

USH
Sunday September 17, 2023
Thimbleful of Joy
Pulpit Guest: Judy Robbins

Opening Words:

Today we turn our focus to joy, which is often confused with its cousin happiness. So, let's get clear about the differences. Happiness is an emotion...it's a temporary emotional response to something external: you won the lottery, you hit all the lights green, your test results came back just fine, you got into the school of your choice (or maybe it's the retirement community of your choice); your candidate wins, your spouse remembers your anniversary, there's a new baby in your family...you get the picture. Happiness is an emotion. And it's temporary. Otherwise, it would defy the most basic law of nature...that everything changes. The Dalai Lama says happiness is like a butterfly: it "lands and flutters away."

Joy is not an emotion. It's a state of mind ... a deep sense of contentment, and it comes from within. It is often associated with the center of our being...our heart. If you are skillful at going to that internal place, you'll see that being joyful is not all that dependent on external circumstances or even your mood.

Happiness has a very secular feel to it, joy is more spiritual. Happiness is like candy, but joy is like a satisfying meal.

The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu co-authored *The Book of Joy* in 2016. Both are reknown spiritual leaders; both Nobel Peace prize winners, yet their personal lives are plagued with adversity on an epic scale. Clearly both of these men are skillful at finding joy in the midst of adversity. Bishop Tutu died in 2021 and the Dalai Lama is now 88. Their legacy demonstrates how joy can be a spiritual practice, no matter what the external circumstances may be.

Without a catechism, without a holy book to guide us, we liberal religionists are trusted to find spiritual practices that resonate with us individually. Both the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu found joy to be a valid spiritual path.

And here's the good news: we don't have to be spiritual superheros to practice joy.

Turning Inward

Today as we turn inward, come along with me to find that space inside where there is an open invitation for joy. You can close your eyes if it would feel alright. Bring your attention inside and notice what is going on in your life

right now... there is a lot there ... all about your home life, your activities at church, your relationships, your various forms of work, what's going on with your loved ones...your health ... your level of physical comfort right now... Let's call all that your Story. We can sweep all those thoughts into the category called Story...

Now step back from the whole Story, get some distance from all that busy-ness. Unhook from the Story for a little timeout...instead bring your attention to your body...you are conscious and alive...you can feel your weight on the pew, the air on your skin...you are aware of your breath...the miracle of your breath...you don't have to remember to breathe...like all the essentials of our aliveness, it is a gift...it is taken care of for us...we are breathed.

Let's wander to a time when you experienced joy...a deep sense of contentment. Don't try hard or overthink it... pick any time that arises.....perhaps it is in nature...maybe a garden...perhaps it is in your kitchen or your car...maybe it is with another person...maybe it came unbidden and surprised you...maybe it is in an imaginary place...or someplace very familiar... listening to music...getting a massage...see if just one moment surfaces when you had that deep sense of contentment... all is well.

This may be a reach...we are not asked to do this often. Just maintain interested curiosity and see what arises. If you have a joy, fine. If nothing comes, just stay open. You can't do this wrong.

Take a moment.

Sermon

A Thimbleful of Joy

Many years ago, at just about this time of year, I went to Parents' Night in the first-grade classroom of my youngest son Tim. The teacher had asked the kids to draw pictures of a wonderful thing they had done during the summer and she had posted the pictures along the wall. Curious about what Tim had drawn, I walked past crayon drawings of Disneyland, camping in the mountains, amusement parks, horseback riding, flying in airplanes. Finally, I came to Tim's drawing and it was of the five of us lined up sitting on the couch watching TV. I was aghast! We had done some really fun things that summer, and this is what he picked?

Looking back on that now, I see that the other kids had drawn pictures of happiness but Tim had drawn a picture of joy...the cozy feeling of being safe and content, in close contact with people who loved him.

What could be better really?

Where happiness is fun, even a little rambunctious and dramatic, joy is simple and satisfying and quiet. Six-year-old Tim reaches forward in time to show us that joy isn't flashy or even extraordinary. Unlike happiness which is dependent on circumstances, joy can be accessed pretty much on demand if you know how to go about it. And we don't need much of it...even a thimbleful of joy goes a long way to soothing our souls.

