

**Joy, Awe, Gratitude and Compassion:  
Common Ground in a Will-to-Openness**

Brent Dean Robbins, Ph.D.  
Allegheny College  
1682 Kelton Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15216  
412-561-1704  
bdeanrob@sgi.net

## ABSTRACT

Four emotions are investigated: Joy, awe, gratitude and compassion. Through philosophical and empirical perspectives, these emotions are found to be mutually determining and reinforcing, thus part of an experiential, structural whole. Taken as a unity, they are understood to be existential emotions that are revelatory of existential meaning. In awe, existence is disclosed as being, yet potentially not-being. While anxiety emphasizes potential non-being, joy is disclosive of existence's "that it is." From joy's pure revelation of being as it "is," gratitude flows. In gratitude, existence is revealed as a gift, and from the recognition of existence as a gift, compassion emerges. In compassion, existence is revealed as a gift to be cherished and cared for. Both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies are found to support the interrelations between these emotions. Finally, these emotions are found to share a basis in a particular style of being-in-the-world, a "will-to-openness" as opposed to a "will-to-power." The implications of this style of being-in-the-world, and the emotions that belong to it, are explored, particularly with regard to Maslow's theory of "self-actualization" and "peak experiences."

This essay<sup>1</sup> is concerned with four emotions: the distinct yet mutually determining and reinforcing emotions of joy, awe, gratitude and compassion. First, I will need to define each emotion, which is easier said than done. On the one hand, we all “know” what it means to be joyful, awe-struck, grateful and compassionate. Most of us are quite intimate with the lived experience of these four states of mind. On the other hand, like Augustine before the question of time, we are faced with a challenge when we must formally define that which we unreflectively live. Secondly, I will make a case that these four emotions are intimately linked. For my argument, I will draw from empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, and I will also appeal to examples to enrich our understanding of the associations among these constituents of this cluster of emotions. Finally, I will argue that the experiential structure that composes the life-world of these emotions is a particular style of being-in-the-world: that is, joy, awe, gratitude and compassion emerge from a comportment that I shall call a “will-to-openness” as opposed to a “will-to-power.”

In the course of this analysis, it should become clear that these four emotions hang together to the extent that they are understood as a particular subset of emotions referred to in prior literature in various categorical terms: namely, existential (Lazarus, 1991), global (Smith, 1986), metaphysical (Robbins, 2003a), authentic (Heidegger, 1962), transpersonal (Sundararajan, 2000; Sutich, 1969), Being (de Rivera, 1977; Maslow, 1962), or peak experience-related (Maslow, 1962, 1970) emotions. In each case, the emotions in question are oriented toward existence as a whole (or Being) rather than any particular instance of existence (or particular

beings). I therefore consider this project to be an elaboration upon and extension of Maslow's (1962) research on "Cognition of Being" ("B-cognition"), "self-actualization," and "peak experiences." The Being-emotions discussed here can indeed be understood as important components of certain kinds of peak experiences (Maslow, 1970) that are more common in self-actualizers (McClain & Andrews, 1969; Mathes, Zevon, Roter & Joerger, 1982; Maslow, 1969). Consistent with Maslow's vision for a humanistic psychology, the exploration of these states of mind serve toward articulating a "positive psychology" (Maslow, 1962; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) of the "fully functioning person" (Rogers, 1951). Moreover, the emphasis on compassion as a fundamental Being-emotion addresses concerns, although perhaps unjustified (Koltko-Rivera, 1998), that Maslow's theory of self-actualization did not adequately address the essential relatedness of human beings to others (Hanley & Able, 2002; Prilleltensky, 1992; Shaw & Colimore, 1988; McClain & Andrews, 1972; Frankl, 1966) and to self-transcendent Being (Garrison, 2001; Frankl, 1966).

### **Joy**

Joy is an emotion rarely studied in psychology. The little past research on joy has, however, lead to a few tentative findings. In this research, the terms "joy" and "happiness" are typically used interchangeably. These findings have suggested that joy emerges (a) when a person subjectively evaluates his or her context to be safe and familiar (Izard, 1977), (b) when a person's given task requires little effort (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988), and (c) when persons believe they are making reasonable progress toward a goal (Izard, 1977; Lazarus, 1991). Further, joy has been found to be an intrinsic component of peak experiences (Mathes et al, 1982, Yeagle, Privette & Dunham,

