

Life As It Is

“Attending to the Fullness of Life”

Episode #23 with Ross Gay

September 27, 2023



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Ross Gay: In this practice, I don't mean to diminish the sort of fullness of life, the full complicatedness of life. But what I do mean to do is to attend very fully. That's my hope. And by attending very fully, it also means I'm attending to what is astonishingly beautiful. So that kind of thing of, oh, you're looking on the bright side of things, I say I'm not looking at the bright side of things, I'm just trying to look at everything. I'm very capable of looking at what's miserable.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard poet and essayist Ross Gay. In 2016, Ross set out to document a delight each day for a year. After he published *The Book of Delights*, his friend asked him if he planned to continue his practice. Five years later, he began *The Book of (More) Delights*, demonstrating that the sources of delight are endless—and that they multiply when attended to and shared. With characteristic humor and grace, he chronicles his everyday encounters with delight, from the fleeting sweetness of strangers to the startling beauty of the falsetto to the unexpected joys of aging. In our conversation with Ross, we talk about why he believes delight is evidence of our interconnectedness, how he understands faith, and how to find delight even in awkward/unpleasant encounters. Ross also reads an essay from his new book. So here's my conversation with Ross Gay.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with writer Ross Gay and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi Ross. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Ross Gay: Same. Good to be with you.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

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James Shaheen: I guess I should say welcome back, Ross.

Ross Gay: Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: This is the second time. You know, first it was *Book of Delights*. Now it's *Book of More Delights*, which is a delight.

Ross Gay: Very creative title.

James Shaheen: *Book of Delights 2*, right?

Ross Gay: Yeah, yeah.

James Shaheen: But the world called for more delight. So can you tell me how this sequel came about?

Ross Gay: Yeah, and I talk about this a little bit in the introduction. Basically, when I was finishing the book, my buddy Patrick Rosal, he's a writer and we share work and stuff. He asked me if I was going to keep doing the practice of writing. For people who don't know, the premise of the book or the way the book works is that every day for a year, I write a short essay about something that delights me. And when I finished the first one in 2017, my buddy asked me if I was gonna keep doing it and I had other stuff to get to, but it did make me think, oh, maybe I'll do it every X number of years. So I decided five years, and that's kind of how it came to be.

James Shaheen: So is this going to be a lifelong practice as far as you can tell?

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Ross Gay: It might be. Yeah. It might be, we'll see. But it's pleasant. I like to write essays, and it's a neat frame for me to just be able to put a little bracket around things and to write essays. It feels like I get around to thinking about what I need to think about one way or another.

James Shaheen: Well, I'm all for getting these every five years, so thank you.

Ross Gay: Oh, good.

James Shaheen: This one is great. We'll look forward to the next. But could you tell us more about the process of writing the delights? What constraints did you give yourself?

Ross Gay: So first thing is daily. I write them every day, and then I give myself thirty minutes to do them. And then for the most part, I write them by hand. Very occasionally I wouldn't write them by hand, and very occasionally they'd take more than thirty minutes. That's just the first draft.

But, so it's a daily practice. At first, I was calling it a, I can't remember, like a discipline or something. And then I said, you know, let's call practice. And that's how it goes. This year I wrote them all in notebooks, grade books that I got from where I teach. So, there's a whole shelf of grade books full of delight.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I was listening to a podcast with Jennifer Egan and she talked about writing by hand. So I have to ask you, why do you write by hand?

Ross Gay: Until I wrote the delights, I had mostly written by hand, so that was familiar to me anyway. But as I was doing it, I did realize there was a kind of thinking that happens by hand that doesn't happen on the computer. And a big part of that thinking is that I'm not deleting big parts of my thinking so I'm able to track the way that my thinking arrives where it does. And that to

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me is very interesting to sort of see how we got to where we got. And so when I'm doing it by hand, I think I'm more inclined to actually leave some of the remnants of that, some of the trail of how I got to where I arrive at.

