

I Didn't Know I Was Surviving

I used to think survival looked more dramatic.

I imagined it as something obvious. A collapse. A sob on the bathroom floor. A life visibly coming apart at the seams.

I did not know survival could look competent.

I did not know it could answer the phone, remember everyone's birthday, pay the bills on time, follow the rules, stay calm in a crisis, keep a tidy house, make the decision, manage the emergency, and still be quietly disappearing underneath it all.

For most of my life, I thought I was fine.

Not joyful. Not particularly peaceful. Not rested. But fine.

Fine was the word I used because I did not have another one. I was functioning. I was responsible. I showed up. I got things done. Life kept moving forward, so I assumed I was too.

Looking back now, I realize I confused functioning with living.

People often described me as calm under pressure. Through emergency dispatch, security, management, and every role where difficult situations landed on my desk, I could make decisions without falling apart. I knew how to separate emotion from action. I knew how to focus on the next step while everyone else was still trying to catch their breath.

At the time, I believed that was simply who I was.

Part of it probably was.

But part of it was something much older.

Not training from a workplace. Training from childhood. The kind your nervous system learns long before your mind can explain it. Learning to notice shifts in mood before anyone else did. Learning to stay useful. Stay alert. Stay prepared. Stay small enough not to become another problem.

Eventually those habits stopped feeling like survival.

They simply became my personality.

I thought I was independent. Practical. Responsible. Organized. Strong. I thought I was simply someone who preferred being prepared.

I did not realize I had built my entire life around never letting my guard down.

The strange thing about survival mode is that after enough years, it stops feeling like something you are doing. It simply feels like who you are.

The strange thing about a wall is that, after enough years, it starts to feel like shelter.

You stop noticing the stone. You stop asking what is on the other side. You decorate it. You lean shelves against it. You build a life around it and call that life normal.

I did that for a long time. Decades.

I built a life around being capable.

Capable at work. Capable in crisis. Capable in rooms where emotion had to wait. Capable in the middle of things that would have frightened me if I had allowed myself to feel them.

I wore capability like armour, then forgot I had put it on.

People trusted me because I did not fall apart.

I trusted myself for the same reason.

But not falling apart is not the same as being whole.

I know that now.

I did not know it then.

When life finally stopped me, I wanted one thing more than anything else.

I wanted my old life back.

The woman who could always cope. The woman who could keep moving. The woman who knew exactly what needed to be done. The woman who could make fear useful by turning it into vigilance.

I thought healing meant becoming her again.

Back to normal. Back to productive. Back to who I was before everything caught up with me.

But slowly, with the kind of slowness that irritated me, another question began to form.

What if the life I wanted to get back to was not peace?

What if it was just survival with better posture?

That question unsettled me more than any diagnosis ever could.

Because once I saw it, I could not stop seeing it.

I began to notice how often I measured a day by what I had managed. How quickly I apologized for needing rest. How uncomfortable I felt when nothing was being fixed. How guilty I became when I was not productive. How instinctively I looked for the next responsibility instead of the next beautiful moment.

And perhaps most surprisingly, I realized I did not actually know what I enjoyed.

I knew what I was good at.

I knew what people expected from me.

I knew what needed to be done.

But if no one needed anything from me, what did I want?

It felt strangely embarrassing to ask that question in my fifties.

There is a particular grief that comes with realizing you have spent years surviving without knowing it. Not because you failed, but because no one ever taught you there was another way.

For a while, I mourned that.

I mourned the years spent braced. The younger version of myself who thought fear was just the weather. The body that kept score while I kept going. The ordinary pleasures I did not know I was allowed to want.

Then something softer arrived. Curiosity.

What if learning to live was not about reinventing myself?

I have never liked the word *reinvention*. It sounds too shiny for what this is. Too polished. Too dramatic. Like the old version of you should quietly disappear so a better-lit one can take her place.

That is not what this feels like.

This feels more like meeting someone I misplaced a very long time ago.

The Joy Quest grew from that realization.

Not because I suddenly became joyful. Not because I believe joy erases trauma. And certainly not because I think healing follows a tidy, inspirational timeline.

The Joy Quest exists because I finally understood that surviving and living are not the same thing.

So now I am learning.

Sometimes that learning looks like driving two hours for an apple fritter because it reminds me of being seventeen. Sometimes it is sitting beside a river with a notebook and no agenda. Sometimes it is trying a new recipe, wandering through a bookstore, painting badly, watching birds, taking a quiet road just to see where it goes, or noticing the way afternoon light moves across a kitchen table.

None of those moments solve my past.

They are not supposed to.

They simply remind me that I am allowed to experience a life that is not organized around endurance.

For years, usefulness was the currency I trusted most. If I was useful, I believed I had earned my place. If I was capable, I felt safer. If I needed less, I was easier to keep.

Joy does not work that way.

Joy does not ask whether I have earned it. It does not wait until the list is finished, the house is clean, the wound is explained, the lesson is learned, or the healing has become impressive enough to deserve a soft afternoon.

Joy is rude that way.

It simply appears.

In warm coffee. In mountain air. In laughter that catches me off guard. In a beautiful notebook. In sunlight on water. In the smell of cinnamon. In the first bite of something I drove too far to taste. In ordinary moments I would once have rushed straight past.

Some days I still do not trust it.

Some days joy feels suspicious, almost irresponsible, after spending so many years preparing for what might go wrong. It feels too light. Too unguarded. Too much like standing in an open field after years of living close to the wall.

But I keep choosing it anyway.

Not because life has suddenly become easy.

Because I finally understand that surviving is not the same as being alive.

And I want to know what being alive feels like.

Not in some grand, dramatic way.

In ordinary Tuesday afternoons. In quiet mornings. In conversations that are not rushed. In food that feels like kindness instead of punishment. In creativity that does not have to become productive. In beauty that does not have to justify itself.

The Joy Quest is not about finding a perfect life.

It is not a declaration that I have found joy and will now be distributing it in tidy little jars.

It is not a healing performance.

It is not proof that trauma becomes beautiful if you add enough sunlight.

It is me trying.

Trying to find out what I like. Trying to let beauty count. Trying to rest before collapse. Trying to stop making usefulness the rent I pay for existing. Trying to become less loyal to the old emergency inside me. Trying to learn the difference between peace and control.

Some days, choosing joy will look like an adventure.

Some days, it will look like leaving the house when anxiety wants me to stay small.

Some days, it will look like eating something nourishing instead of punishing myself with rules.

Some days, it will look like doing nothing and not turning that nothing into guilt.

Some days, it may not look like joy at all.

It may look like grief.

Because when you begin to live, you also begin to feel what survival cost.

I think that is part of it too.

I am not doing this because life is suddenly easy. I am doing it because I finally understand that surviving is not the same as being alive.

And I want to be alive.

I want mornings that are not only for bracing. I want food that tastes like care. I want roads that lead somewhere unnecessary. I want laughter that surprises me. I want creativity without a business plan attached to it. I want to know what kind of beauty still reaches me. I want to stop asking whether joy is useful before I let it in.

Maybe that is where living begins.

Not with a grand transformation.

Not with a perfect new identity.

But with one small, almost ridiculous question:

What would make today feel a little more alive?

That is the question I am following now.

Through rivers and road trips. Through books and bakeries. Through kitchens and creativity. Through tiny adventures and ordinary moments. Through imperfect courage and the slow work of coming back to myself.

This is my Joy Quest.

Not because I already know how to live.

Because, for the first time, I am willing to learn.

Jennifer Irene Stewart