



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Sources of Joy

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister
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301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

This is the fourth year that Jim and I have had monthly theological themes in our worship schedule. They're on a three-year cycle, which means that we're beginning to repeat our themes, such as joy. I preached on the spirituality of joy almost two years ago. Some of you may remember, it was a holiday sermon the first week of December. Indeed, we are most familiar with joy as a theological theme when it is associated with the high holy days of the Christian calendar, Christmas and Easter – the joy in the birth of a savior, the joy in this savior's resurrection after death.

But a lot of us are here in a Unitarian Universalist congregation because the theology of salvation does not compel us. Some of you may even be thinking, Jesus, it's not even Thanksgiving, and we're already talking about Jesus? Why is joy our theological theme in November?

One of the joys of being a religious liberal is we can pick and choose among the annual themes that the Jewish and Christian calendars offer. Joy is a helpful theological theme for inspiring us to lead better lives – why should it only come up twice a year? Justice is also a favorite theme, one that should come up more than once a year on Martin Luther King's birthday.

Indeed, the freedom of the pulpit and freedom of liberal religion is a great thing – you are free to explore religious themes and traditions that interest you most, and Jim and I can bring up the ideas we believe are most relevant and will inspire you most. If we're really on, we'll give you a new perspective that has the potential to change your life. At least, that's why I'm in this racket. It gives me joy to inspire you.

But I often like to observe, and remind us, that our greatest strength, this freedom, can also be our greatest weakness. Unitarian Universalism can seem *too* willy-nilly, and it can be a turn-off when it is too hard to describe what on earth it is. What do you mean you can believe whatever you want? That sounds kind of gimmicky. What holds you all together? Indeed, what keeps us from resembling a social club?

These are not easy questions for us to answer, and I challenge us all to reflect on how you might answer them best. Today I'd like to focus on what part of my answer would be. It has to do with the great traditions from whence we came, and translating older religious themes in ways that are meaningful to our *living* tradition. Have you noticed that's the title of our hymnal? Singing the LIVING tradition? That's what it means, that our faith is a living thing, free to grow and respond to the relevance of our times.

The danger and challenge is to not become too detached from our religious heritage, which contain the Jewish and Christian traditions. Raising the theological concept of JOY is a great excuse to explore and strengthen our ancestral moorings.

That we share and value these moorings is one way 21st century UUs are held together. "Roots hold me close, wings set me free" – Spirit of Life is part of our weekly liturgy because it affirms what we hold to be true: that all great religious traditions contain truth and meaning, and we, with wings, are free to gather this wisdom, that we may soar. We can also find in the hymnal that we clearly state the *sources* from which our 'living tradition' draws, two pages back from the first hymn, beneath our principles. You see written here "Wisdom from the world's religions" but even more specifically, "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

So we're fairly familiar with the Christian take on joy, but we may not be as familiar with Jewish sources of Joy. I have a rabbi friend named Mark who said first it's important to clarify which sense of joy we mean – the ephemeral good feelings that accompany a happy event – or, a substrate of gratitude about being alive, about coping with or overcoming life's obstacles, and participating in community. In other words, a value of joy that can be revisited, a lodestone to re-touch as needed through life.

Today we're interested in the latter. While Joy is a fun theological theme to explore, some of us are not feeling joyful at all. If you're feeling down or depressed, joy is the last thing you want to hear about. This is the time of year, especially with the time change, when all of a sudden it gets dark early in the day, and it affects us. Whether you are pre-disposed to melancholy or not, life has its ups and downs. Is there a way that theological implications of joy can provide aid and inspiration when we need it most?

According to Mark, the Jewish tradition identifies three events that are sources of joy: Creation, Exodus and Sinai. God, or Yahweh, creates humans, and the world that sustains them; Yahweh delivers them from slavery to be a free people, and finally, Yahweh provides Torah or instructions on how to live. The Reformed Jewish prayer book is organized around these three themes of creation, deliverance and law.

So how might we, as religious liberals, translate this tradition in a way that is meaningful to our lives today? In humanist terms, each morning is a new creation – a new opportunity for the individual, and for the community. We believe people are actually or can be potentially freed from all kinds of bondage, and that people can make thoughtful choices about the path they will follow in life. Whether or not we believe God endowed us with these gifts, with these abilities, or not, we have them.

In other words, no matter how bad things get, in the world or in our personal lives, we believe, through our own power, things can change. And more often than not, they change when we turn to our community for help, when we look for resources, for sources of joy when our own well of joy has run dry.

In practical terms, this can mean all manner of sources: reaching out to friends and family for advice and support, coming to church, talking with your minister; finding that really great self-help book that speaks to you. It amazes me how one great nugget of wisdom can change my whole perspective.

One of the nuggets in the Happiness Project that I read from earlier is to act the way I want to feel. Gretchen Rubin writes: "although we presume that we *act* because of the way we *feel*, in fact we often *feel* because of the way we *act*. . . Advice from every quarter," she writes, "ancient and contemporary, backs up the observation that to change our feelings, we should change our actions." For example, studies show that even an artificially induced smile brings about happier emotions, and one experiment suggested that people who use Botox are less prone to anger, because they can't make angry faces.