James Shaheen: So the last time you were on the show, you had just published a book on joy. So I'm curious, how do you think about the difference between joy and delight, and how would you define each of them? Maybe that's a tough question, but I thought I'd ask it anyway.

Ross Gay: No, it's a good question. I like that question, and I don't know. I'd ask it back too because one of the things I think of delight as occasional, like the hummingbird lands very close to you and you feel delight, which now I'm starting to feel like among the definitions for delight is something like the pleasant evidence of our connection or something like that. But joy, I feel like it's just there and you can sort of enter into it. In a way, joy feels like the connection itself and delight feels like the little bells, you know, the little reminders that, oh, there's this fundamental connection here. So that's how I think of it: delight more occasional; joy, more ever present in a way, sort of waiting.

James Shaheen: You sound a little like Sharon now. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, this is tough. I mean, words are fascinating. You know, there's awe and there's wonder and there's delight and there's happiness and there's joy. And I remember a journalist once saying to me that no one was really interested in happiness anymore, they were only interested in joy. And I said I find that very unfortunate because I have the word happiness in most of my book titles. You know, that's really a sad thing to hear. But part of my question is that you said that one of the unexpected perks of writing a book about delight is that readers will reach out to you to share their own practices of delight. And I'm wondering if you actually first found a different response from people using the word joy and using the word delight.

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Ross Gay: It's funny, I think what you're talking about of people being interested in joy instead of happiness, people will have the same response to the word joy for sure and delight. They'll think that I'm talking about something that is, I don't know, that's not serious, I don't know. I was at a reading recently, maybe six months ago, and a woman was in the front row and she was just not interested. As I sort of explained what I was thinking about in these books, she actually softened and was like, “Oh, OK, I'm ready for this.” But she didn't want to hear about just happy little stuff, so it was interesting.

Sharon Salzberg: One of the things you say, which is so fascinating, is that delight compels us to share, and so I think there must be quite a bit of discovery you go through as others share their delights with you.

Ross Gay: It's one of the pleasures of this, which I could never have anticipated at all. One of the pleasures of having written these books is that people will say, “Oh, this delighted me, this thing delighted me.” You know, sometimes I'll get a little letter or I'll get, you know, people online or something like that. And it's an interesting thing because that makes one's life a little bit more pleasant. I did not expect that. At the same time, people also, and this feels very interesting and moving to me, people will also say that the book was a friend to me during this incredible crisis, and that feels also moving. That feels instructive in some way. It feels like there's something really relevant and important to the thing of like what it means to be in the presence of people who are not dismissing or diminishing the suffering of each other but are also in the midst of it able to call attention to what is incomprehensibly beautiful, and that feels really important.

But also the other thing that's been really interesting to me, and I hadn't anticipated it, is that there are a lot of people who sort of say, “Oh yeah, we started a delight practice,” and it looks like any number of things. People get on Zoom doing a delight every morning or something like that. That's another thing I could not have anticipated exactly. Although looking back, I see, oh

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yeah, it's a kind of practice, it's daily, it's got constraints. It's a thing that's in a way easy to kind of plug into,

Sharon Salzberg: Another thing you say that's very interesting is that you've come to appreciate how delight is given to us. So what does it mean for delight to be given to us?

Ross Gay: That follows the other thing, like the people will often thank me because they now have this delight practice that they do with their friends. And I try to remember to be like, this thing is given to me. All I'm doing is like paying attention. And in a way it's sort of like that practice, which itself feels like a practice to remember that I'm just paying attention. I'm not making the stuff. I'm just paying attention. That's how it feels like it's given to me. You know, we have a garden, and this time of year, it's amazing. Among the amazing things are these hummingbirds are showing up and I'm just paying attention. I'm just noting it. So in that way it feels like it's given to me. So for whomever this book is useful and for those who feel like I'm giving it to them, I'm like, yeah, we're all giving it to each other. And that feels like there's kind of bounty, which feels nice.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, in Buddhist traditions, one of the sublime states is *mudita*, or sympathetic joy or appreciative joy, as it's sometimes called, which is really joy in the happiness of others. Instead of falling sway to so much envy or jealousy, it's really actually taking delight in the happiness of others. So I wonder if you could say something about that.

