

40 Days of Joy (Easter 2008)

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 23 March, 2008
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OPENING WORDS Some of the earliest known human literature is about immortality. The Mesopotamian story of Gilgamesh dates to 25 centuries BCE. Taoists tell of monks on mountain tops who live for centuries, eating one bowl of rice per month. Hindus do not seek immortality, but they do believe in reincarnation, that one soul might live many, many lifetimes. Christians believe that Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome went to anoint the murdered body of Jesus, only to find the stone in front of his tomb rolled away, and an angel sitting there, telling them to go tell their friends. They were afraid, and told nobody, but others did, and they told others, and so on, so that today, two billion Christians around the world will sing "Alleluia" in celebration that death has been conquered, and immortality is possible.

Whatever may happen after we die, we do know that we live. Today and every day, may we make the best use of our time here on earth. May the Spirit of Life fill us, and soothe us, and encourage us to seek goodness and truth and authenticity.

FIRST READING The Rev. Ms. Elizabeth Tarbox was born in 1944, in Hertfordshire, England. She served several UU congregations in Massachusetts, and authored two of the UUA's best-selling meditation manuals. This essay is from one of those books:

The ducks came again this year. I like to think it is Nature's way of making amends for the spring rain that floods our yard.

It is a gift for Easter.

When the fruit trees start to sneeze and the pile of snow, thrown from impatient shovels, melts down, the mallards come and make of our yard a sanctuary. They swim about and learn soon enough that this is a temporary pond, that it is too close to the highway for raising young, that there are energetic, impolite dogs in the neighborhood, who see everything as a sporting event. The ducks know they cannot stay. But for a week or two they are there in the morning when we shuffle our with our bread offering; they swim with grace through the tall grass still showing above the water; they fly up suddenly and make our yard seem like a primordial lake from which the very birth of life has sprung.

And then they leave. Yesterday, I watched as the ducks made a turn about the diminishing pond, then took off with a whooshing of wings, freed from the clasp of gravity, and flew around above my head while I murmured: please stay a while.

Easter is an exercise in letting go. It is a reminder that life is precious and fragile, beautiful and impermanent. It is a reminder that love is a gift of immense proportions, that if we have shared it for even so fleeting a moment as the time it takes for a pair of mallards to sanctify our pond, or dawn to come to a grieving woman who watches by a tomb, then love has touched us and we will never be the same again.

SECOND READING Wallace W. Robbins was born in Massachusetts in 1910; he served the First Unitarian Church in Worcester, and was President of Meadville Lombard Theological School. This is adapted from one of his "Eastertide Reflections."

The lights of the world had been put out by human hands and the fire of the courtyard had been quenched by curses...

His last word was not intelligible; it was not a word at all, but a cry like the screech of a dying animal.

The voice of religion had blasphemed in the throats of the priests; the hands of the law had washed justice off into a basin; and the victim, [Jesus,] had died without dignity. There was no human-contrived value which endured that day. In the Easter story as told by St. John, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb alone. She has been identified through the ages as "the woman who was a sinner." So came this outcast of Israel, this scum of society, this corrupt flesh to the tomb, as the story says, "when it was yet dark." And to her, not to the disciples, came the first vision of the empty tomb. She came in the darkness, the darkness of the night, the darkness of the world, the darkness of herself, but she came. This is the act of

faith, hope and love. Those who had watched the crucifixion had hoped and had feared that at the last he might have demonstrated the divine power of wrath or of miracle, and, when he did not, they were disappointed or relieved. Not only had a man died, but God had been proven impotent. Mary Magdalene had never asked for anything. She wanted only to give her thanks to a man—victorious or defeated—who had not thrust her further into loneliness but had blessed her in the face of her enemies and forgiven her in the presence of angry men. He was the one who had demonstrated to her by the courage of his affirmation of her hidden longing for goodness that God could not be wrestled out of existence by human powers. She was, simply, grateful. Her darkness had not frightened him; his dark death did not discourage her.