1989; Dubinski & Benbow, 2000). Joy and happiness have also been associated with playfulness as an action tendency (Frijda, 1986; Fredrickson, 2000). In the case of play, the action tendency is non-specific and open (Fredrickson, 2000). This research, however, fails to distinguish the global affect of “happiness” from other similar, positive emotion constructs. For example, research supports the argument that “happiness” and “joy” are distinct constructs, as are “elation” and “gladness” (de Rivera, Possell, Verette, & Weiner, 1989; Smith, 1981; Robbins, 2003a; Bailey & Robbins, 2003). According to de Rivera and colleagues (1989), joy, in contrast to elation and gladness, “occurs when there is a mutual meeting between the person and another, in which the other is perceived as being unique”; further, joy “functions to affirm the meaningfulness of life” (p. 1016). Elation and gladness, on the other hand, are concerned with particular goals; the former is concerned with unexpected attainment of fantasized goals, while the latter is concerned with the expected attainment of goals.

Heidegger (1962) described joy as an authentic mood that, like anxiety, brings human beings before their authentic ability-to-be. Philosopher Quentin Smith (1981) further developed Heidegger’s insight on joy by distinguishing it from gladness. Gladness, he argued, is to fear as joy is to anxiety. Joy and anxiety are both authentic moods compared to gladness and fear, which are inauthentic. In this context, “authenticity” means a human experience that opens the way toward an explicit understanding of the meaning of Being, which Heidegger felt we always already understand implicitly as human beings. Fear is not explicitly revelatory of the structure of existence, because in fear we are caught up in the particular entity or event that is feared.

Anxiety, on the other hand, occurs when our existence as a whole feels threatened. Unable to fall

into our daily routines, the world that matters to us shows up explicitly *as* mattering to us. Thus, in anxiety, existence as a whole is explicitly felt to matter and to be at stake.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, existence is felt to be threatened by nothingness, the possibility of not having our possibilities. This could literally be the possibility of our death, but more often it means the death of certain hoped for possibilities. As an authentic mood, anxiety brings us back to an appreciation for how the world matters to us. Existence could just as well not be, and yet it is.

Gladness, like fear, is an inauthentic mood. In gladness, one is concerned with a particular possibility, whereas in joy, one is concerned with existence as whole. But how is joy different than anxiety? If we observe how joy discloses a certain way of mattering, we find that joy discloses *fortunateness*, and in response to fortunateness as a way one mattering, one finds one's self in joy as *Being-fulfilled*. Fortunateness as a way of mattering points to the sense in which authentic being-in-the-world is attuned to our existence's "that it *is*, rather than *is not*"; thus, in joy, existence has the character of a *gift*. Existence is disclosed as a gift for which we are thankful. Whereas anxiety threatens us with the possibility that existence could just as well *not be*, joy tunes us into the grateful recognition that it abundantly and generously *is*. While gladness is attuned to the gratitude we have toward making progress toward an instrumental goal, joy is attuned to gratitude not for any event or entity in particular, but *existence as a whole*, regardless of the particular circumstances of our lives. Thus, we see already that there appears to be a structural relationship between the experience of joy and the attunement of gratitude.

My own qualitative research on joy (Robbins, 2003a) supports these findings, but also integrates them into a holistic structure that begins to articulate the complexity of joy as a lived

experience. My research, like any qualitative research, involves asking people about their experiences. To ground people in a concrete remembrance of an experience of joy, I used a therapeutic technique called the Imagery in Movement Method (Schneier, 1989) that I modified for research purposes (Robbins, 2003a). The method involves using drawing techniques, gesture and role play to induce a richly felt emotional memory, which the participants subsequently record in a written narrative. The resulting stories were powerfully abundant in concrete, experiential details.

In one story, a woman described her first memory of a Christmas morning. She recalled in gesture and word the sense of wonder and then exhilaration she felt as she walked down the stairs with her older brothers to discover the Christmas tree lined with presents. Her descriptions were ripe with metaphor. The joy was felt as an “elation geyser” that shot up from the middle of her torso and out through her head like the sparking tinsel dangling from limbs of the Christmas tree. Another participant described the exuberance of bounding onto the finish line when her prize horse won her first race. She described the joy as a world that arced out toward a blue sky, expansive with the fullness of possibility. Still another participant recalled a blissful moment playing with his young cousins in a meadow lined with mountains. As he lost himself in a dance with his cousins, he felt the world to be a powerful and benevolent persona that cradled him like a mother embraces a child. In each case, I was touched by the personal narratives of overwhelming joy, even at times finding myself sympathetically weeping with the participants as they told their stories. And most profoundly of all, I was humbled when each and every participant *thanked* me for helping them to remember a long-forgotten yet nourishing moment of

their lives.