Ross Gay: That feels also like a thing that I learned writing the first book, which was that so often I'd be—there's an essay in that first book where I talk about there's a toddler walking down the row of an airplane and the adults couldn't not freak out. They were just so excited by this baby. And I was in the midst of reading this book about something horrible, and eventually I had to kind of put it down to enjoy all of the enjoyment that I was in the midst of. And it was like this kind of wonderful, pure enjoyment, and I do feel like that's a thing that I started to learn, that so

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much of my delight was actually delighting at the delight of other people in the way that we do when we let ourselves. It feels like it's kind of built in, and it feels nice to sort of be practicing that built-in thing.

James Shaheen: You know, you mentioned paying attention, I'm just paying attention, and I loved it when you wrote you're not being optimistic, you're just paying attention. So do you think delight has shaped or even restructured how you pay attention?

Ross Gay: Absolutely. Yeah, for sure. Because there's all these things that I feel like just by doing this practice, I've gathered a kind of reservoir of things that now I know, “Oh, that's happening. That delights me,” as opposed to it's just happening. I feel like it is a thing that I'm sort of like, oh yeah, that's another thing that I love actually. Something like that. That's one of the things that I found myself arguing a little bit with the delights as the kind of optimistic practice in part because in this practice, I don't mean to diminish the sort of fullness of life, the full complicatedness of life. But what I do mean to do is to attend very fully. That's my hope. And by attending very fully, it also means I'm attending to what is astonishingly beautiful. So that kind of thing of like, oh, you're looking on the bright side of things, I say I'm not looking at the bright side of things, I'm just trying to look at everything. You know, I'm trying to look at everything. I'm very capable of looking at what's miserable.

James Shaheen: Well, that's kind of a default. I mean, that's not hard.

Ross Gay: Yeah, that's not hard.

James Shaheen: Right. You know, often what you're fully attentive to is what we might otherwise take for granted or consider ordinary. But in your work, the common or the everyday becomes unfamiliar and new, and sometimes in a startling way. So I'm wondering how this relates to your background as a poet. We recently had the poet Jane Hirshfeld on the podcast, and

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she talked about the process of defamiliarization. -Do you see a connection between your poetry and your openness to this type of wonder, or seeing in the common or everyday or the taken for granted something extraordinary?

Ross Gay: I think there's probably something to the practice of writing poems, how I try to do it, which is to at least on one hand be, I mean, at the basic level, be trying to sort of make, handle, use language in a way that does in fact defamiliarize our understanding. I feel like that might be a way to think about it first.

But the other thing that I think about with poems is that it is, again, for me, the way I try to write poems is to pay attention to something with a kind of precision or a kind of accuracy or a kind of intensity that does make whatever the thing is transform in the process of my observation. I'm not trying to transform anything. I'm trying to pay very close attention to something. But by now I know that for the most part, usually when I pay close attention to things, they transform to some extent. You know, I do feel like writing poems can be a good practice for just noticing.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you describe ordinary experiences or sometimes experiences that might be negative in ways that show us how to take joy in them. I mean, I really laughed when you went camping. You and your partner were ill-prepared. You were wearing cotton, which, according to the veteran you come across, is lethal. I never thought of cotton as lethal.

Ross Gay: Who knew?

James Shaheen: And she's basically berating you for being so ill prepared, and rather than taking offense, you see the humor and sort of the joy in that situation too. So I really appreciated that, and I got a good laugh out of it. You say that wonder is an experience where the world is made to you anew. Can you say more about what delight has taught you about being perpetually

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wonderstruck, even in the face of these situations that might otherwise be difficult? I have to go back to the camping one. That was so funny.

