

## Jestership of All Believers

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 01 April 2007 Chip Roush

### FIRST READING

Lady Julian of Norwich (pronounced “nor itch”) was born in 1342. Little is known about her—not even her real name— but we do know that she fell ill when she was thirty, and had a series of intense visions, and wrote about them in great detail, twenty years later. Her writing is remarkable for two reasons: it is believed to be the first English-language book written by a woman, and her belief that suffering is not a punishment, which was very different from the dominant theology of the times.

Denise Levertov was born in England, in 1923, and died a citizen of the United States, in 1977. This is excerpted from her poems about Lady Julian of Norwich:

“Julian laughing aloud, glad with a *most high inward happiness*,

Julian open calmly to dismissive judgments flung backwards down the centuries— ‘delirium,’ ‘hallucination’;

Julian walking underwater on the green hills of moss, the detailed sand and seaweed, pilgrim of the depths, unfeared;

twenty years later carefully retelling each unfading vision, each pondered understanding;

Julian of whom we know she had two serving-maids, Alice and Sara, and kept a cat, and looked God in the face and lived –

Julian nevertheless said that *deeds are done so evil, injuries inflicted so great, it seems to us impossible any good can come of them—*

any redemption, then, transform them...

She lived in dark times, as we do: war, and the Black Death, hunger, strife, torture, massacre. She knew all of this, she felt it *sorrowfully, mournfully, shaken as men shake a cloth in the wind.*

But Julian, Julian— I turn to you:

you clung to joy though tears and sweat rolled down your face ... *in beads uncountable as rain from the eaves: clung like an acrobat, by your teeth, fiercely, to a cobweb-thin high-wire, your certainty of infinite mercy, witnessed with your own eyes, with outward sight in your small room, with inward sight in your untrammelled spirit— knowledge we long to share: Love [is god's] meaning.”*

### SECOND READING

Hafiz was a Sufi poet, born about a generation prior to Lady Julian, in what is present-day Iran. He is supposed to have memorized the entire Qur’an as a boy.

Daniel Ladinsky was born in the Midwestern United States, and says that he offers interpretations of the great poet Hafiz, rather than strict translations.

Tripping Over Joy

What is the difference Between your experience of Existence And that of a saint?

The saint knows That the spiritual path Is a sublime chess game with God  
And that the Beloved Has just made such a Fantastic Move  
That the saint is now continually Tripping over Joy And bursting out in Laughter And saying, "I Surrender!"  
Whereas, my dear, I am afraid you still think  
You have a thousand serious moves.

SERMON How many of you are planning to play an April Fools joke, sometime today? How many have \*already\* played an April Fools joke on someone, this morning? How many of you think that laughter is an important part of a balanced, healthy lifestyle?

I agree: laughter and joy have been shown to be quite beneficial. The two most important benefits of laughter are that it massages our internal organs, it forces deeper breathing, thus inspiring better oxygen uptake, and it reduces stress throughout our bodies.

Oh. Well, the three most important benefits of laughter are that it massages our internal organs, it forces better breathing and oxygen uptake, it reduces stress throughout our bodies, and it helps us cope with difficult circumstances.

Darn it. The four most important benefits of laughter are it provides internal organ massage, it creates better breathing and oxygen uptake, it reduces stress throughout our bodies, it helps us cope with difficult circumstances, and it helps form and strengthen human community.

All right. Never mind the counting. Suffice it to say, there are scientific studies that show that "mirthful laughter benefits both physical and mental health." [http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article\\_81.asp](http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_81.asp)

The physical effects that laughter provides include internal organ massage— er, and other preventative effects. This has been known for so long, it even made it into the Hebrew Bible: Proverbs 17:22 says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine."

Psychologically, laughter helps us cope with whatever trying times and difficult circumstances we are facing. If we take things too seriously, we may become emotionally brittle. My cousin says, "blessed are the flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape." How many of you have ever experience "road rage," either as the "ragee" or the "raged-at"? It's frightening. Angry people do not necessarily make the best decisions. Plus, the rager is putting himself or herself at greater risk of heart attack or stroke. It's better to laugh at someone, than to tailgate them. I think this is analogous to liberal and conservative responses to religion. Those who religiously conservative require literal truths and definitive answers; we who are religiously more liberal are more playful, willing to accept metaphor and spiritual gray areas.

