

“More Joy Somewhere”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

16 September 2018

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation.

It was just 11 degrees last Sunday morning in Halifax.

The temperature was a bit brisk for this time of year, but not exactly unprecedented, here at summer’s end.

It was a great deal colder than expected, though, for the 2300 people who had just arrived in town aboard a cruise ship named the Norwegian Dawn.

After they disembarked, the passengers scrambled to find shops open on a Sunday; they were looking for someplace (any place!) where they could buy sweaters and socks, ponchos and parkas.

Because these people, you see, had been headed to Bermuda, not to Nova Scotia.

They had packed swimsuits, t-shirts, and, well, Bermuda shorts. Their freezing feet were shod with flip-flops and sandals.

They just weren’t prepared for the cusp of autumn off the coast of Canada.

But, as Alfred Wainwright once put it: “There’s no such thing as bad weather, [there’s] only unsuitable clothing.”¹

For these tourists, their manner of dress was clearly unsuitable for such a serious change of plans.

¹ Alfred Wainwright, *A Coast to Coast Walk*.

Not surprisingly, there was, among the passengers,
a range of responses to having their vacations derailed
by the beginnings of Hurricane Florence.

Some took it in stride.

Some delighted that this turn of events
was bringing them to Canada for the first time.

And some were downright cranky about it all,
threatening to cancel their reservations
for future trips with the cruise line,
and demand a full return of their deposit.

I'm guessing they hadn't read the small print to see the disclaimer
about foul weather and other so-called Acts of God.

And I'm not really sure what these people
were really wanting to happen instead, anyway.

I mean, I, for one, would always be content
for the captain of any ship I'm on
to decide to steer clear of a hurricane.

So much of living well is knowing which battles you can't win—
and that the better part of valour
is improvising a better plan when faced with terrible odds.

As this week has reminded us in such vivid ways,
Mother Nature tends to come out on top—
sometimes to devastating and deadly effect,
which surely has forced those on the ship who were most upset
to reconsider their initial response.

To be fair, in the less grand scheme of things,
there was genuine reason
for the people onboard to feel disappointed.

As one person said, it was a bucket-list trip.

Others were gracious enough about the big detour,
but not particularly pleased to be headed to the Maritimes,
given they had already visited the city several times,
and, in some cases, had been there only very recently.

The person who intrigued me most, though,
was the man from Halifax,
who had driven twelve hours down to Boston
to board the ship and begin a journey to an island far, far away—
only to find himself taking a cruise back to his own hometown.

As one passenger put it:
“I guess he can at least let the dog out.”

Whether that man wanted to or not,
he was presented with a golden opportunity
to rediscover Chelm rather than to see Warsaw.²

It would be easy for these frustrated, disappointed tourists
to let the diversion of their ship
deny them the joy they had set out to find.

It’s probably safe to say that most of them
booked their tickets in the first place
because they hoped to discover a bit of joy
they felt they couldn’t or wouldn’t find by staying at home.

That is, after all, part of the appeal of travel.

And it’s likely that many of those people, while on the ship,
and since they’ve been back in their own beds,
have wondered and worried whether they missed out on joy.

They’ve probably felt,
like so many of us do, at least from time to time,
that there’s more joy somewhere—
that is, somewhere else, just out beyond our reach.

² An allusion to the morning’s story told during the Time for All Ages: “Schlemiel Goes to Warsaw” Schlemiel is tired of Chelm, his foolish friends, most of all, his nagging wife, so he sets off for Warsaw. A mishap sets him unknowingly back to Chelm. He finds that Warsaw is just like Chelm! In his exploration of Warsaw he rediscovers the joys of his home.

It's a familiar feeling, a seductive notion.

In truth, that longing for joy
can be a powerful force for change,
a great catalyst for moving us to take action, from time to time.

But that feeling that there is more joy somewhere can also
often be an invitation to despair.

For that feeling—that there's more joy hiding someplace else—
can distract us from what's already close at hand.

When we're overly concerned with what's happening elsewhere,
we can easily miss out
on what's actually unfolding right around us.

There's a handy acronym to describe this phenomenon: FOMO.

The fear of missing out.
FOMO. It's a thing.

And one of the places
where it most often manifests is on social media.

There are reasons recent studies have shown
people feel depressed after spending time on Facebook.

