



JOY  
AFTER  
THE  
FIRE

Joyce Wycoff

*Joyce Wycoff*  
connecting through art + ai

# Joy after the Fire

where grief, despair and loss  
become the seeds  
of new growth and joy

*by*

Joyce Wycoff

*digital collage artist  
photographer  
author  
poet  
lover of life  
soul friend to self and others  
creativity junkie  
willing servant to Missy  
tree hugger  
internet addict  
wildflower follower  
blogger  
serial entrepreneur  
California-phile*

**Joy after the Fire** by Joyce Wycoff  
[Gratitude Mojo in Action](#)

Published by: iPub-Press

Copyright (c)2012 by Joyce Wycoff  
Email: [jwycoff@me.com](mailto:jwycoff@me.com)

*This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment and use only. It has been deliberately priced to make it affordable to anyone, so we would appreciate your not selling or giving it away to others.*

*Reviewers are invited to quote brief passages and anyone wishing to quote longer sections should contact the author for permission, which, under most circumstances, will be given.*

*All artwork and photography is by Joyce Wycoff and should not be reproduced without prior permission.*

*Design by Mark Heliger*

*FIRST EDITION: January, 2012*

*iPub-Press*

*Oakhurst, California*

<http://www.iPub-Press.com>

*ISBN: 978-0-9838083-0-5*

***Revised FIRST EDITION: April, 2024***

***Minor changes and error corrections only.***



*For Ava and Reyna...  
may your passions be big,  
your fears small,  
and your joy continuous.*



***Cosmic hugs and kisses to:***

*Richard Wycoff  
Lerrea Mohney  
Wanda Harris  
Maggi BB  
Jerry McNellis  
Missy*

