



Soulful Home

Finding the Sacred in
Our Everyday Spaces



December 2021
Opening to Joy

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The Welcome Mat

What Does it Mean to be a Family Opening to Joy?

We have to be *here*, at *this* time and place, to open to joy.

Let me say that again, because it's very likely that in reading that sentence, you went somewhere else--into your own thoughts, perhaps, or maybe evening a judgment such as, "Yea, Teresa...duh." So let me invite you back:

We have to be here, at this time and place, to open to joy.

Are you with me? Good!

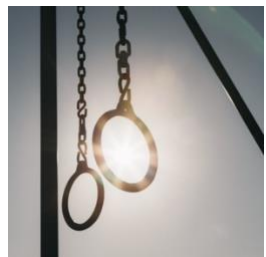
Opening to joy moves us into the liminal space between the physical and the spiritual. On the human, physical level, opening to joy allows us to more fully inhabit our own bodies, to forgo the obsessions and resentments of the past, the fears and worries of the future, and instead attune our cells to the happiness available nowhere and no time else but *here and now*.

With that in mind, we have plenty of games, activities, and questions designed to help families come back to the present this month, where they'll be ready to accept the gifts that are all around them, opening to the abounding joys.

Opening to joy doesn't mean accepting that which is unacceptable, such as sexism, racism, classism, and hate. Rather, it means that we refuse to cede the fullness of our humanity to those who would perpetuate those iniquities, and rather, we relish in our joy as an act of celebration and resistance. This is one aspect of the concept of Black Joy, which we explore more fully in the At the Mailbox section this month. The idea of both/and around justice work and joy also features in our At the Bedside story.

I read a poem this month by Forrest Gander that described someone to whom happiness came naturally. I don't know if that's you or not. Some days, I don't know if that's me, either. But I do know that opening to joy can be like a spiritual muscle that we exercise with practices such as noticing the exquisiteness of life around us, choosing to release ourselves from the grip of fear and resentment, and prioritizing playful engagement even when hanging back might be easier. This month, we'll do these things and more as we practice being families opening to joy together.

Teresa, on behalf of the Soul Matters team



At the Table

Exploring Opening to Joy Through Discussions

At the Table questions explore the monthly theme through a discussion for all ages. They are designed for a family gathering - maybe during a Friday night meal, a quiet moment in the living room or before a board game night.

Introducing the Activity

Family members who are readers can alternate who reads the questions. Those who are not readers are invited to share their own impromptu questions. Discussion partners might answer as thoughts come to them or take turns in a circle.

Discussion Questions

1. Which meal, when you hear you're having it, brings a huge smile to your face?
2. Have you seen a pet or neighborhood animal feel joy? What does it look like?
3. Where do you feel joy in your body?
4. What's the best thing about this month?
5. Who do you know who is always smiling?
6. Is there ever a time that you don't want to feel joyful?
7. What's your favorite joke?
8. Have your parents ever told you the story of the joyful day you came into the family?
9. On a scale of 1 to 10, how joyful do you feel this moment? If joyful isn't the right word, what is?
10. Would you rather make someone laugh, or help them find a solution to their problem?

Return to the Discussion Throughout the Week

Thoughts develop with time. Find opportunities to bring up particularly compelling questions again during the month, maybe on walks, rides home, when tucking your child into bed, etc. If thoughts grew or changed, notice together how we are all evolving beings, opening ourselves to new truths and understandings as we live our lives and connect with others.



Around the Neighborhood

Around the Neighborhood activities engage families with their surroundings through the lens of the theme. It's about perceiving our well-known world in new ways. As you safely move around your neighborhood during this time of Covid, these suggestions help you transform your everyday backs-and-forths into a family adventure!

Treasure Hunt for Opening to Joy

Opening is a wonderful metaphor for understanding the northern hemisphere's longest night of the year, the Winter Solstice. Astrologically speaking, we get as far away from our star as we ever will, and then we turn around and get closer again, opening our whole planet to the year ahead. So, for this month's treasure hunt, we'll be on the search for things that open. To increase the challenge level, choose one, confined area of your neighborhood--such as a park, or the block, or even your church grounds--to find these items.