Using an empirical-phenomenological method of qualitative analysis, I worked the data to find common themes that, at first, were not evident, but with time and patience began to show themselves. In the process, I was able to identify sixteen different themes running through the data of the participants I interviewed. First, let us consider the context. The world in which joy emerges was experienced as powerful yet benevolent. The person, on the other hand, felt centered and felt a profound sense of being present in the moment. They felt open to any possible experiences, and were not willfully pursuing any particular outcome. In this sense, they were engaged in a non-instrumental engagement with the world. Through this comportment to the world, joy spontaneously emerged. Joy erupted in an intentional movement up and out, and the person shifted from a subjective sense of containment to directed diffusion. In their profound presence in the moment, they felt freedom, a freedom to *be*. They felt joy as overwhelmingly intense and powerful, and as a sense of highness, lacking any particular, instrumental aim. As a result of this experience of joy, the participants felt deeply connected to others, a deep sense of interpersonal connectedness. They felt affirmed and nurtured by the powerful, benevolent world that graced them with the experience. They felt awe in the power of the world but also gratitude for the world's benevolence and goodness. They appeared to walk away from the experience with a renewed sense of gratitude for their lives. I was very touched, as well. In general, the world for the participant was appreciated for the simple and pure fact that it *is* (Smith, 1986). In this sense, joy is an *ontological* emotion; that is, it is revelatory of *the meaning of Being* (Robbins, 2003b).



Research on joy supports Maslow's (1968) observations that peak experiences result from the perception of "B-values," including wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortless, playfulness, truth and self-sufficiency (p. 83). Moreover, the data on joy reveal most of the major themes that Maslow (1968) found when studying peak experiences. When objects and others are experienced in joy, they are perceived *holistically* rather than reduced to their usefulness; they are fully attended to in their value as *ends in themselves* rather than means to other ends. Further, joyful perception is saturated with a richness that fascinates the joyful person. Moreover, the joyful person appears to orient him or herself in such a way that they are *self-forgetful* or "egoless" (Maslow, 1968, p. 79). Being as revealed in joy is not perceived as a mere extension of one's own wants and needs; it appears in its all-inclusive Otherness, not just as "mine." In joy, one *lets Being be*. Joy in all these details is *nourishing* and "self-validating" (Maslow, 1968, p. 79); it reveals a world that is *good* rather than evil, and in joy the person experiences an *altered sense of time and space* described in various ways as "eternal" or "infinite." Further, as Maslow (1968) noted was common in peak experiences, the joyful person experiences him- or herself as "child-like" or transported back to a more free and playful time in their youthful lives.<sup>3</sup> Finally, joy gives birth to a whole spectrum of Being emotions, including those mentioned by Maslow (1968): wonder or awe and gratitude. Compassion also belongs to this spectrum of existential emotions, as I shall argue. Maslow (1968) may have neglected to explicitly describe compassion as an outgrowth of peak experiences, but he did acknowledge that self-actualizers (defined as those who often have peak experiences) are "altruistic, dedicated, self-transcending, social, etc."

(p. vi). (See also: Maslow, 1966, a response to Frankl, 1966).

Thus, we can see in these data that from joy flows three other attunements: (a) awe or wonder, (b) compassion and (c) gratitude.

### **Awe**

While there have been few studies of joy in the psychological literature, there have been even fewer studies of awe. Recent theories hold that awe derives from cognitive appraisals of perceived vastness and a need for accommodation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003) as well as negativity and self-reflexivity (Sundararajan, 2002). The perception of vastness refers to “anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference” (Keltner & Haidt, 20023, p. 303). The need for accommodation associated with awe refers to Piaget’s notion of the assimilation of new experiences into current mental structures. In many cases, it appears that “awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 304). Some states of awe result from threat appraisals, while others result from appraisals of beauty (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 304); thus some states of awe appear in response to a benevolent state of affairs while others emerge in response to the perception of a malevolent world.

Awe’s character of self-reflexivity involves a sense of *absorption* in the awe-relevant phenomenon. Absorption, in this sense, is “the tendency to get immersed in sensory or emotional experiences, to be open to experiencing feelings, and to attend to one’s internal state and processes” (Gohm & Clore, 2000, p. 683; cited in Sundararajan, 2002). This self-reflexive comportment is characterized by an attention to affective experience and a “readiness” (Pribram

& McGuiness, 1975) to let Being be (Sundararajan, 2002, p. 187); that is, it is a freeing of self, others and things to be what they are in their self-givenness (Robbins, 2003a). Along with self-reflexivity comes “negation,” a term derived from a tradition of Christian mysticism, and especially negative theology. “Negation” in this sense refers to “self-annihilation” or “self-depreciation”: the “submergence into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind” (Otto, 1970/1923, p. 10).