This is not to say y'all should run out and get Botox, but do try acting the way you want to feel, and see what happens. It may sound hokey, but it's completely in line with one of our most prized notions as religious liberals: that not only do we choose our actions, but these very actions can change the way we experience our lives.

And when this fails us, there's always therapy. That sounds like a joke because we stigmatize therapy, but I mean it. Therapy is one of the best modern sources of joy available to us in our community. Not unlike the King's Speech, Mark's personal story is getting help for a problem of stuttering and the anxiety it created – but not until he was 55 years old. He suffered for much of a lifetime. There was great joy when he found freedom from pain, and joy in his personal accomplishment. It's never too late to investigate what resources of joy could be available to you.

Mark's story also illustrates how true it is, when Khalil Gibran says, "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked." That, "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."

When I'm at my lowest, this is exactly the kind of wisdom I need to hear. Our pain, as much as we'd like to avoid it, is often unavoidable, but at least it serves a purpose that, in the bigger picture, is in service to joy. Our pain and our suffering teaches us how, prepares us, to receive joy. I can remember times in my life when it felt like I didn't have friends. I bet we could all remember such times – perhaps when we make a big change, move to a new place, when we find ourselves without a community. These can be painful times. But did it not teach us to value our friendships, and our community bonds more than before? Did we not experience more joy and gratitude because our sorrow had carved that space in our being?

Mark referred to his own story of overcoming his stutter as a time when he 'passed through the narrows.' In what ways have you passed through the narrows, that in the end, brought you more joy and satisfaction with life than you could have imagined in that narrow place? Isn't part of the joy the process of overcoming? Isn't there joy in the journey itself? Ursula LeGuin said, "It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end."

What I like about the Jewish view of joy and its three sources of creation, deliverance, and law is that, to some degree, these represent stages in a life, that they encompass the arc of a life. Creation is analogous with birth and childhood, deliverance with the successful passage through the challenges that the generative phases of life bring: finding a mate, parenting, career, citizenship, and following the path to later in life and retirement, when task and goal become less important than enjoying what life brings.

We can use this worldview as a touchstone when we are passing through the narrows of our lives by considering our experiences in the bigger picture. The anthem that the choir sang, *It Is Something to Have Wept*, is actually number 5 in our hymnal. It's about life that included difficulty, yet celebrates the accomplishment of life as achieved and lived.

*It is something to have wept as we have wept,
and something to have done as we have done . . .
It is something to have smelt the mystic rose,
although it break and leave the thorny rods . . .
Lo, and blessed are our ears for they have heard:
yea, blessed are our eyes for they have seen:
let the thunder break on human, beast, and bird, and lightning.
It is something to have been.*

What holds Unitarian Universalists together is that we are all interested in honoring what is most sacred in life. We are interested in being able to name the source of the sacred. But the reason it's challenging for us to do so is because we believe the sources of the sacred are all around us, in every phase of life, and even in the fabric of our everyday lives. The fancy theological term for this is an *ontological* understanding of the sacred. Ontological means situated in the here and now, in the things that all human beings experience, such as relationships, such as the physical and natural world we live in, our homes, our work, and all the ways we participate in society. In other words, to locate the greatest sources of joy does not involve any kind of esoteric initiation – it's available to us all the time, because it's all around us. This idea is poetically described in the first hymn we sang this morning, *Seek Not Afar for Beauty*:

Go not abroad for happiness; behold it is a flower blooming at your door. Bring love and laughter home, and evermore joy shall be yours as changing years unfold.

In wonder workings or some bush aflame, we look for Truth and fancy it concealed; but in earth's common things it stands revealed, while grass and flowers and stars spell out the name.

The point here is that you are encouraged, even urged, to take the time to consider, and name the sources of your greatest joy, of what is most sacred *to you*. We as religious liberals acknowledge this is slightly different for everybody, and that's okay. We acknowledge that for some, it is the great religious traditions that have the most meaning, that for example, to emulate Jesus brings the most joy. For others, it's based in nature, in nurturing our gardens, for example. Still for others, it is quite ontologically based in the here and now of our modern lives, such as dealing with actual clutter. Perhaps for you, clutter is a non-issue, but for me, making life neat is a source of joy. Don't belittle the small things that are inherently good and give you joy – there's nothing wrong with this. We tend to belittle things that aren't "spiritual" enough – but if small things speak to you, *honor* them, make space for them in your life. This is how we live better lives – seek not afar for beauty!

For we never seek afar for sorrow. No matter how well we attain joy, sorrow, struggle and difficulty are a part of life. We are better equipped to navigate such times when we have faith in - when we are familiar with - our resources of joy.

And how shall we ourselves become part of that community of resources, that others may find us in their time of need? Just like it says in the hymnal, we familiarize ourselves with Jewish and Christian teachings so we can love our neighbors as ourselves. How can you be a source of joy for your neighbor? The sky's the limit when it comes to volunteering in our community – all the great religions confirm that it's of mutual benefit, when you do good, you feel good.

The Persian poet Ghalib said, "For the raindrop, joy is entering the river." There is so much joy in being part of something much larger than ourselves, and yet, completely akin to what we are. We can find this in the great religious traditions of which we are a part. Our roots connect us to this deep and enduring history: the saga of human struggle to understand ourselves, to learn how to use our wings, that we may be happier, more joyful in every stage of life.

May we all enter the river.