

Dancing in the Streets:
Why We Need More Joy and Where to Find It

Thinking about joy is almost a contradiction in terms.

You

can't think yourself into a state of joy. The experience of joy isn't cognitive—it's more subjective, located in the heart and in the gut, not in the head. Oh, there are intellectual pleasures, to be sure, and much happiness to be found in the life of the mind, but joy

escapes rational boundaries and spills out and over. Like the ambush of laughter Chip Walter describes [in today's reading from *Thumbs, Toes, and Tears*], joy "evades understanding and resists analysis, partly because it thoroughly combines the primal and intellectual parts of us" (143).

Yet joy is by no means a trivial subject. What we believe about human happiness reflects our assumptions about human nature and the nature of the divine. Talking about joy invites a certain lightness, teasing us out of taking ourselves too seriously, yet joy seems to me to touch on three essential

religious questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What are we to do?

It also touches the question of evil. One of the great mysteries of human existence is why we don't do what will make us happy. We are a smart species, and so we understand that war creates chaos and suffering, that greed creates resentment and foments revolution, that global warming causes the sea to rise, that eating a box of chocolate chip cookies makes it impossible to zip up our pants. We claim to be rational beings and yet we behave in irrational ways, ways that create unhappiness and suffering.

“The Devil made me do it” personifies this human predilection to do what's bad for us instead of what's good. The figure of Satan can be seen as a projection of the evil and stupidity that so often holds sway in the human heart.

Unitarian Universalists are committed to reason. We enjoy discourse and debate, studying, reading, listening to each other, and hearing ourselves talk. The Fourth Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association, affirms “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We privilege intelligence, and perhaps we even allow ourselves to think we are smarter than other religious people. The covenant of this congregation, which we repeat together whenever we gather for worship, includes three great promises: to be peaceable, to be helpful, and “to seek the truth in love.” *The* truth, as if there were only one and we could find it.

The great Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson described the Unitarianism of his day as “corpse cold.” Transcendentalism took root in its passionate followers in the mid nineteenth century because they were so eager to break out of the rigid, intellectually focused, tradition bound religion that Unitarianism had become.

It’s curious that our religion is so strongly identified with the rational because the theology that separates us from our Calvinist forebears is a theology of love. As Unitarianism and Universalism developed in the United States, our religious ancestors embraced a warm, forgiving, generous view of God and of human nature. Unitarians and Universalists separated from the Church of the Standing Order, you remember,

because they believed in universal salvation and in a God of Love who was merciful. They rejected the Calvinist God who chose a few to be saints and damned everybody else, and so these early Unitarians and Universalists softened and humanized the more rigid and unforgiving ways of the Puritan church. They came down on the side of joy.

And today we understand that intelligence has many facets, including emotional intelligence. So what about the heart? What part do feeling and emotion, the intuitive, the speculative, the mysterious, the spontaneous, the playful, the ambush of laughter play in our moral and religious life?

Daniel Gilbert in his book, *Stumbling on Happiness*, asks “What could be more important than feelings?”

Sure *war* and *peace* may come to mind, but are war and peace important for any reason other than the feelings they produce? If war didn't cause pain and anguish, if peace didn't provide for delights both transcendental and carnal, would either of them matter to us at all? War, peace, art, money, marriage, birth, death, religion—these are just a few of the Really Big Topics over which oceans of blood and ink have been spilled, but they are really big topics for one reason alone: Each is a powerful source of human emotion. If they didn't make us *feel* uplifted, desperate, thankful, and hopeless, we would keep all that ink and blood to ourselves...

Feelings don't just matter—they are what mattering *means*. We would expect any creature that feels pain when burned and pleasure when fed to call burning and eating *bad* and *good*, respectively, just as we would expect an asbestos creature with no digestive tract to find such designations arbitrary. Moral philosophers have tried for centuries to find some other way to define *good* and *bad*, but none has ever convinced the rest (or me). We cannot say that something is good unless we can say what it is good *for*, and if we examine all the many objects and experiences that our species calls good and ask what they are good *for*, the answer is clear: By and large they are good for making us feel happy (78).

Happiness, according to this view, is at the root of the good.