While it's a great tool for connecting to people around the world,
it also can fuel a wild adventure in insecurity,
as we scroll through photos and posts
that point to others' highpoint moments,
and we are left to wonder if, in comparison,
we are really living our best life,
whether we're living up to our highest or even basic potential.

What we forget, though, is that much of what people post
is highly curated—the choicest snapshots
taken from people's lives
that are far more complicated
than their Instagram or Facebook feed usually reveals.

Of course, some folks do put it all out there.

While it can, at times, feel like too much information,
or obnoxious oversharing, aren't we glad sometimes
when people have the courage to be vulnerable?
To let it all hang out, and allow their true colours to shine through?

Those brave souls do an important service for us all.
They remind us that life is messy, and hard,
and not filled with a non-stop hit parade
of happy, joyous moments.

Bless them for that.

Bless them for reminding us
that things don't always go as expected.

That plans unravel.
That dreams fall apart.
That relationships implode.
That bodies fail.

Bless them for reminding us
of what it means to be human, in all of its fragile splendour.

And bless them for reminding us
that if we insist on comparing ourselves to others,
we need to take the bad along with the good—
that we need to be honest that life is a mixed bag,
filled with both blessings and heartache,
with moments of sheer joy and great despair,
and a lot of everything in-between.

That's why it can be such a vicious circle
to spend any part of our lives
fretting about joy that is someone else's.

Because here's the thing: you are missing out!
The brutal truth is that each of us is missing out.

The fear is real.
There are people down the hall or around the corner
who, right this very moment,
are having the time of their lives,
living through some wonderfully joyous moment.

But bless them for it, for joy can be a fast and fleeting thing.

Life is too short to begrudge anyone joy.

Too short to waste our “one wild and precious life”
with pointless games of comparison and envy.

For every moment of our lives so poorly invested is lost forever,
diminished from what it could have been,
from what it still could be—
if we were to be attentive to what simply is,
and seek to find the joy that is present,
the joy that is possible,
no matter where we find ourselves.

There’s something to that famous quip
by Abraham Lincoln, who reportedly said,
“I have noticed that most people in this world
are about as happy as they have made up their minds to be.”

That, for me, is the lesson to take away from
the Norwegian Dawn’s short stay in Halifax Harbour last week.

Out on the great seas of life,
we can’t always choose our circumstances.

Sometimes our plans are completely upended,
and everything we thought we knew is overturned.

Little seems to be within our control,
and we can feel bewildered and powerless.

At other times we can, in fact, change things.
Sometimes, we have the power
to change the situation we are in

in outward and meaningful ways.

But I think more important
is the power each of us has, no matter what,
to transform whatever circumstance we face
by how we choose to meet life in our most trying times.

Now, I'm not talking about some superficial take
on the power of positive thinking.

I am talking about a power that we can cultivate
and that can carry us through.

To me, that power is rooted in a joy
that is rooted in gratitude
that is rooted in an awareness of the present moment.

It is a power that keeps us awake
to the reality that we're in,
without diminishing or denying the hard fact
of our or anyone else's suffering.

Instead, it is a power that can abide with us in those times.

Hear these words from the essay "Our Own Deeper Joy"
by Reform rabbi Leo Baeck,
who, in 1944, wrote about his experiences
in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

True history is the history of the spirit, the human spirit,
which may at times seem powerless,
but ultimately is yet superior and survives
because even if it has not the might,
it still possesses the power,
the power that can never cease.

Whether one attributes this power
to the divine or the human sphere,
there are accounts from the bleakest chapters
of the human history that point to people
who have summoned that power and survived because of it.

In paradoxical ways,
that power often comes through as joy.

This may be a surprise, but it shouldn't be.

For joy is, at its essence, an unapologetic affirmation of life.

It doesn't always come adorned in exuberant feeling
and squeals of laughter.

But joy always has within it
the force of life, the spirit of life,
that can, as I said last week,
be a powerful form of resistance in even the hardest of times.

Joy is the secret to our resilience.

It is central to the will to live,
that part of our being that holds tight to life—
to what is most cherished, to what is most loved.

For it is that sacred part of us
that recognizes life as the great gift that it is.

To do that—to cultivate that part of ourselves—
means we must be awake to the precious, present moment.

And not distracted by the allure of joy someplace else.

Let us come home to ourselves.

Let us, beginning again this day,
seek more joy, right here and right now.

Amen.