*Your spirits are always with me.*



*And, to my dear friends, without whom  
I would not have survived the journey:*

*Pat, Barbara, Anita, Emily*





## **Table of Contents**

**Preface:** After the Fire: New Life

**Chapter 1:** Breaking Rule #1 (2007)

**Interlude 1:** Changing Pronouns (2009)

**Chapter 2:** Saved by a Bumper Sticker and an iPod (2006)

**Interlude 2:** Message in a Ring (Backstory)

**Chapter 3:** Entering a Fractal World of Gratitude (2006)

**Interlude 3:** Gems of Heartbreak

**Chapter 4:** Bolting down the Rabbit Hole (2007)

**Interlude 4:** Art Knocks (Backstory)

**Chapter 5:** Solitude -- The Howling Wolf (2009)

**Interlude 5:** The Beauty of Death (2009)

**Chapter 6:** Cinderella's Brass Ring (Backstory & 2009)

**Interlude 6:** Do You Love Me? (2009)

**Chapter 7:** Anam Cara (Soul Friend) (2009)

**Interlude 7:** The Gift of Friends (2007 - 2011)

**Chapter 8:** Waking the Dead (2010)

**Interlude 8:** Definitions to Outlive (2011)

**Chapter 9:** Touching Freedom (2009)

**Interlude 9:** Guardian Angels (2010)

**Chapter 10:** The Tangled Trail of Miracles (2010)

**Interlude 10:** Thanking Turtle (2011)

**Afterword:** Being Love

**Appendix A: Stages of Grief**

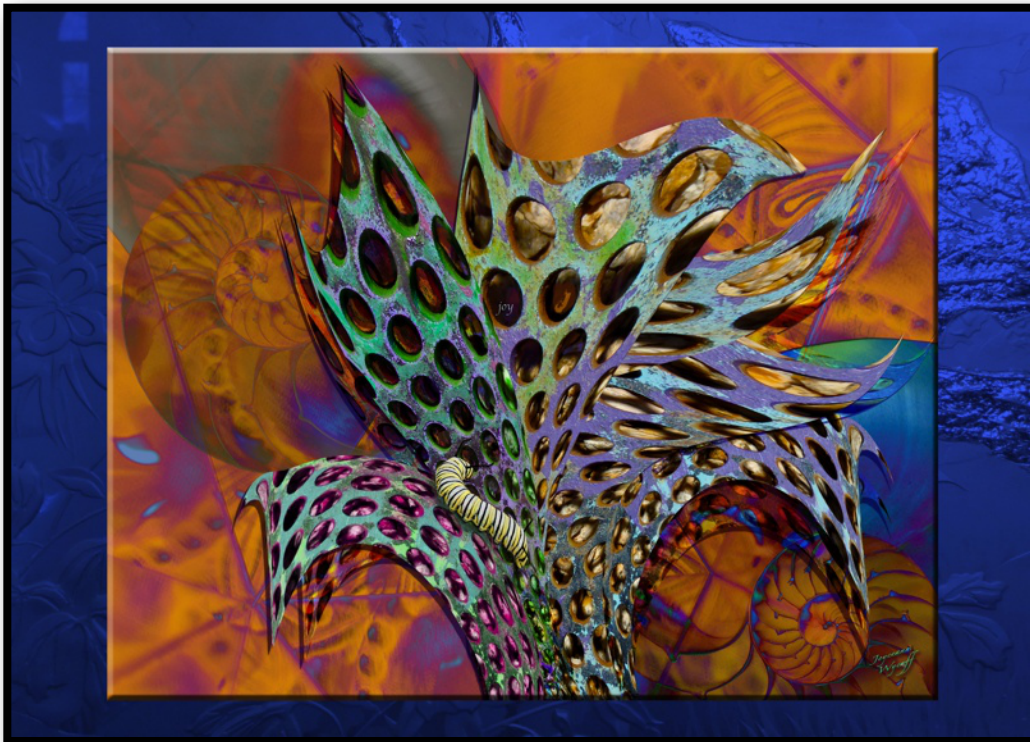
**Appendix B: Poetry**

**Appendix C: Resources**

## Preface: After the Fire: New Life

*“Sometimes I go about pitying myself,  
and all the time I am being carried  
on great winds across the sky.”*

-- Chippewa music  
adapted from the translation by Frances Densmore



**I** did not want to write this book.

I tried to write another book, a nice “how-to” book written with wisdom and humor. A book that would help people identify their passion, and courageously enter the unknown future that stretches before them to find their gifts and bring them back to the world.

I really did try. I wrote the first three chapters and sent them out to be read. The return comments were encouraging, just a handful of people asked, “What is this, a ‘how-to’ or a memoir?” I tried to ignore the question, but the writing stopped, and I could not get it started again. I tried changing the title, then the tone, the outline, but nothing worked. So, I put it away, expecting it to stay put away.

### **Sometimes life has other plans.**

My friend Pat poked me, prodded me and told me that the book I needed to write was my story, my story of loss and recovery. That it might help others. I resisted. I did not want to write a book of grief and loss. I did not want to be put into that “poor widow” box. I wanted to focus on joy, the joy that now enveloped my life. However, the joy started in the blazing inferno of loss so how could I write the story without starting at the beginning?

OK, I said to myself. I’ll write the book, but no one wants to read such a convoluted, messy, sometimes crazy tale. They want “thin thighs in 30 days.” They want step 1, 2, 3; arrive at joy. Not this chaotic dance:

- ❖ **First two months:** run as fast as you can and hope it does not catch you.
- ❖ **Month three:** breathe a sigh of relief because it is working.
- ❖ **Month four:** throw your entire life to the wind.
- ❖ **Months five through twelve:** create as much drama as you can.
- ❖ **Months thirteen through eighteen:** wallow in pain and self-pity.

- ❖ **Months nineteen through twenty-six:** spin in circles and confusion.
- ❖ **Months twenty-seven through thirty-one:** grab one more time for Cinderella's brass ring.
- ❖ **Month thirty-two:** wake up to reality
- ❖ **Months thirty-three through thirty-nine:** refill your empty cup.
- ❖ **Months forty on:** be dazzled by miracles and joy.

If it were not for the last step, I would not write this book. There would be no point. However, I slowly inched my way into Wonderland where miracles and joy did show up. Maybe someone can tell us all how to make the recovery from loss neat and tidy. I can not. I will share my story, though, maybe it will help. More than anything else, I want you to know that there is joy on the other side of grief and loss.

