

Expressions of Joy

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

April 2, 2017

Opening Words

Come into this space of reflection and welcome. In my heart is the hope that today you will know Joy – our theme for the month of April. “Joy drinks pure water – sits with the dying and attends many births – denies nothing, in love with life – all of it . . . Joy is spontaneous . . . and not concerned with success or failure or how to make things permanent – her desire to walk with us is as great as our longing to accompany her.” (J. Ruth Gendler, *Book of Qualities*, adapted.)

Reading **First Sabbath** – by Nancy Shaffer

(Honoring every creative impulse, and the joy of every creation.)

Tell me: did you really rest?
you who made day and night
and sky that separated
waters above and below,
you who told the waters
below the sky
to stay in one place
and out of them
asked dry land,
who told the earth
to send out growing things
and then made sun
and moon and stars,
who made birds that fly
and everything that swims,
and cattle and all creeping things
and every animal untamed
and then made man and woman
and finally, supposedly, rested:
tell me: how –
in the midst of all that buzzing
and flapping
and slithering and stepping,
all that bursting forth of leaf
and fruit and stem
that never had known themselves
before – tell me:

how could you possibly have *rested*,
after seeing what no one
ever had seen before:
beak, hoof, pebble;
after losing yourself
in a thousand versions of blue:
water in sun,
sky against sky,
the horizon where
sky and water meet:
how did you shut your eyes,
how not keep
turning and looking?
didn't you long to caress each small thing – notice
how toes work, and
stamens, and fingers?
weren't you hollering out in amazement?
weren't you so filled up glad
you couldn't sleep?

Reading

This reading is from a book called *Meditation: On the Monk Who Dwells in Daily Life*, by Thomas Moore – author of *Care of the Soul*. Moore lived in a Roman Catholic seminary for 12 years.

Withdrawal from the world is something we can, and perhaps should, do every day. It completes the movement of which entering fully into life is only one part. Just as a loaf of bread needs air in order to rise, everything we do needs an empty place in its interior. I especially enjoy such ordinary retreats from the active life as shaving, showering, reading, doing nothing, walking, listening to the radio, driving in a car. All of these activities can turn one's attention inward toward contemplation.

Mundane withdrawal from the busyness of an active life can create a spirituality-without-walls, a spiritual practice that is not explicitly connected to a church or a tradition. I have never forgotten Joseph Campbell's response when he was asked about his yoga practice: laps in a pool and a drink once a day. Anything is material for retreat – cleaning out a closet, giving away some books, taking a walk around the block, clearing your desk, turning off the television set, saying no to an invitation to do *anything*.

At the sight of nothing, the soul rejoices.

Re-JOY-ces. [added by minister]

SERMON

Expressions of Joy

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

My opening words about joy this morning came from J. Ruth Gendler's *Book of Qualities*. Gendler takes the qualities of our human experience, and adds character. "Although Joy is spontaneous," Gendler suggests, "she is immensely patient. . . . [Joy] knows that there are obstacles on every path and that every moment is the perfect moment."

When I first started thinking about joy, what occurred to me is that I – maybe like you? – make too little time for it. There is so much to be done, always – important work, and often attending to joy – noticing joy – takes a back seat. My colleague, the Rev. Martha Neibanck, has a little statement in her e-mail signature that reads, "Remember Joy!" and every time I get an e-mail from her, I think, "oh, yeah"

Does that ring familiar for any of you? When is the last time you remember, really remember, experiencing joy? Oh, I hope it was recent!

We are so weighted by our worlds – our individual ones, our cares and concerns, our successes, but as likely, our failures or shortcomings, or wants, or needs. Eeyore comes to mind. And then, of course, there's the truth of the fragile and hurting world around us

I remember sharing with you an excerpt from Lewis Thomas's book, *The Lives of a Cell*, where he reminds us what a miracle it is that we are here at all, that he imagines if we remembered the odds, we would all be dancing in a constant dazzlement of surprise, but life intrudes in its messiness, and we don't remember and we're not – constantly dancing, that is, feeling the joy of our existence. Well, maybe some of you are – good job!