Ross Gay: It was funny. I think maybe one of the things about this practice—it's funny the way you raise it makes me think differently—is that it might be the case that there's always, like, I'm trying to think about the way that a practice sort of grounds something and it orients something and maybe it sort of puts guardrails on it in a certain kind of way like I know something about it.

But it might be the case that if, while I'm doing this practice, I'm wondering every day kind of alert in a certain kind of way to what's going to delight me. It's starting with a question: I wonder. I wonder what's gonna delight me. And I wonder too, I'm saying that word a lot, if that experience of not knowing what's going to delight you sort of prepares the ground of not knowing. The vocation for the ear is to not know. Maybe there's a first knowing, which is like, “Something's probably going to delight me.” But the not knowing is like, “I don't know what it is.”

So the delight in a way, it feels like that practice of just being not sure feels to some extent, or maybe to a large extent, connected to wonder, which to me feels like a kind of fundamental unknowing. What do you think?

James Shaheen: What do I think? I think that that's an excellent way to go about it, because if I already know, nothing's going to be new. Nothing's going to inspire wonder. I mean, this is the second time we've had you on, and I think you've become unwittingly more Buddhist, more Buddhist than me or Sharon. It's just very interesting. Not knowing is something that comes up a lot in Buddhism. It's like beginner's mind, more or less. But I was really amazed. I thought if somebody berated me like that on a camping trail, I don't know if I would've taken joy in it. But you're really good at this.

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Ross Gay: You know, it took some—I acknowledge that I'm like, man, she was really going after me.

James Shaheen: Well, that's there too. That's there too. But all of it is a joy. Or a delight, I should say.

Ross Gay: Yeah, that's right.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, in my experience, that's a really interesting moment when I realize that my habit, my conditioning is such to see what's wrong and see what's worrisome and I can complain about in contrast to what else happened today. And to realize that it's like a rut, it's a habit, and moving out of it takes not force or violence but intentionality. It's like, *What else happened today?* Or *Where is the good in this?* And people think that's hypocritical or stupid, like you're just kind of walking around with a smile on your face, not really feeling anything, but it's not true.

It opens us to parts of life or a truth that we're not hanging out with a lot. You know, it's kind of unfamiliar and, and there's something whole about that and fulfilling. You also write very beautifully that one of the purposes of the beautiful is to bring us to wordlessness and grant us silence, which is another way of not knowing. I'm wondering how you view the connection between beauty and silence.

Ross Gay: One thing I want to say about what you were saying too is that acknowledgement of *And what else? What else today?* I wonder about that as an opening question as opposed to a closing question, like the question, *What do we love? What do I love?* as opposed to, all of which is also important, *What is coming for me?* But what do we love in common, or what was beautiful, or what was given to you?

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Those things feel to me really like sort of opening questions that bring us closer to one another or help us to acknowledge our connection to another, which to me then sort of further inclines us to make connections. They grow the thing that they witness, it feels to me in some way.

But beauty and silence, that's such a good question. That essay that you're mentioning, it's an essay about the mostly eighties pop group DeBarge, and I'm talking about the falsetto and that the falsetto sometimes is beautiful enough that it can kind of stun us into silence. You know, it might come back to the same thing that silence is evidence of wonder. It's evidence of the unknown. Sometimes the beautiful or what is sort of startlingly beautiful, part of what makes it startlingly beautiful is that we can't conceptualize it or we can't wrap our minds around it, and so we get to just be silent in the face of it. I wonder if it's that.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, so much of the book centers on the physicality of delight, and I'm wondering, how does delight feel in your body, and what about joy? Is it different?

Ross Gay: That's also a good way of taxonomizing delight and joy. I do feel like joy is a—I'm more inclined to weep in joy. There's something about that. In a way, it almost might be more like disassembling, joy. Like there might be something more in that beautiful way of sort of unbecoming with joy, whereas delight, again, it feels like a bell or something. It feels more like *[gasp]* kind of thing, that kind of sweet startling. But joy, for me, when I'm feeling joy and the experiences that I've had of joy and also the experiences that I've had that in retrospect may have been joy but were not, were terrifying, it feels like becoming something else, disappearing in some kind of way.