This summer Rick and I vacationed in southern California, a place where we have been numerous times so we did not feel compelled to be on the go, doing touristy things. Instead, we unplugged and just hung out a lot. The place we were staying was exceptionally beautiful, perched atop a high ridge. The spacious back deck looked out over San Diego and the balcony off our room had an unobstructed view down a canyon to the Pacific Ocean. It had rained and exotic flowers bloomed everywhere. I often found myself just sitting and slipping into joy...a wordless state of exquisite contentment. It was so pleasurable that it got me to thinking about how to extend that experience... how to bring it home.

I am familiar with the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu's Book of Joy but I'm not a Tibetan Buddhist or an Episcopalian. I've been a UU my entire adult life. As part of a free religion, we UUs are challenged to create a personal spiritual life that works for each of us individually. Many of you know that I helped to start the *UUSpiritLife* programs that are about to begin for the fall semester, starting with a short retreat in late September. These programs are designed to help UUs with the challenge of creating that personal spiritual life.

So, perhaps not surprisingly, I turned to a Unitarian minister to advise me about how to bring the joy I experienced in California back home. Some years ago Rev. Arvid Straube had the idea that all UUs should have a *Spiritual Maintenance Schedule*. His suggested schedule goes like this: once a day we spend at least 10 minutes in prayer or meditation; once a week we take a full day off to rest, reflect, and enjoy life; at least once a month, get together with people who lift our spirits; and once a year, take an extended retreat away from home to refresh our perspective.

Since I am creating a *personal* spiritual life, it seemed to me that I could take a little license with Arvid Straube's once-a-day suggestion by substituting a practice of joy instead of prayer or meditation. I could do it like people practice gratitude. They write their daily gratitudes in a journal. I challenged myself to an experiment: could I find a daily joy or two and make note of it before I went to sleep?

I am still pretty new at the spiritual practice of joy but I am pleased to report that it's actually a pretty easy skill to learn. Tim found joy sitting on the couch watching TV but that doesn't often bring me joy. On the other hand, I don't

have to look much farther than the couch. Sitting on my deck and looking at the sunlight through the trees works for me. Almost any day, looking at the sky and the clouds works. I heard my favorite instrumental version of *Ain't No Sunshine When You're Gone*, closed my eyes and had a 4-minute hit of joy even though it is a blues song. Last week, I sat right here in the second row and had a joyful experience looking at Paula Bleck's beautiful cloud raining big sparkly drops on our water ceremony.

I am finding that Joy is everywhere if I slow down and look with the right lenses. Little smidgens, mere thimblefuls, of joy appear all around me if I look. Joy is on display at Whole Foods where I stand for a little too long looking at a stunning orange pyramid of carrots. Joy appears at Costco where the lady in the hairnet has carefully displayed her food samples in paper muffin cups and she smiles and makes eye contact when she hands me one. Some are mere flashes of joy. But many last quite a bit longer.

One of the benefits of this practice is how restorative it is. On public radio recently I heard a neuropsychologist talking about a phenomenon we've probably all experienced...we get a good night's sleep and yet we wake up not feeling rested. She said that's because there are different types of exhaustion ... and sleep is not the remedy for all of them. Sleep is great for physical exhaustion but we humans are subject to mental, emotional, spiritual, social and creative depletion, too, and sleep doesn't necessarily work for those. For those, we need more contemplative restorative practices to reset ourselves, somewhat like the practice of joy.

As I stand here in front of you this morning, I am humbled to be part of an accepting, heart-centered community of people who are both like me and unlike me. My particular joy may very well be a squirmy situation for you. Slowing down to notice beauty is often a catalyst for me. But you might find joy in music or dance, on the yoga mat or someplace that would never occur to me. During Turning Inward we did a little guided meditation that might have evoked a joyful memory for you. Or maybe you've thought of one since then. We have a couple of mics to pass among you if you'd like to share a joy.

Please speak directly into the mic or the people at home will not be able to hear you. Those watching online feel free to share a joy in the chat.

Forum...(congregants share a joy)

Do you notice that listening to others' joys gives you a little vicarious hit? Even at times when we don't feel particularly joyful, if we are around someone who is, it lifts us up...we get a kick out of seeing someone else be joyful.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion. With no dogma, we are free to find spiritual sustenance in many places. If you want joy to be one of those places,

there are just a few simple steps: set aside your Story. Joy is not about thinking. Allow your attention to rest in the area of the heart and focus on whatever is calling you to joy.

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