Both of these qualities of awe can also be found in joy and anxiety as authentic moods. The vastness of awe is experienced both in anxiety and joy, since anxiety and joy are both directed toward existence as a whole rather than any particular entity or event within existence. Further, both anxiety and joy re-orient the person to a renewed understanding of the world and thus call for the accommodation of current mental structures in order to assimilate the experience. In anxiety, the person is oriented to an understanding that existence might *not* be, thus calling the person to reconsider what is important in his or her life (Fischer, 1991; Smith, 1986). In joy, existence is appreciated for its pure “that it is,” and in this appreciation the person is oriented, as we shall see, to graciously care for it’s well-being. “Awe” then is an attunement that appreciates that existence *is* yet might *not* be. Based on the attunement of awe, one can emphasize either the possibility of *nothingness*, in which case one will feel anxiety, or one can emphasize the *presence* of Being, in which case one will feel joy (Robbins, 2003a; Smith, 1986).

Self-reflexivity and negation are characteristics shared by awe, anxiety and joy. In the case of each authentic mood, things are freed to show themselves in their self-givenness, and the bounded self is transcended as self and world merge in a chiasmic relation. Thus, we can see that

awe is inherent in joy as well as anxiety. How then are awe and joy related to gratitude and compassion?

### **Gratitude**

Gratitude appears to be a *moral affect*, belonging to the same category of emotions as empathy, sympathy, guilt and shame (McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Larson, 2001; Haidt, 2003). Empathy and sympathy “operate when people have the opportunity to respond to the plight of another person, and guilt and shame operate when people have not met moral standards of obligations,” whereas “gratitude operates typically when people are the recipients of prosocial behavior” (McCullough et al, 2001, p. 252).

Gratitude seems to serve three moral functions. First, it acts as a “moral barometer” by which a person comes to acknowledge that they have been benefitted by the good deed of another (McCullough, et al, 2001; Graham & Barker, 1990; Graham, Hudley & Williams, 1992; Hegtvedt, 1990; Lane & Anderson, 1976; Okamoto, 1992; Okamoto & Robinson, 1997; Overwalle, Mervielde & De Schuyter, 1995; Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968; Weiner, Russel & Lerman, 1979; Zaleski, 1988). It also acts as a “moral motivator” that prompts the recipient of prosocial behavior to reciprocate the behavior and/or to spread good deeds to others in need (McCullough et al, 2001; Graham, 1988; Peterson & Stewart, 1996). Gratitude also seems to inhibit agents from engaging in socially destructive behavior (McCullough, et al, 2001; Baron, 1984). Finally, gratitude serves the function of a “moral reinforcer” since it rewards those who engage in prosocial behavior and, so doing, increases the probability of their prosocial behavior in the future (McCullough et al, 2001; Bennett, Ross & Sunderland, 1996; Bernstein & Simmons, 1974;

Carey, Clicque, Leighton & Milton, 1976; Clark, 1975; Clark, Northrop & Barkshire, 1988; Goldman, Seever & Seever, 1982; Maheux, Legault & Lambert, 1989; McGovern, Ditzian & Taylor, 1975; Moss & Page, 1972; Rind & Bordia, 1995).

There is strong evidence that practicing gratitude enhances both psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Experimental participants who practiced gratitude on a regular basis were found to show an increase in exercise behavior, satisfaction in life, optimism, positive moods and prosocial behavior. They were also more likely to attain personal goals, to feel more connected to others, and to have improved sleep patterns, as well as enhanced alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). People who have a disposition to be grateful have been found to have higher scores on measures of subjective well-being, to engage in more prosocial behaviors, to be more religious and spiritual, and to be less materialistic (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2000; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002).

Based on this research and other studies and reports (e.g., Emmons, in press; Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2003; Emmons & Shelton, 2001; Emmons, 2001; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Schulenberg, 2001; Braud, 2001; Teigen, 1997), there is clearly a strong relationship between gratitude, states of happiness, and compassionate, prosocial behavior. Certainly, gratitude has a positive emotional valence (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; Mayer, Salovey, Gomberg-Kaufman, & Blainey, 1991; Ortony, Clore & Collins, 1986; Weiner, 1985), but, more importantly, gratitude flows from joy and, likewise, joy flows from gratitude (Schimmack & Reisenzein, 1997; Gallop, 1998). For example, a recent study by Emmons & McCollough (2003)

found that a grateful outlook's strongest effects are increases of positive affect and enhanced interpersonal relationships.