SERMON How many of you did some kind of joyful activity, as a Lenten practice, at least once? How many appreciated the concept, but found it difficult to incorporate into a busy life? How many found the whole exercise silly or theologically suspect?

I used to work with a woman who believed that the word “happy” should be removed from the language. People might be satisfied, or gleeful, or comfortable or even in love, but the word “happy” was too general, and it implied a state of being that simply did not exist. She thought that the “pursuit of happiness,” was confusing and worse: it was self-defeating, as one could never know if it had been achieved or not.

Our Unitarian cousins of the early 20th century were convinced that humankind would progress “onward & upward forever.” Nowadays, that concept is not just quaint, it is seen as embarrassingly naïve. Having seen two world wars and innumerable “conflicts,” the rise of suicide bombers, genocide perpetrated on every continent except Antarctica, global climate change, and the continual trampling of human rights and human life, in the pursuit of profit or position or power, we do not utter the phrase “perfectibility of humankind” very often any more.

It might even seem that the pursuit of happiness is unseemly... With so many people living in poverty, with all the other ills that face our planet, does it seem that seeking joy is a selfish activity? Only if we are seeking joy for ourselves, at the expense of others; if it is our sincere wish that all people experience it; if we help others to achieve happiness, then we are not being selfish.

But there’s that “happiness” word again. My ex-co-worker would grumble, and part of me does, too. Even as I acknowledge the real benefits of joy—that it brings better health, a longer, *more productive* life, quicker recovery from trauma, whether physical or emotional—it still seems too unserious, inappropriate for a Sunday morning. I think it is an artifact of the Protestant Work Ethic. If we are not working absolutely as hard as we can, then we are not only wasting time, we are demonstrating why we are not fit to get into heaven.

Now *that* is a theologically suspect doctrine. Our Universalist ancestors would point out that a loving god would not create a hell, much less condemn anyone to it; and he/she/they/it would not require us to jump through hoops to earn that love. I appreciate the value of hard work, but only to the point where it supports a high quality of life. When it begins to diminish one’s quality of life, that is too much. Let us seek a balance, between work and joy.

Finally, it might be objected, perhaps, by standing up here and preaching about joy, I’m demonstrating how out-of-touch I am with the world, with the over-busy, over-criticized, generally hurting & some quite seriously populace. At this very moment, statistically, there are probably at least 5 people in this room who feel depressed; there are at least 3 people in this room who are more angry than they want to be; there are at least 4 people who have so much anxiety that they fear it is affecting the rest of their life. There are people in this room who still feel the ache of loss. There are people here who are frustrated with their life, who are almost desperate for something meaningful; there are people who have internalized voices that continually criticize their thoughts and actions; there are many people in this room who battle with feelings of guilt or shame or otherwise feel themselves unworthy.

Dear friends, I am talking to *you* We’re all in the same boat. We’re getting through life; we’re actually doing pretty well, all things considered, and, if we were to tell the truth, deep down inside, we could in fact use a shot of high-powered joy to ease the pain of something going on inside us.

Virtually all of us could use a little help to roll away the stone inside us and let our spirit escape from whatever tomb it sometimes finds itself. Most of us would appreciate finding an angel of joy in there who tells us to go share that joy with our friends.

This is not peculiar to our congregation; there seems to be a world-wide search for joy. Oprah Winfrey suggests a year-long program where buddies can join together, at “awakening joy . info” Time magazine recently published an article on the genetic and age-related aspects of happiness. A whole field of “positive psychology” has sprung up, to study what it is that can help individuals and communities not just live but thrive.

The cover of yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* featured a story on the nation of Bhutan. Bhutan is a small country in the Himalayas, and since the 1980’s, it has focused less on their Gross Domestic Product and more on their Gross National Happiness.

Critics have long noted that our Gross Domestic Product figures include divorce and crime as economic “advances” because the GDP only tracks the exchange of money, not the reason behind the exchange.

