

Clap On, Clap Off:
A Sermon About Applause

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Right in the middle of the First Allegro came a Passage I knew would please, and the entire audience was sent into raptures — there was a big applauding moment; — and as I knew, when I wrote the passage, what good effect it would make, I brought it once more at the end of the movement — and sure enough there they were: the shouts of Da capo. The Andante was well received as well, but the final Allegro pleased especially — because I had heard that here the final Allegros begin like the first Allegros, namely with all instruments playing and mostly in unison; therefore, I began the movement with just 2 violins playing softly for 8 bars — then suddenly comes a forte — but the audience had, because of the quiet beginning, shushed each other, as I expected they would, and then came the forte — well, hearing it and clapping was one and the same. I was so delighted, I went right after the Symphony to the Palais Royale — bought myself an ice cream, prayed a rosary as I had pledged — and went home.

Mozart

And this from Denise Levertov

*Marvelous truth, confront us
at every turn,
in every guise, iron ball,
egg. Dark horse, shadow,
cloud
of breath on the air,*

*dwell
in our crowded hearts
our steaming bathrooms, kitchen full of
things to be done, the
ordinary streets.*

*Thrust close your smile
that we know you, terrible joy.*

A couple of weeks ago, Kathe and I watched the movie 'The Queen' on Netflix. I was not expecting much, and had not wanted to see it when it was in the theaters, but I was much more impressed than I expected, mostly because of Helen Mirren's performance. I thought she was remarkable; she was the queen.

The movie is about the response in England to the death of Princess Diana, and the slow realization on the Queen's part that she has to respond in some way. At the funeral, which was held in Westminster Abbey, maybe the most famous or important church in England, Diana's brother gave the eulogy. It was moving and angry and pointed. He was not a fan of the royal family. The church was full, and there were thousands and thousands of people outside watching the funeral on giant screens. This was a nation in mourning.

After Diana's brother finished, a wave of applause began — outside — and grew and grew until the people inside the church began to be aware of this low and growing sound, until a wave of applause also began to fill the cathedral. The camera focused on Prince Philip — a boor if there ever was one — the Queen and Tony Blair. As they became aware of what was happening, their response to the applause ran from a look of condescension and disgust in Philip, joining the applause by Blair, and a look of resignation and perplexity on the Queen's part, as if she were forced to recognize again that her old world was disappearing, and a new world was appearing, a world she did not fully understand but one in which she had to take her place.

In her world, a quiet decorum ruled; in her world, there was no applause, certainly not at a funeral; in her world, public displays of emotion were rare and controlled. It's a long way from Queen Elizabeth to Oprah Winfrey.

Applause. Clap on, clap off, the clapper!

Sometimes – I bet you have all had this experience – you come up with a great idea for something down the road, and when you get to the time for it, you wonder 'what was I thinking of?' Well, maybe this is one of those times. What was I thinking of in planning a sermon about clapping? Huge existential issue there - applause. Right! Why not just talk about whether God exists or not – something simple like that, or the nature of good and evil?

But, there has been talk here. I have received several emails this week. Should we have applause here during worship? Some of you say 'no' and some say 'yes.' Some feel strongly, some very strongly! At our leadership retreat in September – the Board, Hannah, Alyssa, Sara and I played a game, and during which I asked how many thought applause should be banned – of 14 people, 11 said 'Yes.' I asked our senior high group a couple of week ago, the same question and no one thought it should be banned. We seem to applaud every time a child or youth does something, or when the bell choir rings.

Mozart loved it; Wagner hated it – somehow that is not surprising. The Emperor Nero hired people to applaud his singing, which, apparently was very bad. I cannot remember the last concert I went to where there was not a standing ovation at the end. Here is a bit I found in a blog, about the champion applause event of them all, the State of the Union address by the President:

My fellow Americans, I'm proud to announce that I found my keys (4 minute standing ovation)... They were under the couch (2 minute ovation)... While down there, I also found a button (5 minutes of applause, accompanied by "huzzahs" and "cheers")... .. And I'm happy to report that our great nation now officially has the highest ratio of people to squirrels in recorded history (monstrous applause, tears of joy, and Jon Cornan and Hillary Clinton take their tops off and start giving each other back massages.)