The "humanist/theist" song we heard earlier is an example. The husband and wife who wrote that were singing about their own beliefs; these are ultimate matters, serious concerns about how to find meaning in our lives, and yet they are also playful enough to explore the issue with humor.

It is the same with our musical text— bipolar disorder is a difficult thing to live with, both for the people whose brains are persistently messing with them, and for those who love them, and try to keep up with their moods and behaviors. It might make it easier to talk about, and to live with, if they have Meg Barnhouse's song to laugh along with.

There are thousands of other examples. Just two nights ago, Bill Maher told his "Patriot Act" knock-knock joke: they don't knock, they just break in. Maher also noted that our nation has lost the moral high ground; he lamented that, even if Iran is torturing prisoners, what can we say? "they're doing it wrong?!"

Gini Courter, the moderator of our Unitarian Universalist Association, was the keynote speaker at the excellent Heartland District Annual Meeting this weekend. She poked fun at businesses leaving the Midwest and relocating on the coast— "with global warming," she said, "you want to live on the coast? Stay right here!" Clearly, global climate change and the escalating war in Iraq and the multiple ongoing attempts to turn our government into a police state are not funny. But if we cannot laugh at them, we become brittle and we lose our resilience. As long as we can laugh at our circumstance, we have a hope of overcoming it.

You've probably heard somebody say, "if we weren't laughing, we'd be crying." Not that crying is a bad thing, but we need the rejuvenating effect of laughter, too.

Possibly my favorite example of this was the headline of the *Onion* --the satirical newspaper-- on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001: 'God angrily clarifies "don't kill" rule' With only six words, they managed to bring laughter to a people still in shock from the bombing of the World Trade Center, and to challenge the legitimacy of any kind of a \*religious\* basis for violence, and to reinforce a communal identity, among people hurt and angry about the attack. That headline made us laugh, and thereby helped us cope with the dangerous changes in our lives.

Just as the *Onion* headline helped reinforce our identity, humor often helps to form or strengthen a community.

The two ways that laughter helps build community is that it provides fun and recreation, it helps to break down the barriers between us, and it helps reinforce cultural patterns, by breaking them.

I mean, the three ways that laughter builds community is fun, and breaking down barriers, and reinforcing our shared cultural patterns, and by encouraging us to work together.

{heavy sigh} Once again, from the top, again ignoring the numbering— the "fun" part is pretty obvious. If somebody makes you laugh, you will probably want to be around her or him.

Humor also breaks down barriers. If I'm standing in the checkout line at the grocery, and somebody in the next line over does something funny, and I and the person next to me both laugh, and catch each others' eye, I feel a kinship with that person. A stranger has, just for a moment, become a friend.

And if I'm out in the world, and I accidentally do something completely stupid, so it inconveniences another person, sometimes that person laughs at me, and I laugh at myself, and the laughter not only clears the tension, it creates a bond between two former strangers who have now shared an experience of the absurdity of life. Laughter can remind us that we're all in this together.

Humor plays an important role, sociologically. It helps to reinforce cultural patterns. Children learn what to do and not do, by watching what people laugh at. Just about every Disney movie made in the last 30 years has at least one joke in it about somebody passing gas. Children laugh at this, \*and\* they learn that such bodily functions are inappropriate for polite society.

From the look that Becky is giving me, it seems that they are inappropriate topics for sermons, as well. Sorry.

At least in this way, Disney movies are sort of "Trickster Tales," such as the ones that Native Americans in the southwest tell about Coyote, and West Africans tell about Anansi, and other cultures tell about Loki, or Nasruddin, or any of hundreds more. Folklorist Christopher Vecsey writes that, "By \*breaking\* patterns of culture the Trickster helps define those patterns. By acting irresponsibly, he helps define responsibility."

How many UUs does it take to change a lightbulb? "We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey, you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb. During next Sunday's service, we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-life and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence"

The UU Trickster, who cannot even change a light bulb, reminds us of our responsibility to tolerate and respect the paths of others, AND our responsibility to think critically about those other paths, and not be so open that we no longer stand for anything real at all. The Trickster bellsound, at the very beginning of this service, pointed out the value of that sound. Once we've heard that bell ring often enough, and come to associate it with the spiritual nourishment of this congregational community, then we will actually undergo physical change each time we hear it. Our bodies will relax and our minds will open a bit, just because we've heard that sound. These rituals are important parts of our congregational identity.