James Shaheen: Sometimes we feel ambivalent about joy or delight. We almost feel an inability to fully feel it or embrace it. We might even feel some vague sense of guilt about it. What about that?

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Ross Gay: To me, that’s an immature—when I say immature, I don't mean that with judgment. It feels like an immature understanding of what something like joy is or the way I think of joy. It's kind of like a commercial where you're dancing with your new car. If that's joy, then that's like, whatever, who cares. But when I'm talking about joy or delight, I'm thinking of it as being in the midst of our lives, which are full and complicated, and we know we're going to die.

James Shaheen: Right, I tend to think that we suffer from a lack of it, frankly.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. I mean, I understand the pattern just because I have it and because I work so often and with great joy with caregivers, people who, either in their families or in their professional lives, are really on the front lines of suffering. And it's very hard to feel you do deserve this delight. The way I approach it is really trying to think through more deeply, like where does resilience come from? And what happens when that avenue is blocked and you're not getting fed in that way and you get depleted and you get exhausted, even more exhausted and utterly crash in the end? And so I think you're right. We don't understand it quite, and so the word I tend to use is incomplete. Like, I feel good when I have something nice happen. That's true. But I also feel good when I can breathe and connect and see someone else. I'm filled with some feeling, which helps me keep going.

Ross Gay: Yeah, for sure. I agree.

James Shaheen: Another recurring theme of the book is time, and you write that though the nominal subject of the book is delight, the real subject is the passage of time. Can you say more about how your relationship to time has shifted over the years? How have you been noticing time's passage differently?

Ross Gay: Well, you know, my mother's outside in the kitchen. She's been here for five days. She just turned 82. Every time we're here, we talk about my father's death. He died nineteen

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years ago, and it's a significant part of our experience. But you know, like to be with your mother, I just turned 49, and she's like, “God, Rossy.” I think it's probably the case for most people, but the older you get, the more you're like, time, huh, this thing.-The answer to your question is I don't quite know. I do understand that sometimes, for instance, the fact of this book being five years after the first book, that's why I say the nominal subject of this book is passed of time. Because a few times I'm referencing what happened five years ago, and there's something that we just know embedded in that story is like, “Oh, and then if you do this every five years, there will be a last one.” It might be this one, but it might be like four down the road. You know, who knows. But that to me, in a way, it makes it extra interesting. And in a way it actually adds that layer that when you're talking about delight and you're also talking about aging, you're talking about delight and you're also talking about dying.

James Shaheen: Right, it does seem like getting older plays a larger role in this collection, and you chronicle what you call the many jewels of aging. Could you share a bit about how getting older has shifted your relationship to joy and delight? Has it changed how you're experiencing these states?

Ross Gay: Yeah, I feel like one is that I've sort of given myself the task of attending to the states. I don't know that when I was say 30, I yet had the wherewithal or the chops or the interest or whatever to quite be. It's very interesting to me now, and among the reasons I think joy and delight are so interesting to me is because I'm deeply in belief of the fact that we're all connected. I believe in this deep and fundamental connection. And I suspect when I was like a kid, I didn't want to believe that. And I think there are probably significant parts of myself that still don't want to believe that, but I feel like that's probably where a lot of my pain in my life comes from—that I don't want to be connected, you know, I want to sort of isolate.

So I think that might be one sort of significant way that the older I get my relationship to delight and joy change. I'm very interested in this idea of joy in part because I'm interested in spending

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my time paying attention to how we're connected. It's much more interesting to me now than paying attention to how we're not connected, which I've spent a lot of time doing. But I feel like the much more interesting thing is paying attention to how we're connected.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I mean, I think here of what they're referring to is the epidemic of loneliness. It seems that people do not feel so connected. But you've also said the most interesting thing about us humans is that we die and we change, which resonates deeply with Buddhist teachings, although I won't push any more Buddhism onto you, Ross. You seem a natural at this. How do you see our mortality as an occasion for joy?