- Clouds opening to let the sun through
- An opening in a tree where an animal might be living
- An open book sitting out on a table
- An open window somewhere other than your home
- A sign, ad, or flyer for an open mic night at a local cafe, coffee shop, library, university, etc.
- A lit-up vacancy sign (or if you don't live in an area where there might be older motels or hotels, a lit-up open sign)
- An open gate
- A sidewalk that has been "opened up" because someone just shoveled off the snow, or because construction was completed
- A storm drain opening
- A "We're Open!" sign



From the Mailbox

Our literal mailboxes connect us to the wide world outside, sometimes with messages asking things from us (a donation letter or flyer encouraging us to vote), sometimes with messages offering us gifts (a letter from a friend or a special delivery). Our "From the Mailbox" section applies this metaphor to today's call for families to engage in the work of dismantling white supremacy culture. Together each month, as a Soulful Home community, we open and accept these "invitations" to join some of the many brave, inspiring and wise leaders and organizations who are co-creating a future that is actively anti-racist.

Opening to Black Joy

Black Joy is so many things; this excellent, nine-minute video from The Root called ["Black and Jubilant: Unpacking Black Joy from the Revolutionary to the Ordinary,"](#) says that "Black joy is exactly what its intended audience needs it to be." Understanding Black Joy is a crucial aspect of North American cultural competency, for it is only as people who are free to feel and express the fullness of all aspects of humanity that we will be able to create a just future together.

Watch the video, then discuss together as a family where you see Black Joy in your community. What groups and organizations are making those joyful experiences possible? It may be that your local library held an excellent speaker series featuring Black authors and artists. It may be the church down the street whose creche display includes beautiful (and historically accurate!) Black and brown faces. It may be a Black sorority or fraternity from the local college whose dedicated volunteerism inspires other groups to do the same. Whatever that organization is, find a way to support them, because they are doing good and needed work!

(Re)opening to Joy After Trauma

Individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder are often not able to open to joy because of the way that illness affects the brain. One veteran, farmer, and PTSD-survivor, Jon Jackson, is helping other veterans to begin the process of reclaiming their joy by giving them somewhere to be, and something to do, when they are in crisis but awaiting the sometimes long process of getting professional help through the Veterans Administration. Through his nonprofit, Stag Vets, Jackson gets vets busy helping to grow the vegetables and raise the livestock on 20-acre Comfort Farms, which he founded in 2014.

You can learn more about [Comfort Farms here](#), and [here](#), and donate there, as well. Additionally, here are two powerful videos on the project: [Here](#) and [here](#)

What are your family's experiences of the military? Attitudes? Beliefs? Let this be your invitation to open up and examine those ideas together, especially in the light of our faith.

Note: This section of our Soulful Home packet is always reserved for lifting up those who are doing anti-racist work in North America. While Jackson's work is not explicitly anti-racist, people of color are disproportionately represented in the armed services and face systemic racism in their attempts to receive care after retiring from the military.



At Play

Playing Games with Opening to Joy

At Play activities and questions are a way to joyfully, playfully, and imaginatively experience the theme.

Option A: Folded Boxes to Fill With Joy

Print these whimsical, foldable boxes onto cardstock, then fill them with things you know will bring your friends and loved ones joy! You might leave them on neighbors' doorsteps, filled with goodies and a holiday greeting. They're a good size to hold teacher or mentor gifts such as gift cards or baked treats. (If you do fill them with baked treats, wrap the treat in waxed paper, first.) Visiting a friend or relative in the hospital, you could tuck a pair of warm socks or an eye pillow inside. How do you want to package and share joy this month?