The Trickster chalice, made from a Dixie cup and a candle, seems almost an affront to the dignity of our religious symbol. And it reminds us that a chalice is a drinking vessel, a physical object that can bring water to our lips, as well as a symbolic object that brings meaning to our hearts.

As we laugh at the Trickster, we learn something about ourselves and our communal identity. It might even encourage us to work together.

Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the Protestant Reformation, the German theologian Martin Luther suggested that we did not need priests to mediate our relationship with god. Luther said that each person could have a direct experience with her god; that, in effect, each person could function as his own priest. Luther referred to this as the “priesthood of all believers.”

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great liberal theologian James Luther Adams proposed a “prophethood of all believers:” not only are we all priests, we are also prophets. It is up to each of us, individually, to speak truth to power, and call them to justice. More recently, the Rev. Craig Schwalenberg, whom you’ll hear speak at my Installation, suggested that we also need a “jesterhood of all believers.” The Jester, like the Prophet, speaks truth to power, but the Jester does so in such a way that the powerful are more likely to listen to the message.

In that progression, Luther believed that God holds us responsible for our actions; Adams believed that we hold each other responsible, for creating a more just and compassionate world; and Schwalenberg suggests that we not only hold each other responsible, but that we can make it easier on each other, by meeting each other half way, and by infusing the whole project with humor.

The way we frame the world— the way we understand our role in the universe— has moved from the heavy hand of the priest, through the scolding tongue of the prophet, to the relatively light touch of the jester.

Or, to put it another way, Luther saw us as virtually powerless, passive observers in the worldwide drama of good and evil. Adams recognized that we do have power— limited, perhaps, but an active role at least, in the unfolding of our planet’s story. And Schwalenberg sees that we are not merely players, we are player-managers, coaches, trying to coax the best out of ourselves and each other.

At each step in our religious evolution, we have taken on more power and more responsibility.

Also at each step, we’ve learned to trust the process a little more. This is partly because we feel like we have more control— it’s hard to trust the process when it’s all done \*to\* you, not with you.

And it’s because there are many more people with spiritual insight. In Luther’s day, there was maybe a handful of people, in all of Europe, who had the time, and the education, and the psychological wherewithal to come up with real religious insight. Nowadays, you can find a treasure trove of the best of the world’s spiritual writings at the neighborhood Barnes and Noble. And the internet carries even more.

We have more time, and more access, and some might say more need, so now hundreds and thousands of us are having spiritual insights just as powerful as the ones Lady Julian and Hafiz wrote about, over 600 years ago.

We’re learning to trust that love \*is\* the answer, the meaning of our universal drama. We’re learning to “trip over joy” because we feel the laughter at the center of all of this.

Whether you prefer to say “let go and let god” or “trust the process” or “allow the Tao” or “I believe in the magnificent resources and creativity of the human spirit” it all comes down to the same thing: it’s going to work out. It \*is\* working out. We and the universe are evolving exactly as should be.

This doesn’t mean that we should stop working, it does mean that we should stop getting so stressed out about it, and take things more lightly. Global climate change is a huge concern— and we have thousands of the best human minds working on the problem, and millions more who are already acting to reduce their impact on the world ecosystem.

The genocide in Darfur is heartbreaking and it is the first time in human history where we have come together while such an outrage is still occurring, instead of waiting a generation before speaking up.

The war in Iraq will take generations to repair, and some parts of that ancient culture may never be restored, and they will still survive, and this war marked the first time that we humans acted as a global community, urging a peaceful resolution \*prior to\* the war.

We won’t stop working, but we \*might\* stop fretting.

And right here at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse, there has been a lot of change over the last few years, and too many deaths, and now we've learned that we cannot afford to extend our building exactly as we'd planned.

And I'm here to tell you, it will all work out.

We are creative, compassionate, hopeful people. I predict, in a few years, we will look back and laugh, and be grateful that we did not build, because our solution was so much better, and brought us so much closer, and made our congregation so much stronger that we are all tripping over our own joy, like the poet Hafiz Trust the process.

Trust *our* process— trust the good people sitting around you, and the Spirit of Life that is pouring among and through all of us.

May we not only trust the process, may we also allow ourselves to *enjoy* the process. Because not only is laughter better for our health, it's also the most appropriate response to the ongoing evolution of the universe— at least according to Hafiz, and Lady Julian, and all the other sages and wise folk, for more than two millennia.

So may we be.