Again, however, these studies do not distinguish between various *kinds* of positive affects. Happiness, as discussed, comes in varied forms, such as gladness and joy, which appear to have distinct experiential structures. With a slight modification to Weiner's (1986) theory of gratitude, we can say that gladness (which he calls "happiness") gives rise to gratitude through a two-step process. First, the person appraises that he or she has arrived at a positive outcome. Secondly, the person attributes responsibility for this outcome to an external agent, to whom they feel grateful. In this case, then, the person feels grateful toward a *particular agent* (e.g., a person or deity) for a *particular, positive outcome* (e.g., achievement of a personal goal). Joy on the other hand is an existential emotion (Lazarus, 1991; Smith, 1986, 1981; Robbins, 2003a). It is not about any *particular* event, such as the achievement of a personal goal; rather, joy is about *existence as a whole*. In fact, it appears that joy results less from the pursuit and/or achievement of instrumental pursuits than an openness to experience (Robbins, 2003a, 2003b) that we referred to earlier as "self-reflexivity" (Sundararajan, 2002).

I propose that joy, awe and gratitude are related as existential emotions. Again, joy is a recognition of the bare fact of existence; that existence *is*. In the recognition of the fullness of Being that comes with joy, the person is awe-struck when they reflect on the fact that while existence *is*, it could just as well *not* be. The fact that existence is when it could just as well not be gives rise to the recognition that existence is a *gift*. It is given to the extent that I myself have not granted the gift of Being; rather, Being is a gratuitous *blessing*. In my recognition that existence is

a gift, I feel grateful (see also: Emmons, 2002).

It may seem strange to speak of gratitude toward something as seemingly abstract as “existence.” Yet the empirical evidence supports the thesis that gratitude can be felt toward non-human agents (Moore, 1996; Veisson, 1999; Graham & Barker, 1990; Roseman, 1991; Teigen, 1997; Coffman, 1996). Indeed, Teigen (1997) found in her autobiographical narrative study of gratitude that people could quite easily describe feelings of gratitude toward non-human agents such as “fate,” “higher powers,” and, yes, “existence.” Thus, it can be stated that an existential form of gratitude flows from the existential emotions of joy and awe. From this attunement of gratitude, the person is prompted to feel compassion, the desire to return the gift of existence by enhancing the goodness of the world, including all those others, creatures and things that compose it.

### **Compassion**

Perhaps one of the greatest commentators on the compassionate life is existential philosopher Martin Buber (1958) who argued that, “All real living is meeting” (pp. 24-25). Compassion is at the heart of Buber’s philosophy of the dialogical life and the I-Thou encounter with the other. For Buber, there is no “I” that is not always already related to others; thus, one is most fully him- or herself in genuine contact with the other. In an I-It relation to the other, however, I encounter him or her as a means to my own end, an object for my own use. That is, I encounter the other in an instrumental fashion, as a tool for my own well-being. Yet this narcissism precludes me from genuine contact with the other *as* other, for to the extent that I am not in contact with the other in the simplicity of an unmediated encounter, I am not yet fully

who I am. It is only in the I-Thou relation that I become myself, and such a relation is only possible when it is unmediated, when no further end or expectation intervenes in my contract with him or her.

Yet, Buber (1958) argues, I cannot instrumentally pursue the I-Thou relation. No. Rather, the I-Thou encounter occurs only in a *moment of grace*, a gift that I am blessed with and for which I can be grateful. Thus, Buber (1966) makes a distinction between the I-Thou encounter and the dialogical relation. While I cannot instrumentally will an I-Thou encounter, I can prepare a fertile context that prepares for its arrival. This preparation for the coming of the I-Thou encounter happens in one's cultivation of dialogical relations. For Buber, the dialogical life is a matter of throwing our whole being into our situation; it is a matter of being fully present to our given task and to all those we encounter along the way. The dialogical life is a life of responsibility, a cultivation of community, and a life of joy. "This life is based on a community of sharing and freedom enlightened by a joyful doing" (Gordon, 2001, p. 109). So, for Buber, the joyful life and the life of compassion are necessary but not efficient for the I-Thou encounter. I can cultivate joy and live a life of compassion, but the I-Thou encounter is *gratuitous*, a gift for which I can only be blessed by grace.