<https://www.thetoymaker.com/Toypages/62Comfitbox/62Comfitbox.html>

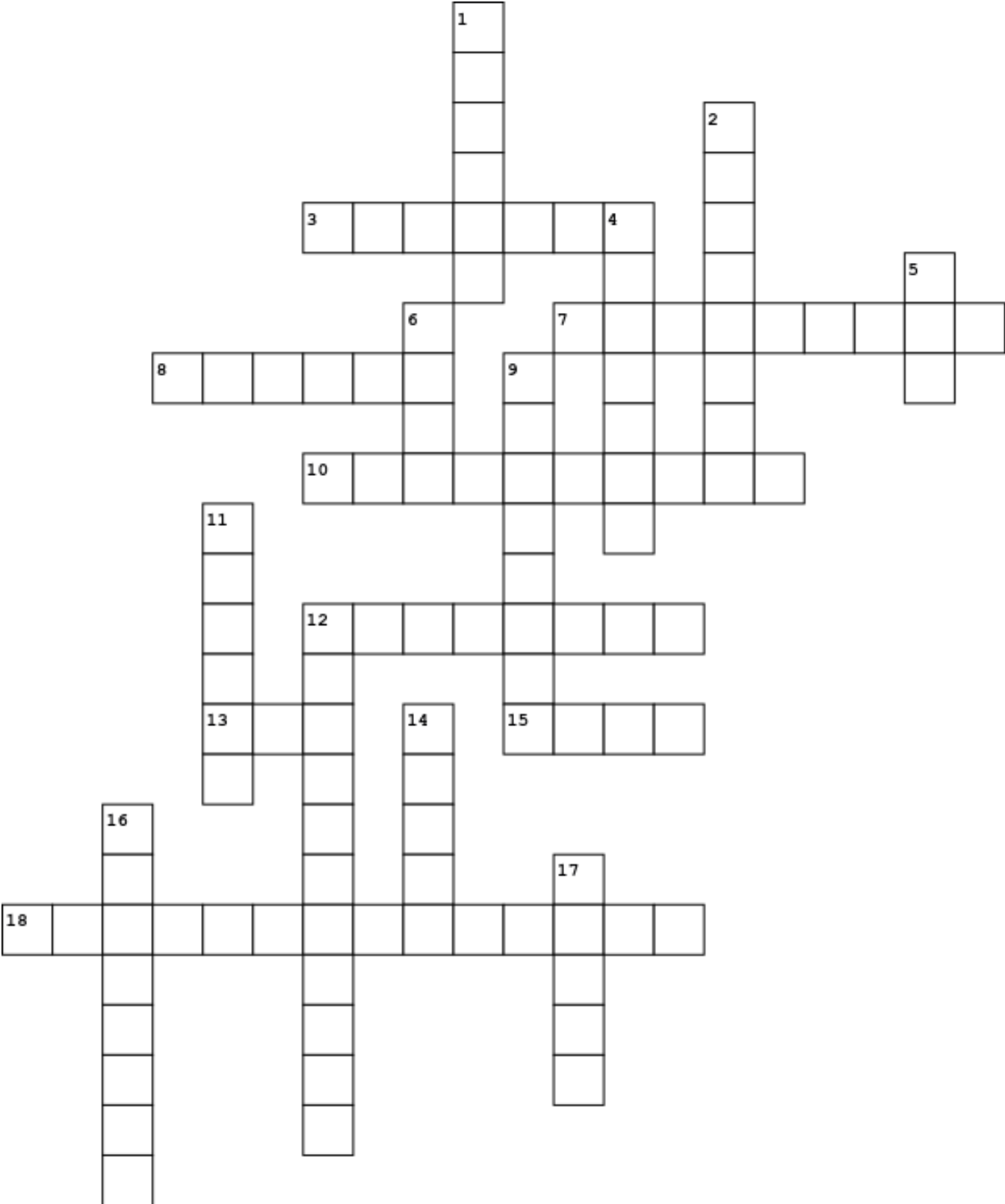


Option B: Soulful Home Crossword

On the following page, you'll find a crossword puzzle containing words that directly or indirectly indicate opening to joy. The crossword is designed to be accessible to people of many ages. Younger children might especially like clues 4, 5, 6, and 17. And you might invite tweens and teens to use Google on other clues, such as 7, 12, or 15.



