

“Joyful, Joyful”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

23 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 that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

My grandmother’s name was Joy.

Well, actually, my dad’s mother’s given name was “Georgialene”...but she was called Joy from a very early age.

I remember her as a joyful person...even though she was faced with many difficult challenges throughout her life.

She suffered from many illnesses and her health was precarious for years.

She also was married to a man who, by all accounts, was not easy to live with.

My paternal grandfather had many fine qualities, but he could be a harsh and judgmental man.

Yet, Joy was joyful!

And many thought it had to do with her strong Christian faith.

My grandmother Joy was a Southern Baptist, and although I didn’t have an opportunity to speak to her much about religion, my sense is that she held a fairly traditional belief in God.

I think I've shared with you that when I was a young adult, she'd ask me, in her letters, whether I had yet "found a church home."

She asked that because, for her, a great deal of joy sprang from her beliefs and her religious community...

And she wanted the same for me.

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For our five-part series on "Joy," we've taken our sermon titles from hymns in the UU hymnbook called "Singing the Living Tradition."

It was published in 1993, and its teal-coloured supplement, "Singing the Journey" came out in 2005.

Last week we reprised Hymn #95 "There is More Love Somewhere," by saying "There is more joy right here."

Next week's service is called "Joyful is the Dark," after Hymn #275 of the same name.

and "Surprised by Joy," #410, comes up on Thanksgiving Sunday.

Today's service refers of course to "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"...which is Hymn #29.

If you like, you might enjoy glancing over the lyrics with me.

The first verse goes like this:

*“Joyful joyful we adore thee,
God of glory, God of love,
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
Hail thee as the sun above.*

*Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the pain of doubt away
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the joy of day.”*

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Those words might be very similar to the ones sung by my Grandmother Joy.

Indeed, they continue to be meaningful to many Unitarians today.

Meanwhile, our deeply inclusive and ever-evolving faith encourages us to actively develop our own spiritual vocabularies, drawing on a wide range of stories and songs.

That diversity is reflected in our hymnbook, where the somewhat traditional lyrics of “Joyful Joyful,” stand beside “Joy, Thou Goddess” at #327... and “Name Unnamed” at #31 as well.

Meanwhile, we have so many other sources of joy!

We celebrate the joy found in community and social action...

We celebrate the joy that comes from human reason and choice-making.

In fact, as full participants in what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls “A Secular Age”...

...many, if not most of us,
are in the habit of seeking “joy”
in anything but the transcendent.

We may seek joy in accomplishment,
In power of various kinds,
In material possessions,
In good health...
and other forms of security.

You might say it “goes with the territory” of our times, when we rely
so strongly on human accomplishment
and insight.

As fulfilling and meaningful as our accomplishments must be, in
order to live ethical lives of service to others...

There will be times in virtually every life
when what we can accomplish, understand and control
falls short of bringing us joy.

At times like those, it might be helpful to reflect on new visions that
could describe the “thee” of Hymn #29.

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Perhaps like some of you, I moved away some time ago from the
images of God that likely inspired my grandmother.

At the same time, I found myself continuing
to be drawn to the idea of a Higher Power
or an Inner Teacher.

In fact, I found that when I cultivated a relationship
with such a thing...

However I defined it,
failed to define it,
or didn't even attempt to define it...

I found myself feeling supported,
in ways I couldn't fully explain.

I found meaning in the concept of the Self with a capital "S" of
Jungian psychology—the depth within me, connected to the entire
universe, beyond my conscious mind and ego awareness.

I was moved by the concept of the Higher Power of
12 Step programs: something that could "restore sanity" to people
affected by addictions.

I was moved and strengthened
by many new ways of conceiving
"that-which-is-given-the-shorthand-name-of-God."

Here are just a few of them, from my ever-growing collection:

Heavenly Muse...from the writer Wendell Berry.

The Ground of Being...famously from Paul Tillich,
writing in the nineteen sixties.

The Essence, also described as "Alaya, the Essence"
in some forms of Buddhism.

The Source,
The Absolute,
The Real with a capital "R."

The Mystery.

The Unnameable (and it's worth noting that in Judaism, the word God is not set down in print).

The Creator: invoked and thanked
by many indigenous speakers
at the beginning of their talks.

Creative Interchange: from a theologian
named Henry Nelson Weiman
who influenced many Unitarians.

The Friend,
The Companion,
The Beloved.

The Dreammaker.
The "Something More."

The Non-Anxious Presence.

That's one of my favourites...along with the idea that:

"God is more verb than noun."¹

I also love the lyric "What if God were one of us,
just a stranger on the bus" from songwriter Joan Osborne.

I'm not sure it speaks exactly to my theology...
but I admire the creativity and the compassion behind it!

It also reminds us that,
even as we may seek meaning in solitude...

¹ Richard Rohr and others.

It is only through our connection with others that our relationship with God or Meaning finds expression.