Feelings are “what mattering *means*.” What's good is what makes us happy. So if we want to be good people, and to do good in the world, we must discover and pursue joy.

In *Leaves of Grass*, the Transcendentalist poet Walt

Whitman gives his prescription for happiness:

This is what you shall do:
 Love the earth and sun and the animals,
 Despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks,
 Stand up for the stupid and crazy,
 Devote your income and labors to others,
 Hate tyrants, argue not concerning God,
 Have patience and indulgence toward the people,
 Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown,
 Or to any man or number of men,
 Go freely with powerful uneducated persons,
 And with the young and with the mothers of families,
 Read these leaves in the open air,
 Every season of every year of your life,

Reexamine all you have been told,
At school at church or in any book,
Dismiss whatever insults your own soul,
And your very flesh shall be a great poem.

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a surgeon at Yale University Medical Center who pioneered alternative approaches to healing cancer patients. He works with meditation, yoga, humor, and other nontraditional therapies. To keep in touch with and strengthen your soul, which he defines as “the authentic self that lies deep within you,” Siegel prescribes these actions:

Access your creative sidetake up painting, writing, sculpting, or other creative endeavors. Expressing your creativity...helps to heal what is trapped within you so that you are able to heal emotionally and physically...

Define your fears ...so you don't feel so powerless and frightened by them...

Get rid of the clutter in your life...make room for emotional growth by periodically cleaning your environment and letting go of belongings.

Get regular massages ...being touched is therapeutic for your body and soul because it releases muscle tension, enhances the immune system, and suppresses pain...

Focus on the joyful...Share funny stories at dinner. Watch funny movies and listen to comedy CDs while driving...

Find your “chocolate”...chocolate, particularly the dark variety, stimulates the release of natural endorphins that

boost mood...If you don't like chocolate, find...whatever makes you feel good when you're feeling low. It could be music, gardening, reading, or talking with a loved one (*BottomLinePersonal*, March 15, 2006, p. 9).

Chip Walter reports that laughter can be “a powerful healer. When we laugh, the brain and endocrine system release cocktails of pain-killing, euphoria-producing endorphins and enkephalins as well as dopamine, noradrenaline, and adrenaline...[which] actually makes us healthier because they contribute to a strong immune system” (156).

The writer Norman Cousins was incapacitated by a degenerative disease in the 1980's. His doctors had given him almost no hope. Cousins discovered that he felt less pain when he watched Marx Brothers comedies and *Candid Camera* episodes. So he began to treat his illness with laughter and eventually made a full recovery (Walter, 157).

Stories about the positive impact of nontraditional treatments arouse my skeptical side. For a long time I believed that these cases were aberrations, exceptions to the rule. But there is growing evidence that emotional stress, hatred, greed, and negativity literally make people sick and that practicing

meditation, yoga, forgiveness, compassion, altruism and service can heal us (Dean Ornish, *Spectrum* 115 – 140).

We live in a culture that teaches us to be very afraid and tells us that we are never enough. Acts of courage and generosity in such a culture are acts of heroism and healing. In an interview, the British political journalist David Edwards, was asked “What do you say to people who feel they are busy struggling to get by and don’t have time to help others?”

Edwards replied, “Once you start to see through the myth of status, possessions, and unlimited consumption as a path to happiness, you’ll find you have all kinds of freedom and time. It’s like a deal you can make with the universe: *I’ll give up greed for freedom* . Then you can start putting you time to good use...Once you realize that helping others is also helping yourself, the size of the overall problems becomes irrelevant. You’re not a one- man or one- woman army out to save the whole world. You help simply because it does good and it feels good” (quoted in a brochure for *The Sun* magazine, which published the interview).

How can we cultivate more joy? My personal answers are tied to my beliefs about the nature of the world, the nature of people, and the nature of God. I believe that Love is the law of the relational universe in the same way that gravity is the law of the physical universe. People were created to love and serve each other. When we do that, we're happy. When we don't do that, we're unhappy. And I believe that God wants us to be happy. (That's the short version.)

My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, Minister of Public Theology at All Soul's Unitarian Church in Manhattan, has hewn his advice about how to live fully and happily into just three short sentences: Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are.

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