Opening to Joy Crossword Puzzle



Across

- 3 Those you might share your joys with
- 7 Your location if you're on a joyride, and a 1957 Kerouac novel
- 8 Community-focused African American holiday started in 1966
- 10 Holiday greeting in Quebec or Haiti
- 12 Control column for video games and aircraft
- 13 You might do this from an abundance of happiness or sadness
- 15 Who said, "When you feel a peaceful joy, that is when you are near truth."
- 18 Meditation style in which you send joy to others

Down

- 1 Another name for a found family, where folk experience love, joy, and support
- 2 What you might be walking on in the joyful 1983 pop song
- 4 What you might be doing if you are making a joyful noise
- 5 What a dog's tail does when the dog is feeling joyful
- 6 Sometimes known as a bundle of joy
- 9 AKA the best medicine
- 11 First recognized Universalist woman preacher in Canada
- 12 1989 novel by Amy Tan
- 14 Number of chalices suggested for observing Chalica
- 16 Boosts feel-good chemicals in the brain
- 17 What jolly ol' Saint Nick's belly is said to jiggle like



On the Message Board

A Monthly Reminder

The On the Message Board section lifts up a theme-related mantra, graphic, quote, or gesture for your family to carry with them throughout the month. Think of these “family sayings” or “family signs” as tools for the journey, reminders that help us refocus and steady ourselves and our kids as we navigate through life’s challenges and opportunities.

December’s Mantra, or Meditation Aid:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40yyN4A0YVI&list=PLWizPQGEBGhVFHeiYKVE04kJpBG7wkjq&index=4>

The word mantra comes from the Sanskrit word meaning *think*. Mantras were tools that teachers would offer students, words or phrases that could help them focus thoughts as they learned how to meditate. Inspired by that etymology, we’re suggesting below a minimalist, 30-minute, ad-free video of water flowing down a stream for you and your family to use as a focal aid for what is sometimes known as a listening meditation. During a listening meditation, you stay in the present moment, using sounds as your guide to be in the here and now.

You may already have quiet-time routines for your toddlers or young children, but if you don’t, you might simply say that you’re going to lay down with your eyes closed, listening to the water for a little while. Or, if you want to meditate for a shorter amount of time, you can sit and watch the water together without talking.

With older elementary and adolescent children, you might talk about the value of clearing your mind and relaxing your body, so that you’re more able to handle and enjoy whatever comes next in the day. As thoughts arise during your meditation time, you might focus on the sound or picture of the water and envision those thoughts floating downstream.

Teens and young adults will likely have heard some of the benefits of meditation, but to offer a few reminders, meditation increases focus, reduces the grip of negative emotions, and strengthens our ability to self-regulate under stress and in conflict. And some people feel as if meditation helps them connect with the Source of Mystery and Wonder that some people call God. For young people, meditation is truly a powerful tool for the journey of growing up. If they are interested in the idea of continuing a meditation practice on their own, they might download apps that include timers with nature sounds or gentle music in between the starting and ending bells.



At the Bedside

At The Bedside activities engage the theme through storytelling. This takes place during the dreamy, almost otherworldly hour or so before children or youth drift off to sleep. Through stories and the questions and realizations that they prompt, we come to understand the nature of and our own place in the cosmos. But also, these selections invite you to remember, shape, and share stories from your own past, using thoughtful narratives to help your child weave the tale of who they are and whose they are.

The Parable of the Fiddler: Opening to Joy

A story about the Baal Shem Tov

Adapted from Yitzhak Buxbaum's Jewish Tales of Mystic Joy

Several hundred years ago, in what we now call Ukraine, there lived a great teacher, scholar, and leader of the Jewish people named Israel ben Eliezer. His many disciples and followers called him the Baal Shem Tov, which means “one with the good name,” or “good reputation.” This showed how well he was thought of, though...not by everyone.

There were some Torah scholars who didn't like the Baal Shem Tov at all. They didn't like the way his followers always danced and sang and acted joyfully.

“It's improper!” they scolded. “Your students should be more serious!” They wanted more studying, more thinking, more worries about the ills of the world, and less celebration. But the Baal Shem Tov only laughed, and then told them this story:

“Once there was a skilled and passionate fiddler who stood in the middle of the town square, playing a rousing and beautiful tune. The townspeople gathered around to listen. The tune was so lovely! The skill was so great! They couldn't help themselves; they dropped their parcels and paused their business to begin dancing, lost to the world, and living only in that moment, in the music, joy coursing through their bodies.

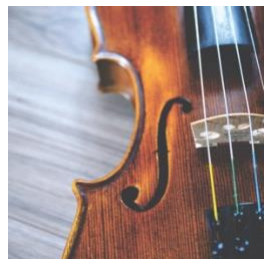
“A man with cotton in his ears passed, and not being able to hear the music, he thought they had all lost their minds.