In his writings on Hasidism, Buber (1972) argues that the "life of perfection" is cultivated through striving for what is hallow in the world, and this striving is an attempt to find that which is sacred in what is typically perceived as merely profane. One might say that this striving for what is hallow in the world, for the sacred, is a readiness for *awe* (see e.g., Schneider, 2003). The cultivation of the sacred, he claimed, requires one's full presence in the world, a full presence that



is exemplified by moments of joy (Gordon, 2001). However, this quest for the sacred is not an impulse for that which is other-worldly, nor is it a turn inward and away from others and the world; on the contrary, the sacred is found in the encounter with the other, or more specifically, in the actions a person undertakes to cultivate goodness in his or her community and in the world at large (see also: Pilisuk & Tardella, 2000; Cummings, 1991). For Buber (1972), joy is necessarily a *communal* joy, the expression of one's labor towards building a "holy community," a community built upon devotion and trust, a *polis* that thrives upon the exchange of compassionate gestures (also see: Sheldon & Kasser, 2001 for empirical evidence that supports this contention).

Buber's theory, to some, may seem naive and out of touch with reality, a reality that many perceive as inherently brutish and ultimately founded upon the selfish pursuit of personal gain at the expense of others. Compassion, from this perspective, is merely a disguised form of selfishness (e.g., I do good for others only because I expect the other to reciprocate my good deed or because I expect some other external reward in exchange for my gift to the other). While there may very well be a truth to this (see e.g., Zahavi, 2000; Nesse, 2000; Moore, 1984) – after all Buber said that we predominately live in a world of I-It relations – there is empirical evidence that the compassionate life, or the dialogical life as Buber called it, truly does cultivate what might be called a "holy community," if we mean by this simply a community built upon communal joy, awe before the sacred, humble gratitude, and genuine, self-transcending compassion (Holmes, Miller & Lerner, 2002; Isen, 1999; Miller & Jansen-op-de-Haar, 1997; Rioux, 1999; Williams & Shiaw, 1999; George & Brief, 1992; Salovey & Rosenhan, 1989; Shaffer,

1985, 1986; George, 1991).

The research evidence supports the link between joy and prosocial, compassionate behaviors (Isen & Baron, 1991; Isen, 1999; Salovey & Rosehan, 1989). For example, a series of studies on organizational behavior has demonstrated that cooperative, prosocial behaviors are associated with positive moods, both at the individual (George, 1991; Williams & Shiaw, 1999) and group (George, 1990; George & Bettenhausen, 1990) levels. Further, prosocial behaviors in organizations have been found to be more highly associated with *prosocial values* than *organizational commitment* (a concern for and commitment to the company) or *impression management* (to create a desired image of oneself) (Rioux, 1999). Moreover, correlational research on altruism in college students has found that altruistic goals, charity and helping behaviors are associated with positive affect and satisfaction with life (Johnson, Kristeller, Sheets & Shiber, 2003).

It could be argued that such prosocial behaviors are motivated by hedonism rather than altruism. However, as Shaffer (1985, 1986) has argued, “an instrumental interpretation of mood-induced helping is overstated” (p. 195). While some people may be motivated to engage in altruistic acts in order to lighten negative moods, and thus engage in altruistic behavior for self-serving purposes, “the benevolence associated with positive moods is less self-serving or hedonic in character” since, in empathizing with a person who is distressed, we risk lowering our positive affect (Shaffer, 1985, 1986, p. 195). In fact, research supports the view that people who appear to be engaged in prosocial acts for self-serving purposes are actually attempting to “provide psychological cover for their act of compassion” (Holmes, Miller & Lerner, 2002, p. 144). For

example, in research by Holmes, Miller & Lerner (2002), they found that “participants donated more money to charity when offered a product in exchange for their donation, even though the product itself held little appeal to them” (p. 144). Miller (1999) suggests that Americans in particular cloak their urge toward genuine compassion as a way to minimize conflict with the prevailing cultural belief that humans are inherently selfish. Yet, in actuality, the cultural myth of the self-interest motive appears to go against the grain of our natural predilection toward genuinely compassionate service to others, that is, toward the cultivation of Buber’s “holy community.”