And so, we remind ourselves that we
“need not think alike to love alike”...
and wonder about whatever it might be
that connects us all on the deepest possible level.

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Many faith traditions emphasize letting go of materialistic sources of supposed “joy”...whether they be money, power, prestige and so on.

Thinking back to the camel in Catherine’s story,
I’m reminded of the passage from the Christian New Testament:

“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”²

In other words, materialism and abundance of all kinds
may actually be barriers to accessing a deeper joy.

Another barrier to joy, at times, may be language itself!

Mary Oliver put it well when she wrote:

“Here in my head,
Language keeps making its tiny noises.

How can I hope to be friends
with the hard white stars
whose flaring and hissing are not speech
but pure radiance?”

² Matthew 19:24

“Tonight, at the edge of the field
I stood very still, and looked up,
and tried to be empty of words.

What joy was it, that almost found me?
What amiable peace?”

What “amiable peace” indeed?
What “non-anxious presence?”

As human beings who are interested—
if not often obsessed—
with our “stuff”
and our accomplishments
and with the various ways we describe all of them—

We might legitimately ask the question: “What else is there”?

And that of course points us toward “something” that might be more
than simply “us.”

Something that we might actually need.

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In his poem called “The Triumph of the Soul,”
the poet Attar wrote:

“Joy! Joy! I triumph!
Now no more I know myself as simply me. [...]”

The centre is within me and its wonder
Lies as a circle everywhere about me.”

Attar was a 12th Century Sufi poet,
Sufis being the mystical poets of Islam.

It seems that Attar may have influenced the more-famous Sufi poet Rumi, who was writing at the same time.

The Sufi mystics experienced the Divine as both immanent and transcendent—

That is, both within themselves and surrounding all things—

And they saw life as an interconnected whole, revealed in the exquisite beauty of nature and the joy of creative expression in poetry and dance.

When Attar writes “the Centre is within me,” it’s not unlike many modern people saying that they listen to the “Voice Within” or the “Inner Teacher.”

The poem emphasizes “circles” and “the centre,” in keeping with the circular whirling of Sufi dancers...

Forming a parallel with the Wiccan chant we joined in earlier:

“We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning and never ending...”

I’m sure you noticed the repetitive nature of that chant.

If we continued it for much longer it might have been challenging to some of us...even boring...

...because it lacks the entertaining bits of interest we sometimes feel we need for joy.

That repetitive structure, though, is not accidental...

because it serves to loosen our grip on our own personal individuality stories:

Stories that can become barriers to our deeper sense of connection with the Whole.

As Unitarian Universalists, of course, we can see a connection here, as well, with what we honour in our Seventh Principle:

“The Interdependent Web of All Existence
of Which We Are A Part”

That, too, might be a way to name the Divine Oneness to which we might open ourselves...

...that we might find joy, and be of greater service.

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Opening ourselves to this Interdependence...
this Cosmic Relatedness...
this God-as-Verb...

We might see, dimly at first,
that so many of our often well-meaning efforts
to make life more comfortable for ourselves
and each other...

...to bring “joy” into our lives, if you will...

...have resulted in terrible harm to other people,
animals, and the planet.

It may be, in fact, that the whole idea of ourselves
as separate joy-seeking entities may need to go...

..in order for new life to flourish.

This way of looking at life
may be quite different than the way we often look at it,
as highly secular individuals in the Western world.

But it may be that a radically transformed consciousness,
arising from contemplative practice of many kinds...

Could be the very thing needed to save the world.

As eco-theologian Thomas Berry writes:

“The natural world demands a response beyond that
of rational calculation,

Beyond philosophical reasoning, beyond scientific insight.

The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild
unconscious depths of the human soul.”³

In other words, we may need to be
spiritually transformed
out of our materialistic way of life.

This may challenge us,
Uproot our assumptions,
And defy our language...

But, drawing on the strength that is larger than ourselves, perhaps we
can, with gladness, transcend our limitations
to bring forth new joy.

³ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 55.

To paraphrase the words of “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee:”

“Field and forest, vale and mountain,
blossoming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain
Call us to rejoice, in...”

A new way.

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Next week, I’ll continue these reflections in a service entitled “Joyful is the Dark”—which will also be Central America Sunday.

I’ll draw on teachings of people who have come face to face with suffering...and yet who seek those experiences so they can serve others with joy...

All the while, drawing on the sources of strength that empower them.

Those sources of strength can go by many names...
and that is as it should be.

But whatever you call them,
they can call us toward our better selves,
our better natures...empowering us to do our best work...

While infusing us with the knowledge that we are part
of a larger Whole that is continually being created
and re-created.

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As I remember with love and admiration
my grandmother Joy today...

I hope for the strength of spirit she modeled for me.

I didn't know her well...but, interestingly, as I've been writing this
sermon, I've been hearing her laughter!

It's a fitting reminder of how much more
there will always be to say...

And how much love and wisdom
goes so far beyond words...

In the sorrow and joy-filled mystery that is life.

Amen.

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