“That is how it is with my followers,” the Baal Shem Tov said to the other scholars.

“Without cotton in their ears, they hear the songs of all that God has created, and because of that, they cannot keep from dancing!”

For Discussion:

- What made the people dance? Why do we want to dance when we hear wonderful music?
- What do you think the teacher meant when he said, “the songs of all that God has created”?
- When you think about being loved-- in your family, by your church community, and maybe by the Spirit of Love and Mystery that some people call God--what do YOU feel like doing?



On the Porch

Raising a Child Opening to Joy Together

On the Porch supports sharing realizations, challenges and hopes around the theme with other supportive adults. Perhaps this happens on a literal porch or front stoop, but it could happen wherever parents and their circle of support gather and talk (online or in person) over the soulful parts of parenthood. The “A Sip of Something New” section invites you and your discussion partner to take in a new idea shared by someone else. The “Spiritual Snacks” section stimulates personal storytelling and the sharing of your own wisdom and experience.

A Sip of Something New

Kahlil Gibran’s “On Joy and Sorrow”

Read this profound and beautiful piece on your own and ask your trusted friend or conversation partner to do the same.

<https://poets.org/poem/joy-and-sorrow>

After you read it, reflect on the idea of your joy and your sorrow having the same shape and that they are even, as Gibran says, are inseparable.

Come to your On the Porch time ready to share a story of a joy that came from a sorrow, or a sorrow that came from a joy. In other words, take the time to reflect on your lived experiences and find a concrete example of what is being expressed in this writing.

Hold each other’s stories with care and tenderness and be ready to be present to whatever emotions come up.



Spiritual Snacks to Share

Bring these questions with you when the time comes to hang out with your co-parent or buddies. Don't treat the questions as a list to go through one by one. Instead pick the one or two that speak to you the most. Treat the questions less as a quiz and more like doorways inviting you into the world of storytelling and memory.

Questions

1. What did you learn about joy growing up?
2. What is your first memory of feeling joy?
3. How has joy changed for you as you've grown older?
4. As your child grows older, what new joy are you experiencing in your parenting and guiding?
5. In what ways are you most alive to the song of all creation? What are the obstacles when you aren't feeling that way?
6. Whose joy matters most to you?
7. What routine or practice helps you stay open to pleasure, happiness, and joy?
8. When you bring to mind the experience of joy, what is the backdrop, or setting?
9. Has Joy ever been an act of resistance for you?
10. When was the last time you told your partner or closest friend that they bring you delight?



The Extra Mile

The Extra Mile section is for families who want to continue exploring the theme of the month through larger adventures, more complex projects or simply through additional modalities not otherwise included in the packets. The Extra Mile suggestions often surpass what is considered an “everyday moment” in a family, and may involve more preparation, planning, or time to accomplish. A bit more effort, but well worth it!

Opening to...Fright!?

Maybe your family, like mine, occasionally feels the urge to push back against the overwhelming messaging of calm, sweet, and quiet that so often pervades December; how about a little scary, fun, surprise to go along with it? Kind of a mix of Halloween and winter holidays, a la “Nightmare Before Christmas”?

If so, check out this drawing tutorial for a Present Monster Folding Surprise, from [Art for Kids Hub](#). It’s an adorable, wide-eyed present box that opens up to a terrifically scary creature!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oDdE7q39U4>

Paper and markers are all you need for this rainy (or snowy!) day fun.

