



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Ted Zorn © 28th August 2022

I've titled my random musings today "FOMO, Imagined Lives and Reclaiming Joy". FOMO is an acronym for "Fear of Missing Out".

I'll start with a confession. I chose this topic because I suffer from FOMO and it has had a profoundly negative impact on the quality of my life and in some cases, the lives of people I care about. But I'm working on practising JOMO (the Joy of Missing Out) and my life is richer as a result.

I've worked in universities since completing postgraduate studies in the late 1980s. In my early years as an academic, I usually taught 3-4 courses per year, a fact that prompted mock expressions of astonishment from my father about how cushy my job must be. However, during most of my career I worked 60 plus hours per week, worked almost every weekend day and always took my laptop on holidays. I regularly woke up at 4 or 5 am to start my workday. I organised my honeymoon around an international conference.

One reason for all this was the "publish or perish" ethos in universities. One reason is the work ethic ingrained in me by my father and given a huge booster-shot when I saw his humiliation at being out of a job in his early 50s. I was determined to put myself in a position where I would never be so vulnerable. But perhaps the biggest reason was my own drive to be "successful" – as I defined it then – and, most importantly for my talk today, to be seen as successful in my career and my life.

In 2012, I thought I was at the pinnacle of my career when I was appointed dean of New Zealand's largest business school at Massey University. Not long after that the University's Vice-Chancellor – the Chief Executive of the University – named me his second in command, Deputy Vice Chancellor.

I was really proud of what I had achieved. During those years, I regularly posted selfies on my Facebook page of my many international work trips, photos alongside prime ministers, ambassadors and prominent CEOs, and newspaper articles about projects I had initiated.

Outside of work, I posted pictures of happy times with my family and friends, the beautiful ocean views from my then home, and the exotic locations on which I spent holidays.

If you had looked at my Facebook feed, you'd have thought I had a perfect life. In fact, friends often said just that.

But it was not perfect. Things were messy and complicated and deeply imperfect. I made mistakes and hurt people I loved.

I had all the material things I needed, but I regularly looked at friends' lives with envy. Sometimes I wondered, should I buy a boat? Could we afford a bigger house? Should I actively pursue a Vice-Chancellor role at another university? Could I make myself feel better if I had more stuff? Would these things make up for what was lacking in other areas of my life, difficult relationships or the pain and regret I felt in my heart?

What's obvious to me now is that I've suffered from FOMO and I've also perpetuated it. I've been blessed with much and still feel envy. And my efforts to highlight only the most positive aspects of my life and hide things that were uncomfortable has caused anguish to people I love.

So what is FOMO?

FOMO was recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary and is defined as: "Anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website."

The term was coined in 1996 by a marketing researcher and it continues to get a lot of attention from marketing professionals.

This is important because the job of marketing professionals is to heighten our anxiety that something is missing in our lives and offer a "cure." From a marketing perspective, your FOMO is not a problem, but an opportunity, something to be stoked, nurtured and exploited for someone else's profit.

FOMO is often used broadly to describe the fear that we are missing out not just on an event seen on social media, but the [anxiety that we are missing out on a better life](#), that others are living better, richer, more satisfying lives than we are. FOMO didn't start with social media but it has been amplified by social media.

FOMO is closely related to what author Adam Phillips describes as the anxiety arising from the belief that our lived life is vastly inferior to the unlived lives we can imagine. And we can imagine those unlived lives in large part because we observe others' lives – but only the parts of their lives that they let us see.

Which leads us to social media...

The algorithms of Facebook, Instagram, and other social media companies – the software programmes that determine what you see on your social media feed -- are carefully designed with one goal in mind: to keep your eyes glued to their site as much as possible. They record what you respond to with likes

and comments, even where you pause and read or watch something, and give you more of that.

Author Johan Haari wrote, “The algorithm they ... use ... has one key driving principle that is consistent. It shows you things that will keep you looking at your screen. That’s it. Remember: the more time you look, the more money they make.”

We know the algorithm is successful; it’s a multi-billion dollar industry. It creates a situation in which each of us is constantly comparing our regular lives to the highlights of others’ lives, our friends’ finest moments.

But social media is not the only cause. The causes are deeper.

FOMO is driven by our need for connection and belonging – we want to be included in our friends’ life events because it makes us feel like we matter to others, that we’re important enough to be included. One of our most basic needs as humans is to be part of a social network and community. One of the most effective methods of torture is to isolate people. We have seen in the covid years that isolation leads to desperate loneliness and mental distress.

So, the “F” in FOMO is rooted in a deeper set of fears. Fear of not belonging, fear of not being good enough.