### **Life throws us into the unknown.**

On this journey, we will call that land of loss and confusion Dragon Country. What is there for us to find is a new awareness of our self and our gifts, new connection to friends, family, spirit, inner gifts previously unknown, and new ways to connect to the world around us. Traveling through Dragon Country is never easy and sometimes it is spirit-crushing, but the gifts are still there waiting for us to awaken once again to life, pick them up and share them with the world.

When the protracted illness and death of my husband threw me into that uncharted land, I thought grief was something to “get over” in order to “get back to normal.” I did not know that it would be my teacher, my guide to my deepest self, my entrance to a new life. It



truly became a wonderland where everything is new, and wonderful things show up.

Although Richard died five years ago, my life now brims over with joy, a new form of joy. I live in a place that feeds my soul, doing art that thrills me and seems to be finding its place in the world, being close to what little family I have left, surrounded by a vibrant network of friends, including a best-friend housemate and our three dogs and two cats. Have I “gotten over” Richard’s loss? Of course not. There are still moments and memories that break me open, and I imagine there always will be.

### **Apples & Oranges**

If given the chance, would I turn the clock back eight years and erase the cancer that took Richard’s life? Of course I would. However, that would mean that this life I am living would never have happened, so I would not know about it or miss it. It is almost as if an apple tree died, and in its place an orange tree grew. If the apple tree had never died, the orange tree would never have found space to grow. My heart aches for the lost apple, but it also leaps in joy for the found orange. No wonder grief is such a swirl of emotional confusion.

I am writing this the day after Easter so maybe the resurrection story colors my thinking. That story makes me wonder if, in a way, Richard died for me, so that I could have a new life...this life. If that is too weird, another way of looking at it would be to know that the best way I have of honoring him and his death is to live my best life. He loved me and I know he would want me to live life. He would be proud that his death opened the door to new ways of finding joy and happiness.

Anyway, I listened to my friend Pat, and myself, and wrote this story, but I realized that just telling the story was not enough...for you, the reader...or for myself. What is useful is not what I did specifically, but the lessons I learned along the way. Clarity about what the lessons meant only came as I began to write about the story and my feelings, and, as much as possible, I describe what I learned at the end of each bit of story.

**First, the story. Second, the lessons. Most important: “Pause and Ponder.”**

However, the lessons are not the critical part either. This is my story and my lessons, and they are not useful unless you can relate them to your life and your own lessons. So, at the end of each chapter, there are some questions to ponder. (You can follow the Wake Up Rooster to find them.) I encourage you to take some time to write in your journal about the questions that seem relevant to you. These questions help you find the self that may still be hidden deep within you and let it emerge on this journey into Wonderland.

I willingly share my story because every day I wake up in a state of stunned gratitude at the beauty of my life and the miracles that flowered around me. Each chapter and interlude begins with a piece of art I have created during the journey since Richard's death. After a loss, we are called on to create a new life; therefore, it makes sense that creativity plays a key role in our healing.

## What is an Interlude?

This story is told primarily in the chapters, but life is never step 1, 2, 3, so there are some things that do not fit the story line, but help

create a fuller picture. We could call them backstory or tangents; I like to think of them as interludes.

Grief is not a linear process, and this book is not written in a chronological format. While it is the story of the past four and a half years of my life, it emerges from the activities and lessons that proceeded these years, so it is impossible to tell the story without weaving some of that material into the telling.

To give you an overview of the progression of the story, I have broken it into six stages, which require some mixing of metaphors for it to make sense, and I have neatly attached each stage to a year to help you follow the progression. The chapter and interlude titles indicate the year of the main activities and pulls in material from my blog to give you a better sense of how I was feeling I was at that specific time. Here are the stages and the related years:

**Death** -- all stories start with change: a death, loss or some sort of disruption. Often stories stay stuck in this stage, however, it is simply the beginning, the context for the rest of the story. Richard's death on November 27, 2006, set this story in motion. (2006)

**Germination** -- death leaves space and fallow ground for new seeds. It is a time that calls for openness and receptiveness without worrying about which sprouts are weeds and which will become beautiful flowers.(2007)

**Chrysalis** -- while the surface of life looks calm and quiet, underneath there is a radical reshifting occurring. (2008)

**Birth** -- the drama of this period is accompanied by birth pains, confusion, fear and doubt. (2009)

**Growth** -- if tended and nourished, what has been born begins to take shape. (2010)

**First Fruit** -- slowly but surely new life begins to open up and reveal its new joy and abundance. (2011)

### **Miracles await us.**

Miracles wait for each one of us who makes the journey into the darkness, whether we go willingly or are tossed there by the vagaries of life. Regardless of what brought you here, whether death, divorce, disease or disaster, I hope you will join me on this journey and find for yourself the multicolored gifts and miracles of joy waiting for you in the deeply beautiful country of your authentic self, your very own Wonderland.