If joy promotes prosocial behavior and gratitude mutually determines and reinforces joy, then we would expect gratitude to cultivate prosocial behavior. Preliminary empirical evidence suggests it does. In a study of participants engaged in self-guided daily gratitude exercises, Emmons & McCullough (2003) found that these exercises were not only associated with higher levels of positive affect, but people who engaged in these exercises “were also more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support to another, suggesting prosocial motivation as a consequence of the gratitude induction” (p. 386). Furthermore, Emmons (2002), drawing upon the writings of G. K. Chesterton, has suggested that awe or wonder cultivates a place for gratitude as well as prosocial, compassionate behavior.

Finally, research on the emotion of “elevation” (Haidt, 2000; Haidt, Algoe, Meijer, Tam & Chandler, 2000) further supports the argument that compassion is associated with gratitude, joy and awe. Elevation is a feeling of being uplifted by witnessing the unexpected, compassionate gestures of another person. When people witness the good deeds of others, they feel gratitude,

joy and awe, and they also feel motivated to help others and to become better persons themselves. These emotions are contagious: they generate a circuit of warmth and trust that motivates the community to cultivate what is good in the world. As Fredrickson (1998) states, these positive emotions, like other positive emotions, “broaden” and “build” the individual, but more importantly, they broaden and build Buber’s “holy community,” a unit that transcends any particular individual while at the same time respecting the uniqueness and sacredness of each individual person who composes that larger whole<sup>4</sup> (see also: Barrett-Lennard, 1994).

Thus, we can see how joy, awe, gratitude and compassion form a structural relationship, each emotion mutually determining and reinforcing the others. We can see this structure beautifully expressed in the following Hasidic tale:

A number of hasidim came to Lublin. Before they set out to the rabbi [the Seer of Lublin], their coachman asked them to give the rabbi, together with the slips of paper with their names written on them, also a slip of paper with his name, so that the rabbi will bless him too. They did as he asked. When the rabbi read the slip of paper with the coachman’s name, he said: “This man’s name is illuminated by a bright light.” The hasidim were astonished. They replied: but this man is naive and ignorant; no one has ever seen him perform a unique good deed. At this moment, the rabbi said, his soul was shining in front of me as pure light. Immediately the hasidim went to look for the coachman; they did not find him in the inn. They went from street to street; suddenly they perceived a merry group of Jews coming toward them celebrating. First the musicians with cymbals and drums, and after them a crowd of dancing and clapping people, and in the middle the coachman who was loud in his rejoicing and merrier than all the others. To their question as to his recent deeds, he answers: After you left me, I found myself at the wedding of two orphans. I drank and sang and rejoiced together with all the guests. But after a while, a quarrel arose and with it confusion; it turned out that the bride did not have money to buy a prayer shawl, which custom required, for her future husband. They were close to tearing up the marriage agreement. My heart could not see the bride’s shame, so I took out my purse and found there just enough money for the prayer shawl. This is why my heart rejoiced. (Buber, 1972, p. 309, cited by Gordon, 2001, with some modification in translation).

In this tale, we can imagine the coachman was prepared for his good deed through awe; that is, he was open to the sacred, not in spite of but *through* his everyday, mundane life as he engaged in his daily affairs. Already enjoined in celebration with others, he is moved by the need of others, the bride, groom and their families, whose wedding ceremony is at stake. The coachman is initially moved by the threat of nothingness: that the wedding ceremony might not happen, and this possibility generates anxiety. But through his compassionate gestures, the coachman generates joy, not only for him and the wedding party, but for all those witnesses who are elevated by his holiness. (Joy celebrates that the wedding now *is*, thus no longer at stake, no longer threatened by nothingness). We can imagine that the coachman is grateful for his opportunity to offer his charity, just as much as the wedding party is grateful for his gift, and this circuit of gratitude spreads like an electrical charge through all those associated with the scene. Here, then, is a moment of grace in which a dialogical life prepares the ground for a genuine I-Thou encounter, blessing all those fortunate enough to participate in its happening.

### **Will-to-openness**

What do these emotions share as a common ground? Is there a condition of possibility that gives rise to and sustains these states of mind? If we closely examine each of these emotions, and the conditions in which they arise, at least one common theme emerges in each case: a comportment within the world that I will call a “will-to-openness.”<sup>5</sup> By “will-to-openness” I am referring to a style or manner of being-in-the-world, a way of being with others and alongside things, that is non-instrumental in nature. When I am engaged instrumentally with the world, I am engaged in manipulating and calculating the world in order to predict and control it. Instrumental