I suspect many of us struggle a bit more.

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Speaking of distractions, I don't know what your recent week was like, but it has been a tough one in the Unitarian Universalist arena.

To begin with, one of our ministers in Turley, Oklahoma, was arrested on charges of receiving and engaging with child pornography. We grieve for the community he served, his family, his friends – they are all undoubtedly suffering. It is especially troubling when those we trust to be working for good, who call us to be our best selves, turn out to be so disappointingly flawed.

And then news, at the end of the week, that our Association's president resigned. For those of you

visiting or relatively new to our tradition, we Unitarian Universalists hold ourselves to pretty high expectations around addressing issues of racial justice and systemic inequality. If you were here on March 19 for the Rev. Tom Schade's sermon, you'll recall his connecting the dots from the identity of religious independence to our prioritizing justice-seeking as what defines our tradition. We take pride in that work – too much pride, perhaps.

So when the most recently open regional lead position (there are five of these leadership positions across the country) was filled with an ordained white male without adequate explanation as to why the non-ordained, female, woman of color who was up for the same job did not get it, there was widespread reaction and frustration; countless expressions of the many ways in which we, institutionally, are falling short of our hopes and expectations for equal access to upper-level positions of leadership. Long-story-short, our Association's president, Peter Morales, indicated in his letter of resignation that, in his words, "I have clearly lost the trust of many people and my comments have become a focal point in the ongoing discussion. It is clear to me that I am not the right person to lead our Association as we work together to create the processes and structures that will address our shortcomings and build the diverse staff we all want."

These have not been joyful events.

We appear to be a tradition in tumult, with a fair amount of hurt and pain and confusion.

And, to be honest, we've had some of that here in our own church recently. Many of you were present when we co-hosted Black Lives Matter Boston speakers two weeks ago; and, while many of us were inspired and challenged, others were confused or hurt by the exchanges of question and answer, by the emotionality we were either not expecting or prepared for. In our grappling, we join the legion of Unitarian Universalists struggling to address racial justice with the urgency and incompleteness of now. It's hard work, with a long trajectory, and it often feels anything but joyful.

The Rev. Sean Parker Dennison wrote an article recently called, *Good Intentions and Incomplete Efforts*. (<http://www.uua.org/worship/braverwiser/good-intentions-and-incomplete-efforts>) Sean is a transgender person, and my guess is he experiences a great deal of both, but in this article he speaks of a different focus of intentions and efforts that yet remains instructive for our racial justice work, as well.

"I preached recently in a building that was a beautiful old chapel in the country. Because it was old, it was one of those buildings where accessibility was a challenge. The congregation had just finished . . . installing an accessible entrance and bathroom. . . . They were understandably and appropriately proud and I was enthusiastic in my gratitude as they showed me the improvements.

Then they took me upstairs to the worship space and showed me the pulpit, which was up four steps on the chancel. Those steps are not a barrier for me, but they would be for others. And we'd

just been celebrating their good work in making the rest of the building accessible. And I choked. I stammered out something like “too bad those stairs are there...,” which was neither very polite nor very helpful in reminding them there was still work to be done. . . .

The hardest times to hold ourselves and each other accountable compassionately is when the work has begun but there's more to be done. We want to acknowledge the effort, and it feels a little awkward to say “What a great start! You did something great, but you’re not quite there.”

Ok – so aside from the fact that when I read it, I was imagining our REALLY FANTASTIC effort – underway now! – to build an accessible bathroom in our narthex, and then noticed where I’m standing . . . the point of sharing this article is the sentence I repeated: **The hardest times to hold ourselves and each other accountable compassionately is when the work has begun but there's more to be done.**

Another day I would focus on the “more to be done” – how we must keep at it and be compassionate with each other, which are both really important – but for today, the phrase I want to pull out of his message is this: **the work has begun.**

YAY!!! There is so much joy in that! THE WORK HAS BEGUN!! The never finished, always imperfect, enormously important work has begun!

