

A Bright Golden Thread

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, July 23, 2017

Meditation

“To Savor the World or Save It”

- by Richard S. Gilbert

“It’s hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

~ E. B. White

I rise in the morning torn between the desire
To save the world or to savor it—to serve life or to enjoy it;
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;
To celebrate life with exuberant step
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty
Clouds the sky of my vision;
When the glow which lights my every day
Illumines the hurting world around me?
To savor the world or save it?
God of justice, if such there be,
Take from me the burden of my question.
Let me praise my plenitude without limit;
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!
No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.
What is that you say?
To save, one must serve?
To savor, one must save?

The one will not stand without the other?
Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself,
In my concern for my own life
I had forgotten.
Forgive me, God of justice,
Forgive me, and make me whole.

Source: *In the Holy Quiet*

Reading

“Joy in Ordinary Time”

- excerpt from *Waking Up the Karma Fairy:*

Life Lessons and Other Holy Adventures

- by Meg Barnhouse

My Mama was a second-grade teacher at the Gladwyne Elementary School in the rich suburbs of Philadelphia. She loved the children, but she was shy with the parents, who were financiers, pro-ball players and attorneys, members of the Junior League, cricket clubs, fox-hunting clubs. For Christmas she would get amazing presents. One year she got a bottle of Joy perfume, then \$150 an ounce. I don't know that she ever wore it. She was keeping it for a special occasion.

She kept it so long that it finally evaporated.

About other things she was more openhanded. We had grandfather's china and silver, which she often used. “That's what they are meant for, to be used,” she said. “No sense in saving them. You'd never see them at all that way.”

That openhandedness didn't extend to her own person. She wore sensible clothes, comfortable shoes, white cotton underwear. She had grown up the child of missionaries, and, whether she wanted it or not, that background was deep in her. She looked respectable and kind. She was cute and cheerful and funny.

Joy perfume didn't fit who she seemed to be. A daughter never sees all the sides of her mother, though. It makes me smile to think that she harbored a hope that there would come an occasion where it *could* be her, where she might walk into a room smelling rich and sophisticated, cherished and valued, where it would be just the thing for her to wear. She let my sister and me smell it whenever we wanted to. The bottle sat like an honored but intimidating guest on her dresser. Whenever we smelled it we marveled at how much it had cost.

I don't remember it ever occurring to me to wear it.

I want to let this lesson deep into me. Celebrate the body, the trooper of a body, that carries you through life, that pleasures you and lets you dance. Celebrate your body now, before you have lost the weight, before you get your muscle definition, before you feel justified by the harsh eyes of your expectations.

Celebrate being alive, drawing breath; celebrate that you are achingly sad today and that it will pass. It is good to be able to feel feelings. Celebrate that there was a love so big and good that it hurts to lose it. That there was a time so sweet that you ache, remembering. Celebrate those things. Honor the flowering of the tomato plants, the opening of the day lilies, the lemon smell of magnolias. Honor the ache of your heart and the tears falling.

Life is mostly ordinary time. Ordinary time, shot through with light and pain and love. Lavish joy on ordinary time. Hope is a wonderful thing, but not if it makes you put off splashing yourself with Joy.

Sermon Reflection

“Joy calls to us in our uncertainty and bears fruit in the very garden of our limitation.”

~ Leaf Seligman

A year ago this month, the Church of the Larger Fellowship published their monthly newsletter, “Quest for Meaning,” on the theme of joy. I stand before you today fully convinced that it would serve us well – I’ll own that – it would serve *me* well, to review the contents of that issue perennially, but particularly now, maybe even especially in what often feels like the “fierce urgency of now” of our time and place. For those note-takers among us, the issue can be found at questformeaning.org – along with a plethora of other such wonderfulness.

The bright golden thread of my sermon reflection title comes from a meditation in that issue penned by a community minister from Austin, Texas named Nell Newton. She begins by describing how

When a weaver starts a new piece, she first must tie the warp strings on her loom to form an underlying base of the fabric she will create. Warp strings are the long strings that are fixed in place, while the woof or weft threads will be the ones she sends back and forth to create the body, texture, and design of the fabric. As she weaves, she might cut the woof threads, add in new ones, or change colors or textures. But she won’t cut the warp strings until she removes the fabric from the loom. Warp strings remain constant.