In Bhutan, they use their Gross National Happiness index to increase the joy of their populace, not just the rate of spending of their citizens. By referring to their GNH index, they require traditional dress in their government buildings, they have decreed that they must have a minimum of 60% forest land in their country, and they have largely outlawed smoking in public.

One of the foremost researchers in Positive Psychology, Jonathan Haidt (that’s H-a-i-d-t), has published a very good book, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* which is subtitled *Why the Meaningful Life is Closer Than You Think*. When David Halperin recommended the book to me, I planned on using it as a centerpiece in this sermon. Alas, it is too full of ancient wisdom and modern science, and how best to combine the two, to distill into one Sunday. It might make a good sermon series, or even better, a great book to all read as a congregation, maybe one chapter per month, and discuss in small groups together. I will share some parts of it.

I chose the picture on the cover of the order of service with Haidt’s book in mind. Once upon a time, a chocolate easter egg would bring us pure bliss. As we grew older, we grew more complicated, until our simple egg looks more like a maze inside. Haidt, and other positive psychologists, are helping us to navigate the maze.

For example, research shows that there is a genetic component to happiness. As much as 50% of the variation in the levels of happiness between people can be explained by genetics.

Age also has something to do with it; until we are in our mid-40s, the older we get, the less happy we are. Then, in our later 40’s and beyond, our general happiness level rises with age, until we experience severe illness.

Haidt actually gives an equation for happiness, including an initial range, as set by our genes, plus a component from our current circumstance, like how much stress we are living with right now, plus a factor from our voluntary activities, such as joining a church, or volunteering for other good causes, which can significantly improve the level of our happiness.

Haidt also suggests three simple actions that can increase joy: meditate, engage with a therapist, and/or take the appropriate medicine, if necessary.

Not all of us need to take psychoactive medication, and it may well be over-prescribed, especially in children and teens, but for some of us, at least, SSRIs are the *best* way to increase our level of joy.

Similarly, not everybody will benefit from seeing a therapist. But I dare say most of us would, or do. Haidt recommends cognitive behavior therapy, but my plain-old psychoanalytic “talk therapist” does help me.

Meditation is not for everyone, either, but it is the simplest and the cheapest and it has been proven to work. Come sit with us, this afternoon and every Sunday at 5; or join the Wednesday group, at noon; or do it alone or somewhere else, but do consider trying it.

All the things I’ve mentioned so far are about individual pursuits. Another aspect to true joy is connection with others. We want to cultivate human wholeness *and* cultivate authentic interdependence. Whether it is with family, or with friends, or with relative strangers, real authentic engagement with other human

beings can enrich our lives in many ways. It is not always easy, but the more challenging it is, the more beneficial it can be, to the people who are creating right relationship, and to the world around them.

How many of you saw or heard or read Senator Obama's speech on race and class last Tuesday? This is not about his campaign; I will not endorse any political candidate from this pulpit. For all I care, even if he resigns from office tomorrow, his speech has already offered us a chance to work on our country's deepest divisions.

There is very little more difficult in our nation than race and class. He knows about as well as anyone how much resentment and anger people feel. Yet he also sees how much compassion and potential there is, in us. Like Mary Magdalene, in our second reading, who was grateful that her imperfections had not frightened Jesus, and so would not let his tragic death discourage her, Obama knows that we are all flawed and he does not let that fact discourage him.

May we all accept our imperfections, and the imperfections in others, and in our world; and may we also acknowledge and lift up the good within us, and in others and our world. May we roll away the stone that is blocking the light in our heart, and may we resurrect our hope and our willingness to risk with love.

So may we be.

BENEDICTION Again, the words of Elizabeth Tarbox: "May you find [meaning] in the darkness of the tomb *and* in the breath of the garden, in the aching sadness of the good-byes that will last forever and in the impudent greeting of the mallards on their honeymoon. May you find [blessing] in the loneliness of your Good Fridays and in the togetherness of your Easter Sundays. May this community of love stand with you in the night and dance with you in the dawn.