My Immigrant Mother's Joy Revolution

"I don't remember ever focusing on the word joy or happiness - it was never a concept of conversation." My mother said casually as I caught up with her on the phone from a New York City cafe, not far from where she grew up after emigrating from Japan. My jaw dropped down to the cafe's cement floor after hearing this. If you've ever met Shirley Zaragoza, you know she is the human embodiment of uppercase, all caps, and bolded **JOY**. She is just over 5 feet tall, and is always a tiny bundle of happiness with a smile across her face, a Raye Zaragoza T-shirt on, and a succulent in her arms. My mother is bubbly, she is silly, and she is joyous. At the tender age of 66, she has a very youthful energy. So when I asked her what her relationship to joy was growing up, and this was her answer - *I was curious to say the least*.

She elaborates, *"In retrospect, I realized that I had to find my own interpretation of joy. My parents worked all the time. When I was young, my Mom was doing odd jobs like sewing pillow cases and my father worked in retail at a department store and was a full time student. I was more focused on my school work and obligations than joy."* I then realized that what my mother and I don't have in common is that she is an immigrant, and I am not. I may have been raised by one, but she was raised by immigrants who were quite literally *"fresh off the boat,"* and in survival mode. My grandparents had to work multiple jobs, learn a new language and attend school while raising my Mother and her siblings. I can't imagine what my grandparents went through on a day to day basis to make ends meet. I can understand that they had little time for much else. They were trying to survive.

"When was the first time you recognized joy?" I asked. She answered, *"At 4 or 5 years old, I saw joy with my friend Marci's family. They had a TV and watched the Ed Sullivan show, it was so much fun. I spent a lot of time with her family because there was a frivolity there that I didn't have at home. Marci and I loved to play with our barbies and play make believe. I think her family was happy because they interacted a lot with each other. My parents worked a lot and did not interact with me very much."* It made me a little sad that my mother first learned joy from a white non-immigrant family. What did Marci's family have that my grandparents didn't? Time? Money? I refuse to believe that joy and happiness is a privilege - but so often immigrant families like my Mother's are not set up for success in this respect. They are not set up to be frolicking through flower fields on birthdays, apple picking on the weekends, and cozying up on the couch watching Ed Sullivan on weeknights. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has taught us that in order to reach Love and Belonging, we must first reach a level of safety and have our physical needs met. And my grandparents, like many immigrant families, were working their tails off for those needs at the bottom of the pyramid. They were working hard to feel safe.

My mother explains, *"When an immigrant family comes over it's about survival, feeling safe, and getting food at the table. But once you've been here for a while, you find more joy with the community. I hope that immigrant families can get to a point where they are feeling safe enough so that they and their children can do things without feeling self conscious or fearful - because that is where happiness comes in. My parents eventually got to that point, and were less fearful of letting me do fun activities outside on my own. Success for an immigrant is to feel*

safe enough to interact with the world around them, and have more peace and joy. For so many immigrants, it's such a struggle to get through that basic survival threshold."

"So what does Joy look like for you now?" I asked my mom. She replied, *"Looking back, it's those same things that I found early in life that give me joy. The personal one on one interacting with people, and finding laughter. Finding fun music, and finding silliness with small activities. My children, the puppies, and my garden give me so much joy"* I am so glad that my mother went through her joy revolution, and learned what it means to experience her version of radical, unapologetic, and unconditional joy. Although my Mother's experience is not the universal experience of an immigrant, I know it is not an uncommon one.

I know that even through all the hard work and tough days my grandparents went through, they experienced joy in many ways, and that joy grew as they got older. My Obachan loved to make dumplings, and one of my most joyous childhood memories is making dumplings with her. I know that their hard work is why I get to live the life I lead today, and I am so grateful to them. One thing I try to remind myself as I ponder my own relationship to joy, is that *our ancestors fought for our joy and our laughter* - and every smile I experience is an echo of their resilience. In today's society, it is so easy to feel that one must *earn* joy, but I would like to believe that we are all deserving of the safety, security and support that sets us free to experience radical joy. We all deserve to heal our relationship to joy - and experience our own joy revolution.