A [recent review of research](#) on FOMO found it is linked to psychological problems, such as diminished well-being, dissatisfaction with life, anxiety, and depression. It is also connected with destructive behaviours, such as compulsive social media use, sleep disturbance, and “phubbing” – “P H U B B I N G” - a combination of phone and snubbing, when someone focuses on their mobile phone instead of on the people they’re with.

FOMO leads us to focus excessively on our imagined lives at the expense of the life we’re actually living. Heightened fear of missing out leads us to focus on envy, jealousy, and regrets. It steals our sense of joy and gratitude.

Our imagination is a wonderful gift. It allows us to envision what’s possible and be inspired to aim for better, richer, more connected lives. But when it goes too far and we spend our time focusing on the unattainable, we miss the gift of what, and more importantly, who is with us right now.

Are we helpless? No. There are things we can do to reclaim joy in our lives.

This is where JOMO – the Joy of Missing Out – comes in. JOMO is about intentional choice: intentionally choosing to ignore the Joneses, to choose not to try to keep up. We can frame each moment and our lives in terms of our

dreams, goals and values and not those of others, and to choose simplicity and satisfaction over materialism and striving and craving.

We can find joy in missing out only if we decide that the thing we're missing out on will not contribute to our happiness. That we don't need others' validation of our worth by being there or having more.

Overall JOMO comes from valuing what you do have and believing that it is enough. That time with your loved ones and friends is enough. That YOU are enough.

Here's a partial list of things we can do to resist FOMO and reclaim joy:

First, practice mindfulness, acceptance, and being in the moment. Again, Thich Nhat Hanh: "The immediate product of your practice of mindfulness is joy, solidity, and happiness in every moment."

Second, redefine success, not as attaining status or wealth, but as Emerson said so beautifully, "To laugh often and much; to win the respect of the intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the beauty in others; to leave the world a bit better whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know that one life has breathed easier because you lived here. This is to have succeeded."

Third, practice gratitude: A recent *Harvard Medical School* article was entitled, "[Giving thanks can make you happier](#)". Gratitude helps us feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve our health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.

Fourth, turn off or intentionally limit your consumption of social media. Or alternatively, unsubscribe from people who boast too much or who are not supportive of you.

Fifth, try a digital detox. Take a break from all your digital devices.

Sixth, spend time with friends and people whom you love and who make you feel supported. Make those personal connections with people who are important to you.

Finally, because of those external forces working to heighten our FOMO, we may need collective action to regulate those forces.

The social media algorithms that work to keep you scrolling and clicking are at the heart of what's called "surveillance capitalism" – the capture and commodification of personal data – especially the social media items you click on or linger on – for the core purpose of profit-making.

Author Johan Haari argues that: “You could have all this technology ... but ... design [it] not so that it pulls people away from their deeper and more meaningful goals, but so that it helps them to achieve them. ... We could just ban surveillance capitalism.”

In closing, let me return to where I started, to my personal struggle with FOMO.

For me, I believe anxiety of missing out led me to make choices that were ultimately destructive for my wellbeing and relationships. So I'm trying to practice my own version of JOMO.

Despite what I said about my struggle with overworking and excessive striving for success, I have loved my work and still do. But I look at it differently now. I am trying to focus on the joy of the work itself and the ways it can make a difference rather than the external rewards. Admittedly, that's much easier late in one's career.

I have greatly reduced my social media use and device use in general. I deactivated Facebook a few months ago and I have not missed it. I also have not taken a laptop on a holiday in the last year.

I have been practising mindful meditation and gratitude regularly.

Most importantly I have been focusing on my personal relationships in a new way. I am working to build a strong, honest relationship with my daughter, trying to transition to a meaningful relationship between adults. I am active in a group that focuses on creating deep, intimate friendships among men. I open myself to them and am vulnerable in new ways and thus have formed close friendships. This has given me a new community in which I have a strong sense of belonging and connection.

These are bonds that let me give up the showmanship of Facebook because what I have now is stronger and more real than that superficial arena. I have seen how I have hurt people with my Facebook feed and want to be honest and brave in my relationships instead.

At the heart of resisting FOMO and practising JOMO is accepting that most of us have enough and that I – and you – are enough. Recognising that despite all that's wrong in the world, we have each other, and we have the chance at living lives of value and integrity. We don't have to spend our moments fretting over what others have or are doing but can claim the joy in our relationships and our lives.

Meditation / Discussion Starter

1. What is your experience with FOMO and JOMO?
2. What will you individually or collectively do about it?