Voices of Sisters



Sr. Nodelyn Abayan, left, and Sr. Celeste Arbuckle attend a San Francisco Giants game April 8. (Nodelyn Abayan)



by Sr. Nodelyn Abayan

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Since I was a little girl, I have always been fascinated by what I used to call "highfalutin' words.” They felt like treasures — long, mysterious and fun to pronounce. I still remember the first time I learned to say "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." I repeated it endlessly, convinced that if I could say it, I could almost become Mary Poppins herself. Even today, when a TV commercial warns about injections for "pneumococcal pneumonia," I find myself echoing the words out loud. There's just something delightful about letting them roll off my tongue, even if what they describe is far from delightful!

So, when I stumbled on a new term while reading Dacher Keltner's 2023 book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder*, I couldn't help but savor it: "Collective effervescence." At first, I enjoyed just saying it. Collective effervescence! Collective effervescence! But the more I sat with the definition, the more it spoke to my soul. Keltner describes it as "a powerful, awe-inspiring experience that arises from shared, synchronized movement or action, creating a sense of unity and connection among individuals", although the term was first coined by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim.

The idea immediately resonated with me. I began to notice how often I find myself immersed in this shared energy of community. On Sundays, when I pray with fellow parishioners, kneeling and rising together, I feel it. When I sing in the choir, my voice blends with those of others, and together we create harmonies I could never achieve alone. In Zumba workout, as we laugh and sweat in rhythm, there it is again. At college graduation, standing in academic regalia while students' faces shone with pride and possibility, I felt swept up in something larger than myself. Even cheering at a San Francisco Giants game with Sister Celeste — when thousands of strangers erupted in joy at the crack of a bat — I sensed it.

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And perhaps most powerfully, I experienced it marching on May 1 through the streets of Downtown San Francisco for the Labor Day March, chanting "Hands OFF our democracy!" with workers and allies. That day, hope pulsed through every chant and every step, an almost transcendental feeling.

The more I reflected, the more I wondered: Did Jesus cause people to experience this same thing?

When I turn to the Gospels, I see collective effervescence woven throughout his ministry. Think of the Sermon on the Mount — a hillside filled with people, all leaning in, hanging on Jesus' words. When he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," a single person might have felt consoled, but surrounded by hundreds equally hungry for hope, that consolation would swell into something electrifying.

Or picture the feeding of the 5,000. People gathered, not only for food but for meaning, for belonging. As bread was blessed, broken and shared, the miracle was more than full stomachs — it was the joy of one table, one community. Can we not imagine the surge of collective effervescence as thousands realized that hope and abundance were possible in their midst?



Sr. Nodelyn Abayan, center, with friends Ericka Erickson, left, and Maria Jose Bastias, right, May 1. (Nodelyn Abayan)

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem, too, carries this energy. Crowds waving palm branches, shouting "Hosanna!" Their enthusiasm carried Jesus forward, the spirit of the people propelling him into the holy city. And of course, at Pentecost, the Spirit descended upon fearful disciples, uniting them into one bold body, speaking in many tongues yet filled with the same fire. That moment was not only divine — it was the ultimate eruption of collective effervescence, birthing the church itself. (Interestingly, that is the feast day of my community, the Sisters of Social Service.)

Jesus didn't just encounter this energy; he nurtured it (in fact he is God's energy!) He gathered people, invited them into shared meals, told stories in groups, and healed in the midst of crowds. He knew that the Spirit often moves most powerfully when people come together. What one person struggles to hold onto — faith,

courage, hope — the community can carry and amplify.

This reflection or sort of higher awareness fills me with hope. In a world or even a country, where isolation and division seem to dominate, collective effervescence reminds us that we are not meant to journey alone. We are created for connection, for rhythms of togetherness, for shared experiences that open us to the Spirit. Jesus shows us that hope is not just a private sentiment tucked away in our individual hearts; it is a current — a stream of life that rises when we gather, pray, sing, march, or even cheer side by side.

And so, I find myself in quiet prayer saying thanks for the ways this reality, this insight, quietly shapes my life. In church pews, in choir lofts, in Zumba studios, at graduations, in ballparks, and even in the streets calling for justice, I sense the energy of the Holy Spirit weaving us together. These are glimpses of God's Kin-dom, moments where Jesus is palpably present, blessing our unity, magnifying our joy and strengthening our hope.

Perhaps that is the miracle: that God takes our ordinary acts of togetherness — our prayers, our songs, our meals, our laughter, our chants for justice — and transforms them into sacred glimpses of what is possible, but we have to have awareness of it. Collective effervescence is not just a psychological phenomenon or a sociological term; for me it is a spiritual truth. It is the Spirit at work, drawing us closer not only to one another but to God.

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So, the next time I smile over saying "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" or repeat "pneumococcal pneumonia," I will laugh. But when I say "collective effervescence," I will pause with reverence. For in that phrase, I hear the heartbeat of community, the whisper of Jesus moving among us, and the assurance that hope is always rising. Even a small glimpse of collective effervescence can renew the hope our country and world so urgently need.

What has been your own experience of collective effervescence?

P.S. Collective effervescence also exists in nature — think of migrating birds — but that's a reflection for another time.