Rainer Maria Rilke, German poet and visionary, captures the essence of this book in two short sentences:

*"Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses  
who are only waiting to see us act, just once,  
with beauty and courage.  
Perhaps everything that frightens us is,  
in its deepest essence,  
something helpless that wants our love."*



**About this Image: *Inching into Wonderland***

The spark of this image came from a picture I took of the seat of a painted metal chair found on a road trip.

The pattern of holes and the flaking paint remnants of purple, green and blue called to me. Rigid and static, it wanted to bend. The wonderland of Photoshop allowed it to morph into a flower where a caterpillar is about to venture into one of the holes.

***What will it find there?  
What do we find when we bend?***



## Chapter 1: Breaking Rule #1 (2007)

*"Always begin again."*

-- The Rules of St. Benedict



**E**very sane person agrees that rule #1 after you lose a spouse or significant other is to make no major decisions for at least a year.

I had heard about it, read about it and totally agreed with rule #1 long before Richard was diagnosed with prostate cancer. It was

rehashed and reinforced repeatedly throughout the three years of one failed treatment after another. And, on that morning when a silence deeper than anything I had ever known began my day, and

divided my life into before and after, the wisdom repeated over and over in every conversation until...

### **Throwing caution to the wind.**

Until the day a few months later when I didn't just break rule #1, I pulverized it and threw every tiny particle to the wind.

I am sure you will not be surprised to learn that breaking rule #1 involved a guy, and that the fates were playing their games behind the scenes. I met Gary when we were toddlers, and he wove in and out of my life like an accent thread in a tapestry.

Broken marriages bound us together. His stepfather was my stepfather's stepbrother. We called ourselves cousins. He was my first real crush, and I thought we would marry, but it did not happen. He married another on my twentieth birthday, and a year and half later, on his birthday, I married his best friend. Karmic coincidences of that sort made me think destiny pulled us together. Insane thinking? Perhaps.

His mother (my "aunt") became our connecting link. She was my unwavering supporter, one of my best friends and my chosen, almost-mom. She visited me often in California, and at least once a year I visited her in Tulsa, where I would also catch up with Gary. When Richard died, Gary had been single for fifteen years and worried about his mom's health. He started calling and after many long conversations about life, death, and living alone, he suggested that we form an "alliance."

I did not ask what that meant. (*That was insanity!*) I just got on a plane, flew to Tulsa and turned my back on what was. Within a few

months, we bought a house in the lake country of the Arkansas Ozarks and moved Gary, his mom and me to our new life.

### **The healing magic of long, slow days.**

I can think back on those times and wonder at the insanity of tossing everything to the wind, and the drama of moving three houses into one, but what I remember most were the long, slow days. Our house had a wide front porch, and we would sit out there on warm afternoons literally watching the grass grow. I spent lovely, long hours with my aunt, remembering our lives, laughing at Missy, the toy poodle we bought for her, and Gabby, the cat we inherited when we bought the place. Discussing what to have for dinner was a highlight of those peaceful, healing days.

As my aunt's health deteriorated, she spent most of her time resting and we took occasional, short car trips. Gary was not a "go-er," so quiet solitude marked most of our days: my aunt napping, Gary on his computer looking for car parts for his collection of old cars, me on my computer learning the intricacies of Photoshop and layering together photographs to make digital collages. The gentle, rhythmic pace, a breathing in and breathing out, pulsed in slow motion. I thought it would last forever.