People applaud at the end of movies! That I do not get – somehow applause needs a recipient, but a movie screen?

Applause in church, or rather, in worship, is ancient. The Psalmist says the worshiper should clap their hands. Much of the African American religious experience is centered in an active dialogue between preacher and worshipper – the call and response, the amens and hallelujahs, the applause – this is a part of the experience of worship, of joy and affirmation. Emerson complained about corpse cold Unitarians; it has been said that ours is a faith from the neck up, only.

We have inherited our worship from New England – not a place of spontaneous outbursts of emotion. I hail from Scandinavians in the Upper Midwest – those people who think melancholy is the height of joy, and that instead of applause we might say, when we are so moved by the excellence of something ' Well, it could be worse.

And I wonder whether applause in African American churches comes from the fact that worship, and faith, for them, was about liberation and freedom. Hallejulah! Praise God! While for New England Puritans faith was about condemnation and sinfulness. Hard to applaud the image of an angry God holding sinners over the yawning pit of Hell.

Now I understand that applause at an artistic performance is different than applause in worship – although there are similarities. After all, what we do here each Sunday is a performance – some by professionals and some by amateurs, and we always strive for excellence. You expect Stephen to play well and conduct well, for our section leaders and soloists to be excellent, for the preaching to be excellent. This is performance.

But this is not a concert hall; it is a house of worship. So – what about applause here? I told Kathe that I was going to tell you all that there could be no applause at all – except for my sermons. Or just

applaud for the offering – that is applauding yourselves and your generosity, you know. I thought of planting some people to applaud after I invited our bowl to sing, or to applaud my prayer, or the chalice lighting.

The question of applause is one of the vexing questions in worship, like announcements or when to serve the juice in RE.

Here is what I think – last Saturday a number of us attended a workshop led by the Rev. Peter Morales of Golden Colorado. Peter preached here last week. His church has been one of the most rapidly growing UU congregations in the last decade. We have enjoyed moderate growth here. Thanks to the efforts of the Welcoming Committee and Betsy Blue, and now with the leadership of our Membership Coordinator Kim Hayden, we are a welcoming place.

At the workshop, Peter claimed that the people who visit here are already, in his words ‘pre-qualified.’ We no longer get many, if any, who wander in with their Bibles, not knowing who we are. Today, the most common way of finding us is after a Google search or after taking the belief quiz on beliefnet.com. Our visitors know, basically, who we are – liberal, open, non-creedal – and they are looking for a place to belong.

Studies of church memberships across the Board in the US suggest that the feeling of belonging matters much more than belief. People are as likely to be a Methodist as a Unitarian. It is the sense of belonging that people seek. People come here looking not so much for theology – though that matters – but for community. To be sure, there are many exceptions, but, generally, that is the case.

I have been in the ministry for 25 years and in that time I have noticed a gradual sift in the reason people come. 25 years ago there were lots of refugees from fundamentalism; a while later there were people looking for a deeper spirituality; now it is overwhelmingly people looking for community. A place to belong and a place to serve – to get from and to give to.

Peter told of a sociological study done in 1985 about how people felt connected or disconnected. One question was how many people in your life are there with whom you can share intimate information about your life. The modal response – the most common response – was three. The study was repeated in 2001 and the modal response was zero. The percentage of people in America who reported that they had no one no one in whom they could confide intimate information went from 10 percent to 25 percent. 50% of Americans report that they have no one or just one person in their life with whom they can confide.

Peter went on to say that such a thing has never happened in the history of the world. We have become a nation of isolated individuals and it is getting worse. In a time of so much connection – cell phones, email, facebook, myspace – we are more and disconnected. Does this ring true?

We are social creatures; we are not built to live alone. No wonder people say they are looking for community. This is why our Pastoral Care program described this morning is so important; this is why the work of the Welcome Committee is so important; this is why we turn to each other and say ‘hello. Welcome.’

