

On joy as rebellion

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I remember, months or years ago, seeing a statement make the rounds on social media that went along the lines of “your joy is rebellion”. At first I thought it was a nice sentiment. In a world that beats people down, there is power in holding one’s head high.

Then at some point I heard a take decrying this idea as harmful. I came to agree. If I wanted to ensure people did as little as possible, I would tell them that in fact their comfort was rebellious. *No, I thought, rebellion is rebellion. Joy is good and in fact necessary, but it’s hardly countercultural. Future generations won’t be grateful that I was comfortable. They’ll wonder why I wasn’t fighting tooth-and-nail. They’ll wonder why I spent so much of my life sitting still.*

Certainly if your whole being is under attack, if there is a concerted effort to make your community miserable, then there *is* something rebellious about feeling okay. In a time when trans rights are under attack, trans joy is rebellious. In a time when police and judicial action suggest Black lives do not matter, Black joy is rebellion. But, I thought, for anyone in a fairly comfortable position, joy-as-rebellion feels like an excuse to stick one’s head in the sand and be no help to anyone. Like playing video games and eating fast food is praxis ‘cause it sparks joy in an effed-up world.

My ancestors fought hard, I thought, working shit jobs with low wages so that I could one day live comfortably. What right do I have to put in any less than them? I have a moral obligation to fight as hard as them toward a greater good.

I brought this up to a friend, who countered with refreshing bluntness. “That’s dumb”, he said. “You’re intellectualizing something that doesn’t need to be intellectualized. Just do what’s right”.

A few days later, I fell ill from overwork. I spent the better part of a day sleeping. That evening I remembered a safety sign:

WARNING:

If you don’t schedule time for maintenance, your equipment will schedule it for you.

My friend was right. I was splitting hairs morally grandstanding & critiquing a straw man. Whether or not you frame joy as rebellion, joy and rest and comfort

are necessary or you become worse than useless: you become an asshole. It's not that complicated. Do what you can when you can, and take it easy too. Simple as.