Gradually, however, the relationship with Gary began to show hairline cracks, and, in spite of our best efforts, they expanded and deepened, and we found that our long history could not patch them back together. Slowly, inexorably, pain bloomed like a dark flower in my chest. Hurt and disappointment announced that "happily ever after" was not going to happen, and joined the slow roiling of the deferred grief I had tried to avoid. These combined with the pain of watching my aunt's health decline to form a growing ball of loss.

So, I did what came naturally; I bolted again. This time to Colorado where I knew a total of one person, a coauthor and friend of twenty years. There, I finally had to stop and face myself and my life. Suddenly lost and alone, in a strange state that did not feel like home, uncertain about who I was and what I wanted to do with my life, the fabric of my life unraveled.

I felt purposeless and rootless. Richard and I had moved a lot, but it had never mattered much because home was always wherever we were together. He was my place holder, but now there was no place, no home, nothing tying me to anything, nowhere to go but into myself.

I did not know it at the time, but Richard's death had launched me into Dragon Country, that dark place where there are no maps, no street signs, no guide posts. I would grab at, and miss, one more brass ring, but that story will wait till later.

As I look back, I ask myself: was breaking rule #1 foolish? And I have to answer: Absolutely. However, sometimes life offers us opportunities to play the fool. Looking back, breaking this rule may have been one of the wisest things I ever did. I would never advise someone to break it, but every journey is different and sometimes we need to break the rules in order to move forward.

I also realized that everything is a lesson. Even things that do not go my way offer me new understanding. Now I frequently force myself to stop and ask *"What have I learned?"*

**About this Image: *Follow the Path***



On the charming and relatively conservative island of Coronado, part of San Diego, sits a brightly colored house with a painted sidewalk leading up to the door. It called to me for years before joining up with an arbor in a park in Minneapolis, a western landscape and the rooster from Boca de Tomatlán, Mexico, to form this collage.

The rooster always challenges me to wake up, and this image seems to call me to follow my own path, one that does not look like all others, and leads to a destination that is dim and hidden in the distant future.

What a beautiful path it is though.

**2024 Update:** Digital collage taught me that I could take bits and pieces from the “real world” and make them in to what I wanted them to be.



## Interlude 1: Changing Pronouns (2009)

*"I chose and my world was shaken.  
So what? The choice may have been mistaken;  
the choosing was not. You have to move on."*

-- Stephen Sondheim



**M**y key. My lock. My house.

The pronoun was as new and unfamiliar as my new life. I opened the door and scanned the emptiness. Influenced by the book *Shed Your Stuff; Change Your Life*, I had given away or sold almost

everything except my absolute treasures. Now the rooms looked empty, lifeless but oddly promising. After 42 years of living as part of the constant compromise of “we,” it was now just me/my/mine. The blank page of the rest of my life stretched before me ... terrifying and thrilling in even the mundane questions such as what to do with the too small, and still empty, living room.

Although the last census showed that 25% of Americans are living alone, many of us at the vanguard of the baby boomers are being thrown into that chaotic state with few charts to guide us. Like most women of the boomer generation, I married young, barely of age, but already “late” according to my mother. I settled into the state of marriage without complaint, going where his jobs took us, socializing with his friends, eating what he preferred, watching the movies and television shows of his choice. I didn’t even notice the constant deferral to his choices until the relationship broke open and revealed an empty hollow where love had once lived.

While that could have been a time for self-examination and growth, a seamless fate arrived with a new relationship, a joyful new “we” that, of course, came with a fresh set of compromises. Time drifted contentedly until a number on a medical examination started our lives on a roller coaster of hopeful highs and despairing lows ending with a final parting too soon and too young. The dreaded solitary pronoun knocked at the door, and neither my head nor tongue was ready to say “my” so I careened into a doomed relationship that offered safety, security and the comforting shores of “we.” When that choice ran its short course, I knew it was time go it alone for the first time in my adult life.

