

“Surprised by Joy”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

READING “Don’t Hesitate” – Mary Oliver

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 happens 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.

SERMON: “Surprised by Joy”

“Joy is not made to be a crumb.”

Joy is not meant to be swept away, the poet reminds us,
brushed off the table, a discarded casualty, an afterthought.

Joy is not extra—some superfluous, gratuitous thing
that we can take or leave.

In this world that so often tears at our hearts, joy is no luxury.

It is, instead, the renewing spark
at the very heart of our being alive.

Now, that doesn't mean
we are forever riding high with delight,
or that we experience happiness at every turn.

Suffering abounds in this world of ours.

As Mary Oliver puts 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.”

And, yet, she says:
“Still, life has some possibility left.”

She suggests that joy is, perhaps,
life's “way of fighting back,” and she reminds us
“that sometimes something happens
better than all the riches or power in the world.”

She advises us to resist our fear.

“Don't be afraid of its plenty.”

Don't fear for the abundance of joy around you.
Embrace the whole of it.
Don't settle for crumbs.

* * *

In a conversation with a friend earlier this week,
I was reminded of how very important
this wisdom can be for these trying times.

As we each shared how disheartened we are
by the news out of Washington,
she told me she had just turned down an invitation
to speak at a rally for reproductive justice,
because she knew, deep inside,
that what she most needed to do
was tend to her own broken, breaking heart.

She knew she needed a few precious hours
to rest, to reconnect with her kids, to cook dinner,
and savour all that she cherishes—
the things that stir her most sure-fire feelings of gratitude,
things that flood her soul with joy,
things that make her feel alive, and assure her
the long struggle to build a better world is worth all the trouble.

Amid her anger and disappointment at the week's headlines,
she was mindful of the need to give in to joy,
to not “be afraid of its plenty”—but, instead,
to welcome in its abundance.

She was not seeking joy to blunt or numb her despair,
but as an antidote to it.

My friend recognized that more than anything,
she had to renew her spirit if she's going
to fight the good fight over the long haul.

Her determination reminded me of that sage bit of wisdom from Wendell Berry,
the famer poet, who tells us to:

“Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”

“Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”

As Mary Oliver promised, my friend's joy
took hold in those moments when love was felt,
when she grasped anew the gratitude she feels
for the relationships that make her who she is.

When she took comfort
in what is most life-giving to her.

When she took in the ordinary miracles
that fill life with its meaning.

But, how hard it can be to do that.

And how easy it is to take for granted

the ordinary miracles that comprise our every day.

This is what the poet Jane Kenyon points to with such haunting beauty:

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

These words were written by Kenyon in 1993,
just after her husband,
the equally brilliant poet Donald Hall,
had been diagnosed with cancer.

What makes her words all the more poignant
is the knowledge that Kenyon herself
died less than two years after writing them, at the age of 47.

Her husband survived his cancer,
but she, sadly, did not survive hers.

In the fifteen months between her diagnosis and her death,
she continued to write, with the same precision
on the most mundane miracles of life.

The poem “Otherwise” was published after her death
in a collection that took as its title
the title of the poem itself.

Three years later,
Donald Hall published a collection of his own, called *Without*,
that traces his journey through the devastating grief of her loss.

These two books, *Otherwise* and *Without*,
were my constant companions during the summer I served
as a chaplain in the children’s unit of a cancer hospital in Boston.

On hot mornings, on my way in on the bus,
I would read the poems again and again,
touched by the rugged humanity they contained,
moved by the powerful ways
each poet so clearly cherished the ordinary.

Their imagery of flawless peaches and refulgent fields,
of mid-day naps and candlesticks on the table
were a counterpoint to the visits I would make
throughout the course of each day—
visits to the kids who’d lost their hair but not their hope,
as well as to the ones who knew they soon would die,
yet who so often exuded a joyful calm I’ve rarely seen
in adults faced with the same hard facts.

I often thought of them as little Buddhas,
bearing a peace that was indescribable.

I believe these kids discovered for themselves
the truth the poet had named:
they knew, even amid their suffering,
that sooner than later things would be otherwise.

While there were certainly tears and plenty of heartache,
there was also a pervading joy in that hospital unit
that's still hard for me to explain.

It had something to do
with those kids learning life's hardest lesson—
that life's deepest value is discovered in its fragility.

We live our lives in radical contingency.
In a single moment, in the twinkling of an eye,
everything can change,
leaving our foundations shaken.
Our dreams dashed.
Our hopes upended, never to be righted again.

This point is powerfully made in the musical "Jersey Boys,"
when the main character, playing the singer Frankie Valli,
takes a phone call and learns his daughter
has died of a heroin overdose.

As he hangs up the phone, he reflects
on how he'd always heard the phrase "this too shall pass,"
as a bit of hopeful assurance to help people get through life's challenges.

And then he says that what he'd never realized before
is that it applies to the good stuff, too—
to the joy and the happiness that fills our lives.

This, too, he found, shall pass. Sometimes in an instant.

As heartbreaking as this truth can be,
it is where, I believe, gratitude is born.

Gratitude takes root in the knowledge
that things—for better and for worse—
could and will certainly someday be otherwise.

It's not a matter of simply feeling ourselves
to be more fortunate than someone else,
though that can sometimes be a source of gratitude.

To be sure, the words, “there but for the grace of God,”
have crossed many lips in a moment of confession
at our relief in not having it quite as bad off
as this person or that person, or those poor people over there.

But there is a deeper well to be found
from which gratitude can be drawn.

The place where we, in grasping life’s heart-breaking fragility,
come to discover the true and staggering depths of life’s worth.

The place where we learn that because life is precarious,
it is all the more precious.

The bittersweet place where we know in our bones
that because everything will ultimately be otherwise—
the gift of each day, of each breath,
of each morsel of food and every expression of love—
that our hearts must beat with gratitude for the miracle of it all.

On the Sundays when I’ve preached during this series on joy,
I’ve offered as the closing words:

“Rejoice and be glad, for this is the day we are given.”

These words of benediction are a reminder to find joy, here and now,
to be present to this day that is upon us,
knowing that yesterday is a memory and tomorrow but a dream.

It is an invitation to take whatever this day has to offer—
which is surely a bittersweet mix of life’s beauty and heartache—
and to celebrate it all the same,
as the strange and wondrous gift that it is.

These words can be something of a mantra:

“Rejoice and be glad, for this is the day we are given.”

Last week, I was sitting next to my friend Claire
during a series of denominational meetings in Boston.

She has an app on her phone that randomly reminds her

of life's most inconvenient appointment.

Once or twice or three times a day, at unexpected moments,
she gets a text message that says:
“Don't forget, you're going to die.”

What she's found most interesting is how that reminder
has reframed life for her, in the moment.

When those texts arrive while she's caught up
in some happy moment with her daughters,
she's reminded to cherish what she has.

When it comes in a tense or tedious meeting,
she wonders if she's spending her life in the best possible way.

How might such a message reshape your life?

Would it call to mind what you're most grateful for?

Would it stir you to live in a different way?

Would it cause you to be on the lookout for joy?

I hope so.

I hope it would open your heart to the present,
that you might see around you the gifts of this life,
the things for which you give thanks,
the ordinary miracles that can still surprise you with joy.

May it be so.

Amen.