

STAYING JOYFUL DURING THE HOLIDAZE!

You'd think that staying joyful during the holiday would be a piece of cake (or fruitcake, at least), but you and I know better. This upcoming swirl of days can be real tough on the body and the soul. Lots of people get depressed—pressed down, far more than usual. So the call to be joyful, then remain so, during the holidays poses a sizable spiritual challenge.

Now, throughout religious history, matters of joy—everything from being silly to pure delight—have been undervalued, since orthodox religion's been a serious, if not grim, enterprise. In fact, for some believers, the more you suffer, the more religious you are.

A priest once said to Groucho Marx, "Groucho, I want to shake your hand for all the joy you've brought into the world." Groucho responded, "Why, thank you father. And I want to shake your hand for all the joy you've taken out of the world." Alas, too frequently, religion has devoutly dimmed, rather than lit, life's spark. That's why an affirming, buoyant faith such as Unitarian Universalism is particularly valuable in a world where organized religion still majors in fear, guilt, and misery.

Why, in a survey at Columbia University, 100,000 Americans were ranked on a happiness/unhappiness scale. It turns out that fundamentalist Baptists scored highest on the unhappiness scale, followed by Orthodox Jews and Roman Catholics. You know who scored lowest on the unhappiness scale? Unitarian Universalists and Quakers! Basically, I'd like to think, because our faith has little to do with shame, terror, or punishment.

We're flawed to be sure, but we're an upbeat, joyous faith because our mission rests squarely on the here-and-now rather than the here-and-after. We concur with the

poet W. H. Auden who urged humans to “practice the scales of rejoicing” daily. Now, one of the ways I practice those scales is by humming and whistling, every chance I get, every walk I take. Follow me around, and it’ll be hard to smirk or frown. How do you practice the scales of rejoicing in the here-and-now?

Unitarian Universalists consider it folly to squander this single, precious life and miss its soul-deep satisfactions and sorrows. The cemeteries are filled with corpses of those who’ve bartered their souls in anticipation of promises to come.

One of my favorite stories on this score is of the woman who’d worked hard all her life, pretty much denying her deep desires along the way, waiting around for the time when she’d formally retire. The way she put it: “When I stop working, I’ll reach my happiness haven. And I’ll be free to do all the things I really want to do.”

But, lo and behold, when Marilyn actually retired, a dreadful thing occurred. She plumb forgot what the things were that she loved most, and Marilyn was left empty-hearted, without much of anything exciting to seek or accomplish. Consequently, she frittered her final laps away. You see, Marilyn had failed to develop and practice the scales of rejoicing, day-in and day-out, along the way.

And so, what’s the lesson of this modern day parable? Quit postponing your life, because who you are to become you’re now becoming!

I truly believe that the Egyptians were right when they posited that, shortly after death, we’ll be confronted by the god Osiris with a quiz that has to be answered honestly. After forty-two rather routine questions concerning how the deceased has lived, Osiris asks one crucial question that has two parts: first, “Did you find joy?” and, second, “Did you bring joy?”

Note the emphasis of Osiris isn't on our products or on our possessions, not even on our creative talents or our noble works, but on the basic purpose of our earthly journey, namely: Did you locate joy and did you spread joy during your lifetime?

Now we can't lie to Osiris, and a lot's at stake. If we answer these questions affirmatively, we're given back a measure of continued existence. If not, we're lugged off and forthwith eaten by a hippopotamus. In truth, hippos are vegetarians, so we're more likely to be gobbled up by a crocodile or lion instead! Pleasant thought, right?

So, despite steady attempts throughout religious history to squelch our hilarity, to shut down our dancing, to condemn singing as irreverent, despite all these stifling efforts (especially in the Western world)...religion, at its finest, has been marked by irrepressible joy. Linguistically, the linkage between religion and joy is unmistakable. For, example, *enthusiasm* literally means "being god-filled." And the old Sanskrit word, *lila*, signifies in Hindu culture, both the enjoyment of this earthly moment and the playfulness of God.

I like the way the poet Kafiz puts it:

Every child has known God—not the God of names, not the God of don'ts, not the God who never does anything weird. But the God who only knows four words and keeps repeating them: "Come, dance with me!"

Woody Allen's warning that "most of the time we don't have much fun, and the rest of the time we don't have any fun at all" is a rude wake-up call for us especially during the holidays, a season that only comes alive when we drink deeply from the wellsprings of joy. Yet it's so tempting, as we move through December, to get spiritually stuck in the extremes of despondency or shallowness. Therefore, I offer a few reminders on staying joyful during the holiday.

First, without losing ourselves in subtle distinctions, I think it's important to recognize that whereas the reality of joy may include physical and mental contentment, even bliss, it goes deeper than that. For example, the cycle of pleasure is usually short; it arrives, contributes its sensation, then leaves. But joy's a thick not a thin virtue, enduring rather than mercurial, and doesn't arrive merely when we summon it, or by wearing a smiley-face T-shirt or by cracking jokes.

So I beseech you not to settle for moments of euphoria, but to hold out for finding and delivering some real joy during December, January, and when you get on a roll, why not for the rest of the year as well?

Second, I invite you to look to find joy at sneaky times and in serendipitous places. Be surprised by joy! You and I are seldom able to buy much joy during the holidays, no matter how hard we try; so loosen up, let go, and be surprised by the real article.