Ross Gay: If that's one of the grounds of our being together, it feels like that's one of the things that we share, that for the start, I feel like there's something really moving about walking down the street and seeing whoever it is walking toward me and being like, “Oh yeah, you too will die. We're both going to be dead.” I think that's an interesting ground to sort of operate on. I also think there's also this sort of this shared fleetingness of things that if we can kind of get a handle of that, be less afraid of that, be curious about that, it also seems to me to be like a ground of sharing, to be practicing witnesses of how fleeting this whole thing is. That offers a kind of possibility for generosity, a different kind of generosity if we think that that's another thing that we don't share—I'm going to die but you're not, or vice versa.

James Shaheen: We do sometimes go about our lives as if that were true.

Ross Gay: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Sharon Salzberg: You also write about how delight can occasion and be occasion by faith—faith in each other, and our capacity for “mutual, radiant, unpredictable. Sloppy mycelial, transgressive care.” Could you say more about how you understand faith?

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Ross Gay: That feels like a lesson for me regularly, and maybe this is part of the practice of this delight thing. It's interesting. In the first book I had this essay where I'd been writing a bunch of ideas for delights, just ideas, and eventually I had to get rid of them because that wasn't the practice. The practice was to have a delight every day, and to have a delight every day was a kind of faith that there would be a delight every day, which I think comes from practice. I feel like in this instance, the faith follows the practice. The practice has provided the evidence that, oh yeah, you can have faith in this thing. So maybe that's how I would say that faith and delight or faith and joy sort of arrive together, you know, or how they have a connection to one another. It feels very much that.

There's another one in this book where I'm talking about my friend Kate's cat got lost. In the essay I sort of reveal that every time I see a little sign on a telephone pole that says “Lost Cat,” I'm like, “Oh man, that's a bummer. You're never going to see your cat again.” And in a way I'm like, oh yeah, I have a kind of faith, and my faith in that universe compels me to contribute to that universe, which is to say that when I see a bummer, I'm not looking around for anyone's cat. If my friend's cat gets lost, I'm not helping them out. Right. You know? And I've been an asshole on account of that. My friend Kate, on the other hand, has faith in this other kind of cat-rescuing universe. She made signs, and her cat got back to her. And in a way, the other thing that kind of comes from that is that it's a beautiful story, actually. Her cat got lost. She put up signs. She goes to the place where her cat got lost, which is behind a strip mall in a murky, swampy area. She goes out there at dawn one day shortly after the cat gets lost, and there are people out there calling her cat's name.

That's the kind of faith that she gave me, but I needed a reason to sort of have that faith. In a way, the thing that I'm thinking about in that essay is that often these things are given to you by other people. Someone has to teach you that, oh, when you put signs up, people kind of try to take care of you.

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Sharon Salzberg: It's interesting, I wrote a book called *Faith*, so it's a topic I'm very interested in. And one of the reasons I wrote it, I realized later looking back, was that I have a kind of passion for redeeming words, words that used to maybe be useful for us in our lives or uplifting or opening in some way, and then through association and the different ways they get used, they get maybe a very negative connotation. Certainly that was the case when I was writing *Faith*. People would say to me, “Why are you doing that?,” my friends, and clearly for them there was an association between faith and being silenced and not being able to ask questions. And you are using it really in an opposite kind of way, bringing us to not knowing and opening and it's very, very different.

Ross Gay: Yeah. I had a friend say something once, and I remember it kind of blew my mind when we were kids. We were in college or something, and he said that faith doesn't exist without doubt. Something like that. And I remember that that was such a beautiful observation, like, oh yeah, there's some degree of suspension.

