Even in Terrible Times  
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**Special Edition Teaching Toolbox**  
**Finding Joy, Even in Terrible Times**  
by Emily O. Gravett

We've reached the end of a really terrible, dark, weird, boring, wild, scary, harried semester. In just a few months, the coronavirus has ravaged the globe; lives and livelihoods have been lost; some communities have been disproportionately affected while others are riding out the storm from the comfort of their homes; divides and disparities, of every imaginable kind, have deepened; the category of [essential workers](#) has expanded, now including not just ER doctors, but supermarket cashiers and the housekeeping staff who keep facilities like ours sanitized; we are all overwhelmed and worried and burnt out. All of this is true and real. There is much to [grieve](#) here.

AND. (You knew there would be a "[yes, and](#)" with me, didn't you?) And we can [recover joy, not just in our teaching](#), but beyond.

In his entry on "Joy," from [Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words](#), David Whyte writes, "Joy is a measure of our relationship to death and our living with death.... If joy is a deep form of love, it is also the raw engagement with the passing seasonality of existence." Joy needn't be a forced, false optimism that shoves anything bad deep, *deep* down and pretends everything is okay. No. There is a danger to this kind of "[toxic positivity](#)." Rather, maybe we can understand joy like [Zadie Smith](#), who once defined it as a "a strange admixture of terror, pain, and delight." Or [David Steindl-Rast](#), who speaks of joy as a "happiness that doesn't depend on what happens" because what happens, so often, is thick with tragedy and terror and trauma. Joy doesn't move us away from a raw engagement with life, life as it is. Joy allows us to face it, head on.

It is my hope that we can honor the horribleness of this semester AND that we can find joy. We [contain multitudes](#), after all. And it is my hope that we can do so, no matter what any given moment may bring. I agree with Thich Nhat Hanh who writes, in [Happy Teachers Can Change the World \(2017\)](#): "you can generate a feeling of happiness and joy at any time." There are even certain benefits to doing so, as Daniel Goleman documents in [Emotional Intelligence](#). Marshalling positive feelings can go a long way toward reducing the very stress, anger, and anxiety COVID-19 has provoked in many of us.

So, I've become like Ross Gay as of late, [cataloguing delights](#). Gay thinks we develop a "delight radar" or a "delight muscle" when we do. "The more you study delight," he writes, "the more delight there is to study."

Here are the joyful delights I'm studying these days: extra time with my daughter, now that schools are closed and I'm working remotely; a mix-up at the [Co-op's curbside pickup](#) that hilariously resulted in me getting purple cabbage instead of purple cauliflower, so that I had the chance to test

out some surprisingly yummy recipes; the smiles of my students on our synchronous Zoom sessions and their end-of-the-year appreciations for our time together; the labyrinthine innards of Canvas that have given me fun (no, really) chances to problem solve; the opportunity to write [blog posts](#) for new audiences; work attire that now makes room for my favorite article of clothing (sweatpants!); my friend Lucy's professional-grade photos of fern fiddleheads and morel mushrooms; a rediscovery of my love for *The New Yorker* and wonderfully weird short story collections, like Karen Russell's *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*; the appropriately named company [CrateJoy](#) that will send me desserts on demand; the grit, grace, and innovation of educators at our institution and across the country in the face of totally unprecedented circumstances; and even those tenacious dandelions, whose fluff my five-year-old has always endearingly called "spokes," which are showing up everywhere—[even in our CFI programming](#).

In closing, you might be interested to know that, after spending a year writing about delights, Gay found that his delight grew when he shared it with others. I've shared my joys here, in this Teaching Toolbox. But now I ask you, before signing off for the summer: What is delighting you? What, amidst it all, can you still find joy in?

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