One of my colleagues, Forrester Church, has written this, and it jibes with my experience: ‘During twenty years as a minister, I have seen people hold on for dear life through every manner of personal crisis. Often crises that other people struggle to endure, I can hardly imagine enduring myself. Sometimes they survive. Sometimes they succumb. In both cases I have witnessed remarkable displays of human courage and resilience. Surprisingly often, my parishioners emerge from their struggles not only intact but also with a more profound appreciation for life’s meaning.

Over the years, my parishioners have taught me two lessons. When cast into the depths, to survive, we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach to things that can. As to the former, until we free ourselves from an attachment to false sources of security and let go of our illusions, we will remain in the abyss. With respect to the latter – and hear this – the most important

thing to remember is that lifelines have two ends. To grasp one end, however tightly, avails us nothing unless the other end is secured.'

We come here, so many of us, looking to connect, pre-qualified for liberal religion, and asking whether this might be a community in which we can find closeness and where we can tie that other end of our lifelines.

Applause is an expression of this yearning. After all, it is a communal act. I am well aware that you sit out there, listening to me or to the music, each in your own chair, alone with your thoughts and your questions, your joys and sorrows, your wonderings. We join voices together in song; we now turn in greeting at the beginning; we turn to each other at the close of worship. That is something, but not a whole lot. By clapping for something, you come together, joined in appreciation or thankfulness.

Yeats wrote in his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing.

Unless soul clap its hands, and sing, and louder sing.

Yes!

This is not a bad thing. Clap on.

But of course, there is a 'but' here – this seeking community is not all that we do or offer. We are not here just to connect with each other, but to worship, to probe the mysteries of living, to be exhorted to ethical living, to stand in front of mystery. Remember the scene in Exodus when Moses [cleverly disguised as Charlton Heston] comes to the burning bush, and he is told to take off his shoes for he stands on holy ground?

This is holy ground, made holy by our gathering and by your yearning for the sacred. We stand here; we sit here, in the presence of the Holy, in the presence of the mystery of creation, in the presence of the sacred, in God's presence. And that, my friends, is humbling. It is to me; we take off our shoes here, or we should, and we place our soles on holy ground.

One of my favorite descriptions of a religious experience is in William Steig's book 'Amos and Boris.' It's a children's book about a mouse and a whale [of course]. Amos, the mouse, builds a boat for himself to see the world – much like a UU, I would guess, curious, wishing to see faraway things, self-reliant, independent, pushing the limits. And off he sails to see what the rest of the world is like.

Steig writes: 'One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marveled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water; and later, lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse, Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all. Overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of everything, he rolled over and over and right off the deck of his boat and into the sea.'

Steig has captured perfectly what mystics have been describing for centuries. Not only the feeling akin to it all' but the rolling off the boat. That is, the mystic experience doesn't last and we end up back in the real world. And that is where the real religious life begins, when we're in the water. We come out of those experiences and roll over and over and right back into life. We grow in faith; we move from one understanding to another. We talk about this all the time here – life as a journey, faith as a journey.

So you are here in this boat, and all around us is the wide and mystical sea, a living thing in the vast living universe, where you can feel thoroughly akin to it all.

And when that happens, when you feel akin to it all, applause is not the response, but a deep and silent sigh of gratitude for the experience of the presence of grace.

In worship, we connect with what is holy – or we hope to or try to – and this is – or should be – humbling. And maybe we should just be silent in its presence. We say that our faith comes, in part, from: *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*

Somehow, I don't think there was applause at the end of the sixth day of creation – just the statement 'And it was very good.' We stand in silent witness to the mystery of being here, filled with wonder and gratitude.

We live in a world that is not only isolating, but also that is noisy. We are not used to silence. Our car radios are always on; ambient noise is way up; the TV goes, our iPods have become a body part. How often do you enjoy silence, deep, contemplative silence? Not often I bet, and some of the drive to applause is that we no longer know how to be silent. Pascal said that all of the troubles in the world were the result of our inability to sit quietly in a room. He may be right.

So applause is not a good thing. Clap off!

Well – clap on, clap off. Do we clap on the noise and joy and need of human closeness and community, or do we clap off and await the presence of the Holy?

You tell me. I don't know.

Amen