Using the analogy ala Carol King of our lives being “like a tapestry of rich and royal hue,” Newton notes in her own life that “There are patches where the woof threads are thin or frayed by sadness, poverty, loneliness, and disconnection, but those are also the very places where warp threads show more clearly.” And for her, and it is true for me as well, one of those warp threads, one of those constants, is joy.

She goes on, and I believe this is helpful, to review the difference between joy and happiness.

Happiness is a feeling, external and temporary. It comes from something outside of the self—a purchase, an encounter, etc. It’s what I [she] call the “sparkly pony” emotion. It’s fun. It feels good. And it’s over pretty quickly.

Joy, on the other hand, is internal and it lasts. **And it can coincide with other feelings**, like grief. Joy can be present in the middle of a life storm, whereas happiness can’t survive the tempest. And while happiness can increase over a person’s life span, it is also strongly

determined by genetics and personality. **Joy is more of a constant, and people can strengthen it by learning to recognize its nuances.**

Happiness: external, temporary. Joy: internal, constant.

The Rev. Carl Scovel once wrote “At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return.... Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict—not even survival—is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy.”

What do we think of that? Does that chafe against any of our preconceived notions or ways of being in the world? How do we reconcile this with all the wrongs that need to be righted, all the evil that must be confronted, all the righteous battles to be fought? Joy? Really? Who has time for that now?

My answer today is to share with you Peggy Clarke’s story reflection on why we need joy. Short, sweet, and like an arrow to the heart.

“**We Need Joy**” - by Peggy Clarke

<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/we-need-joy/>

After college, my best friend and I drove from her home in Texas through the Southwest. We put a cab on the back of her old Ford Step-side pick-up truck so we could sleep in the back, and we toured the country, talking to truckers on the CB radio and meeting fellow travelers along the way.

We spent about a week in the canyons of Utah after befriendng the staff at a hotel at Bryce National Park, thereby avoiding paying for a room. One night, deep in the dark, we sat on the edge of the canyon talking about the world and the beauty that abounds. I didn’t know what time it was, but I knew morning had to be nearby. One of the guys we were with asked if we could be quiet for a bit, so we sat, feet hanging over the edge, in complete silence.

And as we sat, the most magnificent, most glorious thing happened. The sun rose. It broke through the darkness in such a grand display of power and grace I would not have been surprised had the rocks and trees started to sing *Alleluia*. We sat awestruck until we spontaneously broke out in applause, hollering and cheering in gratitude.

Joy is not in the circumstance, but in the response. The sun rises every day, like it or not. **Being entranced by it is a choice.**

I've been an activist my entire adult life. I've fought and struggled and disputed and attacked and argued with the best of them. I've drawn lines and crossed lines. I've lived with and cried with the poorest of the poor. The wellspring from which this work is fed is an abiding hope and an experience of joy. Were this not true in my life, my first night with a broken child would have been my last. **I have never been charged by my anger.** I know it exists and I confront it each time I look into the face of suffering, but it is not what propels me forward.

When I was deepest in that work, I put a sign on my door with a sketch of two women frolicking on the beach and a quote from Emma Goldman which said: **"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."** Pollyanna, I am not. **But if the work for peace isn't sourced by joy, the world we dream about will never be made manifest.**

Take a moment to remember. Remember the first time you spoke your truth. Remember the rest you took in the garden. Remember the conversation that went deep into the night. Remember the meal you shared with people you love. Remember the birth of your child. Remember the silence of a morning or the laughter of an evening. **Those moments are the wellspring of our work.**

There is much work ahead. Rights to fight for and wrongs to protest. A planet to protect and people to value. There's a margin that needs to be made center and a center that needs to be made whole. So we need joy.

We need to remember that grace abounds and the sun rises in magnificence every day. We need to celebrate the tiny gifts we are given as if the universe shines her great fortune upon us, and **we need to celebrate the tiny gifts we give** as if we ourselves are the universe. We need to applaud the sunrise until we are propelled back into the world filled with joy.