engagement is motivated by a “will-to-power” rather than a “will-to-openness.” One seeks to become a master and possessor of nature, as Descartes (1978, p. 74) would have it. Things and others appear as means to further ends, as resources or “standing reserve” whose meanings are reducible to their mere use-value (Heidegger, 1966b). On the other hand, what I have in mind by the “will-to-openness” is quite similar to what Eckhart (1996) termed *gelassenheit*, a letting go of willed ends in order to be present in the here and now; it is giving one’s full presence to the hallowed ground of the task before us, the other in need, the existence that sustains us with its blessings, without willing a further purpose or ground beyond them, like the rose without reason and without “why,” there in its pure simplicity and openness to Being (Silesius, 1986). For Eckhart, to achieve such a will-to-openness is to become like God, who “does not seek his own interest. In all his deeds he is unencumbered and free, and accomplishes them out of genuine love” (Eckhart, cited in Fox, 2000, p. 451). In “letting go” of ego-related pursuits, I prepare the soil for the I-Thou relation to blossom forth, except here the I-Thou encounter is not only reserved for one’s relations to other people, but to creatures, things, the natural world, and existence itself.

As I have argued elsewhere (Robbins, 2003a), joy is only possible when I am engaged in a will-to-openness. Empirical research supports the connection between the “will-to-openness” and joy. For example, a series of studies have found that individuals who stake their happiness on contingent, instrumental goals are likely to experience dysphoria when these goals are not attained. However, those who enjoy activities for the intrinsic value of the activities as ends in themselves are unaffected by goal attainment or non-attainment (McIntosh & Martin, 1992; McIntosh, Martin & Jones, 2001). When I am fully present rather than willfully pursuing future

ends, I make a place for joy. In joy, the world shows itself purely in its simple “that it is.” Having made a place for joy through the will-to-openness, I come, through awe, to realize that while existence *is*, it might not have been, and thus I feel deep gratitude for the gift of existence. In my gratitude for the gift of existence, I am called to compassionate engagement in the world: called to be engaged in the service that enhances the goodness of the world. To the extent that these are ontological emotions, one could argue that, in the will-to-openness, we come closer to a genuine contract with the *real*. Thus, in the attunements of joy, awe, gratitude and compassion, together in their unity and as emerging from the will-to-openness, I become more fully human, that is, more coincidence with the essence of what it means to be human: to *care* (see also: Pilisuk, 2001). Perhaps, then, it is no wonder eminent people have most frequently understood that the meaning of life is discovered, on the one hand, through enjoyment, and on the other, through loving and helping others (Kinnier, Kernes, Tribbensee, & Puymbroeck, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

Based on this review of the literature, Maslow’s theory of self-actualization and peak experiences can be extended and enhanced when viewed through the lens of an existential and phenomenological understanding of “Being emotions” such as joy, awe, gratitude and compassion. Moreover, an ontological understanding of Being emotions provides a deeper, existential foundation for Maslow’s humanistic theory of human being-in-the-world. In the tradition of Heidegger’s existential understanding of moods, Being emotions are not only the result of Being cognitions or values. They are disclosive of the very essence of the meaning of Being and human beings as the “shepherds of Being” (Heidegger, 1993). Joy reveals that Being is,

while Awe discloses that it might not have been. Gratitude discovers Being as a gift, and compassion discloses Being's gift as something to be cherished and cared for. In this disclosure of Being, human beings are implicated as the kinds of being who disclose the world as it is, understanding that it might not have been and thus is a gift to be nurtured and cultivated as our dwelling place, our home. From this ontological foundation, Being cognitions and values are made possible and make sense. From this perspective, to be "self-actualized" means to be coincident with our essence as human beings whose meaning is to care and, in caring, who reveal the meaning of Being as what is cared for.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This essay was presented in preliminary form at a conference entitled Works of Love: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Altruism, May 31-June 5, 2003, hosted by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love and the Metanexus Institute.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent discussion of the relevance of anxiety for humanistic psychology, see Gordon (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Hoffman (1998) found that peak experiences are common in childhood.

<sup>4</sup> A wonderful example of this connection between positive values, positive identity, altruistic action, and thriving communities can be seen exemplified in the work of the Search Institute (Benson, 2003). Work by the institute has found that positive values and identity (among other factors) in adolescents is associated with altruistic action, which in turn reduces patterns of risk behavior (e.g., drug use, sexual activity, violence) and increases thriving indicators (e.g., leadership, affirmation of diversity, proactive health, delay of gratification).



<sup>5</sup> Self-actualization as “openness” is not a new concept. Mittleman (1991, 1994, 1995) reinterpreted Maslow’s conception of “self-actualization” as trait openness. See Tobacyk (1994) for a critique of Mittleman’s argument.

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