Sharon Salzberg: And also questioning and opening. When I was writing the book, I had a freelance editor and she said, “What's the opposite of faith? Isn't it doubt?” And I said, well, no, not from the Buddhist perspective, because the right kind of doubt, which is a sincere questioning, not being cynical—we can be full of doubt, which is really just a mask for fear, like I don't know if I can do it, so I'll pretend it's not worth doing. But when it's the right kind of questioning and not knowing and insisting on seeing the truth for yourself, it only enhances faith. And then she said to me, “Well, if it's not doubt, what is the opposite of faith?” And I had, as usual, one of those experiences where I just heard this word come out of my mouth, and that word was despair. Because faith is that which also connects us maybe to our inner strengths, to a bigger picture of life, to a sense of maybe the cat will come back. I don't know that it will, it's not that kind of faith. But maybe, maybe. And so the opposite connection is the severing of connection, which is despair.

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Ross Gay: That's right. And it comes back also to the second part of the question earlier about change, that nothing is going to change even in our relationships or in each other. In addition to just being sad, that is despair. It's just like, no, this is never gonna change.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm also curious how you understand our messiness and unpredictability, which has come up a few times in this conversation.

Ross Gay: Yeah. That comes back to that change business. I feel like another thing that age has something to do with. I think getting older, our messiness and unpredictability, I feel like that's a thing that, one, I'm more comfortable paying attention to in myself. You know, not totally comfortable, but more comfortable.

But also there's a kind of notion that we are not one thing and that we are many things—and that we are many things in the process of becoming many more things. That to me, again, like the fact that we die, the fact that we change and we are not one thing, it's so interesting to me, and that feels to me, again, like a kind of faith, a kind of faith that also inclines me to feel tender toward others when I can kind of hold that, oh yeah, we're changing. We're changing. I don't know what I'm going to be tomorrow or next week, but I also don't know what anyone else or anything else is going to be tomorrow or next week. That feels like, although again, it's a kind of groundlessness, it feels also like a kind of potential for a kind of sweetness in a way. Like, oh, what are you going to be? Where are you going?

James Shaheen: You know, Ross, in this book, you begin with your birthday, and I was reading it on Sharon's birthday and I thought, I wonder what he wrote on my birthday. So I'm a little biased, but I really liked what you wrote on my birthday.

Ross Gay: Which is what?

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James Shaheen: It was February 1st. It was “My Neighbor's Face.” And I was wondering if you could read that for us.

Ross Gay: Yeah. Let me find that.

“My Neighbor's Face”

As I was walking home today, my neighbor pulled up next to me in his car, rolled his window down, and said, very gently, *Hey Ross*, while pointing at our car, which has a crumpled rear end, and the back windshield busted out. It's a mess. He looked alarmed, worried, and concerned, which explains his tone of voice, solemn, soft, pointing from the seat of his car to ours, this dude with whom I suspect I perhaps do not share some values. Hang on. How long can I abide in myself the infantile, arrogant notion that I would know anything about anyone's values without asking them what they value, myself included? I mean to say I bet I didn't vote like my neighbor in 2020—maybe there was a sign or a sticker?—which, if we're being real, might not actually have all that much to do with values; for political parties, and perhaps more explicitly the heads of those parties, do not have values, they have donors, they have shareholders, and they have promises, both parties, which more and more seem like one party, that they have no intention to keep. Oh, I guess I stand corrected: those are values.