Elbert Hubbard was a 19th century American writer and philosopher who started his professional life as a traveling soap salesman. He said: “There is only one way to avoid criticism: Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing.” That’s not the path we want to follow.

And here’s the thing Ruth Gendler reminded us:

Joy knows that there are obstacles on every path AND that every moment is the perfect moment.

This whole effort, this initiative we’re engaged in – this LIVING – is one big messy thing that each of us will see our own end of but none of us see THE end of, so our joy must be found in the midst of it as we work to create of what we know it can be – THAT work has begun!

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We heard two readings this morning offering potential pathways to remember joy, to practice its presence more intentionally in our lives.

Nancy Shaffer’s delightful query of The Big Creator reminds each of us of our generative capacities. “Weren’t you so filled up glad you couldn’t sleep?” she asked. We can each create in our own ways. We may not be building an entire new world, but we make pieces of art, music, potlucks filled with soul-renewing food, a card for your neighbor. I love the song in the musical “Sunday in the Park with

George”: “Look, I made a hat, where there never was a hat.” Creation – every act of creation, if it’s only a stretch and a thank you – can be joyful.

And then our friend, Thomas Moore, who left home as an adolescent to live among the Servite Order of priests for 12 years. Moore entices us to find joy in withdrawal, retreat – not long and lingering retreats, necessarily, not 12 years, but the everyday moments that help us refill, rejuvenate, restore – times in which the soul re-Joys itself. It may seem counterintuitive that I would suggest, as Moore advised, “withdrawal from the world,” even as I have been praising our engagement with it. But these are moments of withdrawal that might give us access to the joy that is close at hand.

Remember Joy, Martha reminds us.

One of my favorite lines from the Rev. Clark Wells – a former UU minister and terrific poet – is his exhortation to do what we can to put ourselves on paths of appreciation. “It is not always the great evils that obstruct and waylay our joy. It is our unnecessary and undignified surrender to the petty enemies (time and schedules, our irritabilities of the day . . .): and I suggest it is our duty to scheme against them . . .” (You Be Glad at That Star)

Here’s the thing about joy: It’s a bit of a chicken-and-egg kind of thing. In the process of creation – of some thing, or of love – or in the process of withdrawal from the busyness that distracts us, there are moments of connection to each other, and to all things that stop us short – that make us feel full, somehow, in our hearts, that bring smiles to our faces sometimes despite ourselves. This is joy! The connection – the memory that we ARE, as Karlene Griffiths Sekou reminded us, inextricably bound to each other, and to this miracle we call life.

When that realization intrudes, or when we take the time to notice it – and maybe sometimes it’s one way and sometimes the other – we know joy. Our hearts swell. We are bound.

Joseph Campbell references the Bodhisattvas who “joyfully participate in the sorrows of the world.” (<http://www.escapefromcubiclenation.com/2008/09/25/joyful-participation-in-the-sorrows-of-the-world/>)

We are not likely all Bodhisattvas, those whose specific task is to dedicate their lives to attaining Buddhahood, but it is likely we can be closer than we think.

So this week, I want to invite you to make room for joy; to prompt it if you can, by creating something – anything – we won’t all be Michaelangelos or Hemingways, but we all create things all the time – moments of connection that can inspire us to joy when we are paying attention. Let whatever it is be enough and feel the joy of it.

Or withdraw for a moment to a space of connecting with your freshly folded laundry or your five minutes of salutation to the sun or your favorite music, and allow yourself to recognize the joy in that.

Beckon your inner Bodhisattva to keep you company as you recall your connection to all things and experience the sheer joy of it.

We will always have work to do, and we have begun. Let's not forget to experience the joy of it along the way.

How about an "Amen" to that?!

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You know Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever pray is thank you, that would suffice." Our closing hymn – "Oh, We Give Thanks". Let's sing it with joy.

Closing Words

"If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happened better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb."

— Mary Oliver, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*, "Don't Hesitate"

Therefore, let us feast.

So may it be.