However, everywhere I looked, choices clamored for my attention. *Where to live? In the city or the country? At the beach or in the*

*mountains? Near the grandchildren or near friends? What to do about money? Work or make art? Retire and live frugally or work some and be able to travel more? Go back to school or live in Europe for a year? If I wanted to travel, where did I want to go? And for how long? By myself or with someone?*

**Bewildered by the cornucopia of choices,  
I could barely figure out what I wanted for dinner.**

Without the natural compromises of being with someone else, every moment was a decision point and the fear of making the wrong turn paralyzed me. Unable to actually move or make a decision, I began to listen to the siren song of different possibilities. I found myself starting all conversations with my friends with the same refrain, “I’m thinking about ...” and then I’d tell them about the new business I was going to start or the six months in New Zealand I had just planned out in glorious detail or the master’s program in social transformation that called to me. I allowed myself a total immersion in the details of each possibility, edging closer and closer to taking a tangible step. But, in each case, one detail would layer onto the previous, creating a more and more complete picture, until some final fact or thought would trigger an avalanche that made me realize that I didn’t want to do it at all. Then I would move on to the next seductive possibility ... fortunately my friends were patient and supportive.

Over time, as each grand and glorious plan built itself up only to implode quietly, I slowly began to have a better sense of what I truly wanted. And, what I wanted wound up being pretty simple ... a little house, a nest, near friends in a place of natural beauty where I could easily hike in the mountains or kayak on an alpine lake. A place where I could work and make art and walk around town. I began to make lists of all the things that brought me bliss and when I found a

small mining town in Colorado between Denver and Boulder, a place where I could walk to a farmer's market and coffee shops, a place with an art co-op almost in my backyard, I knew it was the place for "me." It had never been part of any previous "we;" it was fresh and new and was truly a place where I could learn how to be me.

So, here I am crossing the threshold of a new relationship with myself, into a mostly empty house waiting to see what furniture wants to live in my too small living room and what shows up in this next stage of life. Somehow, it makes me feel more adult, more like a grown-up than I have ever felt in the first sixty-three years of my life.



The above was written in mid-2009, just after I left Arkansas and moved to Colorado. I thought I had found the exact right place for me and my future. I thought life was ready to slow down, find "normal." Little did I know that I was entering one of the most chaotic, confusing and creative periods of my life.

On one of my trips from the mid-west to California, I listened to a podcast by [Jan Phillips](#) an incredible artist and writer. During this podcast she gave us a Balinese quote that changed the way I think about my life:

***Someone out there needs you.  
Live your life so they can find you.***

This journey has made me think about what it means to live an authentic life. Of course, I have heard the advice to live "authentically" for years, but it is one of those "duh" recommendations. Of course we should live authentically, but what does that mean?

It is a hard question because each of us is a moving target. Who I am today is not who I was yesterday, and it will not be who I am tomorrow. Interests and passions come and go. For a couple of years, I did needlepoint and truly loved it; then I stopped and I have never done it since. My authentic self did not change but what brought it joy did.

### **We are not our labels.**

People like to put labels on us. “Oh, you are a needle pointer, or you are outgoing, or you are practical.” So, when we change, the labels get messed up, and people are uncertain about who we are. We catch their uncertainty and confusion like a common cold, and we start to think we should stay in the old box rather than letting ourselves change in order to follow our authentic path.

The Balinese quote about living so someone can find you, though, brings a deeper layer into living authentically. I do not believe this means promoting ourselves or maximizing our social media presence. I think it does mean being authentically visible all the time, being our true self in every situation: from the grocery store to when we pay our bills, from what we choose to do as our profession to how we spend the dollars we earn, from how we treat our children and our elders to how we show up under stress and conflict with our coworkers and friends.

If we are following the path of joy and our true nature, we will be broadcasting a clear signal that will let the world find us.



## About this Image: *Focus*



Every once in a while I find myself off track, starting a project that is not actually my passion, choosing it for a reason that is not “authentic.”

I made this piece of art to remind myself to focus on doing only what I love, what brings me joy.



- ❖ *What is Rule #1 in your particular situation?*
- ❖ *Are you comfortable with it or do you long to break free of it and find your own path?*
- ❖ *If you were going to break Rule #1, what would you do?*
- ❖ *What tethers you to your current situation? Does it bring you comfort and joy? Or does it merely feel safe?*
- ❖ *In your imagination, and with no constraints such as money or time, if you were going to fly away to a different life, follow a different path, what would it be?*
- ❖ *What decisions do you make that are clearly for yourself? What compromises do you make?*
- ❖ *What parts of your life bring you feelings of joy, peace and connection?*