But per values I would like to share with my neighbor, I aspire to share with my neighbor—along with knowing his name, which is sort of step one in being a good neighbor, which places me at step zero, trailing him on that front—let me simply report what he said to me, softly, just as I hope I also would do if I saw my neighbor's car crunched up, making my face as loving and tender as I could, just in case of the worst, as he did, looking over at the wreckage, pointing: Is she okay? He didn't mean the car (that would be a difference of values), he meant the most-often driver of the car, Stephanie. We then had a nice laugh about it once it was established all was okay, it was Stephanie's very rubbery twenty-seven-year-old son driving, and

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he was okay, as was the driver of the truck who rear-ended him. My neighbor exhaled loudly, shaking his head, and said, Phew, it looked bad. Then he lauded the Honda, patting the door of the one he was driving, which, though I'd seen him driving it at least one million times, if you were to have asked me earlier, I would've told you, with great conviction, that he drives a Chevy or Ford. And after we were together praising the Honda—me mainly about mileage and how long they seem to run—he said something technical about axels or carburetors or WD-40 or something and I pretended I understood and nodded and laughed and thanked him for checking on us.

James Shaheen: You know, that's really wonderful. One of the reasons I picked it, aside from the fact that it was written on my birthday, one of the reasons I picked it is that we live in such polarizing times and these spontaneous expressions of concern seem to affirm our capacity to care for each other, to feel connected, as you say, despite the fact that so much in the culture works against that. So that was really lovely. Thank you.

Ross Gay: Thank you for noticing that.

Sharon Salzberg: Before we close, I'm wondering what's been delighting you today?

Ross Gay: Like I said, my mom coming here, she hasn't been here for a few years, and to have her here, you know, we have a pretty sweet garden and we dug potatoes and made potatoes and green beans the other night. And just having kind of a slow, sweet time with my mother has been really, really, really delightful. Really lovely.

Sharon Salzberg: So nice. So James, I want to ask you too.

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James Shaheen: What delights me today? I was just about to say. This podcast today has really delighted me. It's such a pleasure to be with you, Ross. What delights you today, Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, now you've pointed out several things. I'm delighted that Ross is with his mother. I'm delighted that this podcast has been so wonderful. And I'd say finding some space in my day has really brought me a lot of delight.

James Shaheen: Ross, do you have anything else to add?

Ross Gay: No, it's been really nice. It was fun talking last time, and it's fun talking because it feels like the deepening of the questions, so I'm grateful for the questions and to be in conversation with you all. It feels like keeping the unknown sort of fluttering, which feels lovely.

James Shaheen: Well, we'll definitely do it again. I'm sure Sharon is on board with that too.

Sharon Salzberg: It was lovely. Does someone have to write another book or can we do it before then?

James Shaheen: Yeah, we'll figure out a way. Okay. So, Ross, thanks so much for joining us. It's truly a delight. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Book of (More) Delights*, available now. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. So Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you. Thank you all so much. If you want to just sit comfortably, you can close your eyes or not, however you feel most at ease. Just settle your attention on the natural flow of the in- and out-breath, wherever you feel it most distinctly, the nostrils, the chest, or the abdomen, and the operative word here is rest. We rest our attention gently on the breath. Sometimes the image is used of resting our attention lightly, like a bird settling on a flower.

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It's something so easeful out of recognizing that we're breathing anyway. All we need to do is feel it. Nothing extra, nothing strained. You don't have to get ready for even the very next breath. It's just this one.

I'm going to ask you for a few moments to think of something in your life today or yesterday, something immediate that you feel grateful to when you notice it. It may be something you overlook. It may be something seemingly small. And it may bring up all kinds of feelings, like embarrassment, or this is stupid, or I've got to concentrate some more on the pain or my problems. Whatever happens, it's fine. You can let all those feelings arise, but see what it's like when you stretch a little bit and you kind of point the flashlight of your attention onto that which has been good. Something. Just one thing.

Because we're not moving from the complaints, which are the only truth, to something that's fanciful or funny. We're moving to a truth that we may hardly ever look at. So let's give it a little airtime. And you can bring your attention back to the feeling of the breath. When you feel ready, you can open your eyes or lift your gaze, and we'll end the meditation.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Ross.

Ross Gay: Thank you.

James Shaheen: We'll do this again. It's a lot of fun.

Ross Gay: Good, yeah, for sure. Have a good one. It's good to see you all.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Ross Gay. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with

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