My friends, let joy crack open amidst the most ordinary of your daily events and you may—no promises, remember joy is an unmerited surprise—you may be showered with a spray of life-giving radiance. Jesus reminds us in the Christian scriptures that the realm of God dwells in the midst of us, right where we live, not on the other side of the fence, not behind or beyond or above us, and certainly not in any store.

Rather the realm of God, holy joy itself, is discoverable smack dab in our very midst, where we're least likely to look: in well-worn relationships, in difficult work, in startling objects, in quiet moments, in the eyes of strangers, yes, even in the tedium and trivia of life.

Which reminds me of our 11 year-old grandson Trevor's various Little League teams which I've assisted these past few years. One year, the head coach right off the bat told the kids to keep their eyes on him whenever they were seated in the dugout. Fair enough. "And what else do you have to do as Little Leaguers," he firmly inquired? And child after child, wouldn't you know it, came up with don't after don't: don't throw your glove or bat, don't argue with the umpire, don't climb the fence, don't hit anybody, don't spit, but then one kid (I think growing weary of all the negatives) shyly piped up: "Coach, I want to have fun, is that alright?"

And I knew, right then and there, that this little boy had already unlocked the gate to life's purpose. This youngster knew that the point of being on earth was finding and delivering some joy, whether or not he ever played another inning of Little League baseball.

A third reminder. Joy, in addition to being found midst the mundane surprises of our days, is also likely to turn up amidst the torments and tumults of existence. A balanced religion, such as ours attempts to be, contends that joy and sorrow are woven fine (Blake), mutually enriching forces and can't be torn asunder. So, during these upcoming holidays, I urge you to allow both joy and sorrow to mingle fully in your life.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the baptism of King Aengus by Saint Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, Saint Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he'd done and begged the king's forgiveness. "Why'd you suffer this in silence?" the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "Well, I just thought it was part of the ritual."

Well, folks, as we welcome its sharp poignancy, sadness makes the season holy not just a sentimental outburst of superficial merriment. Sadness is attached to the season; it's part of life's ritual.

So, don't smother any of your sincere sorrow with pageantry, don't apologize for it, and for goodness' sake, don't let Santa Claus or any therapist or minister ever talk or buy you out of genuine sadness. Learning to befriend our sorrow during the holidays may prove to be one of the finest gifts we ever give ourselves.

A fourth way to stay joyful during the holidays is through being of service to those in need. You know what? Our culture is suffering from a great illness. We're suffering from a grave disrespect...for other human beings as well as the earth. Yet the way to cure our ills, the way to get healthier is through service. There's nothing that will make us well like compassion will.

People sometimes ask Unitarian Universalists why our faith places such emphasis upon justice and mercy, and we simply reply, well, because "service is our prayer," or as Alice Walker reminds us, "service is the rent we pay for our stay on earth."

Furthermore, we believe service to be one of the rare places where deep, abounding joy is truly given and received. So, I exhort you to find ways during these holidays to be of assistance to others, especially those in dire financial or emotional need. Dare to spread some joy.

I'll never forget the incredibly mature and loving example of a teenage girl, in my church youth group, who went, every December, from house to house in her neighborhood, especially visiting shut-ins, and even people she didn't know. When folks came to the door, Joannie would say something like: "I live in the neighborhood, and I

just wanted to see if there was any chore you might need done during these 12 days of Christmas. I stand ready to be of service to you, if you need me.” Then *she* thanked them, whether or not they gave her something to do. Joannie was amazing!

Friends, without a passionate, sustained commitment to serve society, our holidays will dissipate into soulless pleasure in no time at all. For joy-sharing is a puny experience, if unaccompanied by its life partners, justice-building and peace-making.

You and I belong to a religion here at San Dieguito that claims that each of us can make, yes we can, a significant difference in the ongoing creation of our cosmos. We can meet the challenge of the Egyptian God Osiris by finding and bringing joy, because the source of joy is planted deep within every one of our souls, if we but unleash its power. And when we do, hallelujah, the entire Creation reverberates with a loud Amen!

Let me close with a charming story that may assist us in staying joyful during this oft-bleak and difficult season of the year. It’s a story concerning the translation of the New Testament from English into Inuit language.

Problems arose for the translators when they encountered certain words in English for which there was no corresponding term in the Inuit language. For example, there’s a passage that tells that the disciples are filled with joy upon meeting Jesus. But since there’s no word for joy in the Inuit language, the translators had to find another way to express the meaning of the scripture.

In their research, they discovered that one of the most joyful times for an Inuit family is when the sled dogs are fed in the evening. The dogs come barking and yelping, running about and wagging their tails furiously; the children are squealing with delight,

and the neighbors join the delightful commotion as well. It's truly a blessed time for the Inuit people.

Consequently, the translators used that particular event to help convey the meaning of the aforementioned biblical passage. As a result, when the scripture was translated back into English, it read, "When the disciples saw Jesus, they wagged their tails."

My friends, as you face this upcoming season of challenge and delight, heartaches and memories, may you do so with a soulful of joy—barking and yelping, bounding about and wagging your tails as excitedly as possible, so that your joy might become contagious and all creatures of the universe might join in the scales of rejoicing.

Tom Owen-Towle
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