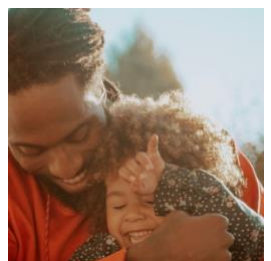


Blessing for Opening to Joy

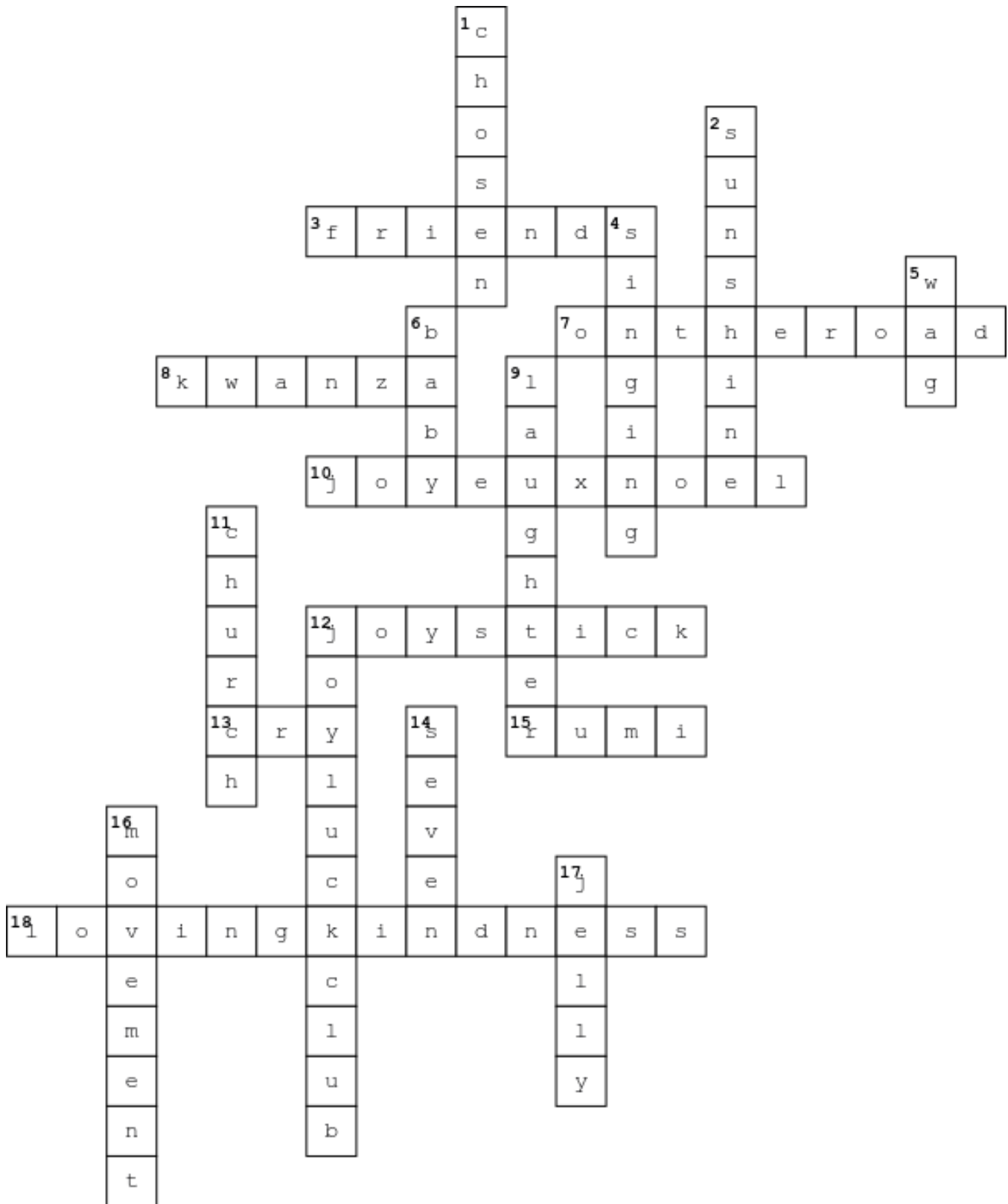
May being present with your family, with your faith community, and in quiet stillness with the Holy this month

be like oil on the hinges of your heart, easing the opening out toward the wide and wonderful world, with all its joys and sorrows

whose inseparable shapes fill all that we will know of this brief, exquisite experience of being alive.



Soulful Home – Opening to Joy – Answer Key



Connect with more Inspiration for your family, and for you!

Parents can Join our Facebook and Instagram pages for
daily inspiration on our themes:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/?ref=settings>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/soul_matters_circle/

Parents and youth will want to check out our music playlists on the monthly themes.
One playlist is one [Spotify](#) and another on our [YouTube](#) channel

Credits

Soulful Home packets are prepared by
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