

## Practicing Joy

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 1/28/18

**Reading:** “Resources for Living,” by Lynn Ungar, Minister for Lifespan Learning for the (UU) Church of the Larger Fellowship [*Quest LXVII*, 7, Church of the Larger Fellowship UU, July 2012, p. 7]

I figured that in exploring the topic of joy it would be good to ask an expert for some input. So I decided to interview my dog, Piper, who is pretty much the most ridiculously joyful being I have ever encountered. We say of Piper that her emotions run the gamut from cheerful to ecstatic (with exceptions for baths ...). Here’s how the conversation went [with Worship Associate taking the part of Piper]:

Lynn: So, Piper, can you share with us the secret to finding so much joy in your life?

Piper: What’s not to be happy about? I’m here. You’re here.

Lynn: Good point. One of the greatest sources of joy is the companionship of those we love. The experience of unconditional love, of just being in the presence of someone who knows you and loves you just as you are has to be one of the greatest joys in the world. What would you say are other important sources of joy?

Piper: Snake! (Pounces on favorite squeaky snake toy) I kill it! Ha ha!

Lynn: Oh, I see. [Your favorite squeaky toy.] What you’re saying is that in order to be truly joyful, everyone needs a sense of purpose, a mission in life to accomplish.

Piper: Snake! (Shakes snake toy vigorously)

Lynn: Um, you get that that isn’t a *real* snake, right?

Piper: Piper is queen of the snakes. I kill it. I kill them all!

Lynn: So what you’re saying is that other people’s perceptions of our activities shouldn’t make a difference in the joy we find in life. I might think that what you have in your mouth is just a raggedy stuffed toy, but if killing it is meaningful to you, then it doesn’t much matter if it’s meaningful to me. Don’t let other people rain on your parade, right?

Piper: Parade?

Lynn: No, not at the moment. But I’m sure you’d enjoy marching in a parade.

Piper: I could dance!

Lynn: Yes, you could. And I'm sure people would enjoy seeing a dancing dog. I suppose that another path to joyfulness is being ready to share your unique gifts with the world, to be able to feel like your own particular ministry makes life better in some way for the people around you. The truly joyful don't hide their light under a bushel.

Piper: What's a bushel? Can I eat it?

Lynn: No, sorry.

Piper: It would be better if I could eat it. How about a snack?

Lynn: I see what you mean. People tend to want to make joy into something abstract, something that we'll find some time in the future when we're older or thinner or done with the project or more enlightened or whatever. But most often joy comes to us in the small things that are close to hand, in our pure animal pleasure in the moment.

Piper: So now would be a good moment for cheese, yeah?

Lynn: It could be. But here's what I'm wondering. How do you make joy stay, in a world where pleasures are so fleeting? If I give you a piece of cheese, it will be gone in an instant. The way you eat, maybe half an instant. And then the cheese will be gone. Doesn't that make you sad?

Piper: We could get *more* cheese.

Lynn: True. But think about it. Life is like that piece of cheese. No matter how much you enjoy it, it's going to be over way too soon. So how do we find joy, knowing that life is short and death is just around the corner?

Piper: Around the corner? Are we going for a walk? (Bounces up and down) Let's go!

Lynn: Hmm ... So you're saying that we never know what's around the corner. Life as we know it has to end, but who can say what happens after that? All of us are on a journey, and maybe death is just another part of the journey, so why not be open to finding joy at all points along the path. Is that it?

Piper: I love the path! Can we go now? Can we bring cheese?

Lynn: Sure, why not? Thanks for sharing all your insights.

[No snakes were harmed in the production of this reading.]

## **Practicing Joy**

One of my spiritual practices is a Buddhist metta, or loving-kindness meditation. I use four phrases, that I repeat to myself, starting with "May I be filled with loving-kindness." Maybe

some of you do something similar. As I go through these phrases, I invite you to repeat them to yourself. May I be filled with loving-kindness. The idea is to quiet down, relax, and let yourself feel what that means to you, or could mean, in your life. To really take in the idea that you could be filled with love. May I be filled with loving-kindness.

When I first began working with this meditation I experienced “filled with loving-kindness” as being about compassion toward others, as in “filled to overflowing” so that it spills out of me toward other people. After quite some time, it occurred to me one day that being filled with loving-kindness could mean simply my feeling filled with loving-kindness, feeling like I was held by love and it permeated all through me. May I be filled with loving-kindness.

The next phrase is “May I be well.” That will mean different things at different times, and it needn’t necessarily be about physical health. May I be well. May I be well. ... Next is “May I be at peace.” Again, it will mean different things to you depending on what’s going on in your life, what you need peace about. May I be at peace. May I be at peace. ... And last, and here we come to what this sermon is about: May I be happy. May I be happy.

The way this meditation practice works, or the way I do it, is that I then move on to someone—or perhaps many someones—that I care about: May my sister Sherie be filled with loving-kindness. May she be well. And so on. And then someone I don’t really know, like the receptionist at the doctor’s office, or the guy who just delivered the church office supplies: May he be filled with loving-kindness. And finally, someone I may be feeling some conflict or tension with. Maybe I won’t give an example of that. But again, may she be filled with loving-kindness. May she be well. May she be at peace. May she be happy.

My spouse, Marie, also uses this meditation, or something very similar, and at first she had trouble with that last part, “May I be happy.” I have her permission to tell you that it triggered, for her, questions about whether she deserved or ought to be happy, and the sense that it might be trite. Marie belongs to a discernment group, a small group of people that gathers monthly to reflect together on the movement of Spirit in their lives, and she described the meditation to them and said that she was having some difficulty when she came to the part about “May I be happy,” and everyone around the circle nodded their heads in recognition. Yes. We have this idea that maybe we shouldn’t be happy, or at least we shouldn’t ask for it. Or pursue it, like it’s one more thing to attain or one more area of self-improvement. Or maybe happiness is part of white or middle-class privilege and it’s somehow wrong to want it. Or we might be grieving, and can’t imagine being happy again. Or depressed. And there’s a superstition in some of our cultures that if you’ve gotten some good news, or things are going well, you shouldn’t talk about it too loudly because ... I don’t know who it is that will hear but they have the power to swoop in and take that good thing away.

I say superstition. But there's the realization that life is hard, and happiness is fleeting. And this is a hard time in our world. We have mixed feelings about happiness.

We mix up different kinds of happiness. Aristotle talked about four levels of happiness, and I find him helpful here. His first level is the happiness we get from material things, like a nice meal, a day on the beach, or a new car. Nothing wrong with those things, but they have little to do with *lasting* happiness. The second level has to do with things we achieve, like winning a game, earning a diploma, landing a plum job. These are also fine things, but again, the happiness you get from them doesn't last. The third level is about doing good for others, making the world a better place, siding with love. Here our focus moves from ourselves to others, and the happiness we find is deeper and more lasting, but still it depends on what we do and on others. Then there's the fourth level, which involves transcendence: a connection to the larger universe, or God, or some great cause or meaning, perhaps unconditional love. This kind of happiness is life-giving. I would call it spiritual, though it might not feel that way for everyone. You could call it moral, or sublime, or ultimate. This kind of happiness is about giving yourself to something greater than yourself, however you understand that. It's about finding your place in the scheme of things and affirming all of life.

This is the kind of happiness—or joy—that makes life a thing of beauty, regardless of our external circumstances. It's what dwells within, and carries us through everything. It's what lets you say Hallelujah even when things have all gone wrong. I even suspect, since we find it deep inside, that it dwells at the center of everything. In Greek mythology, after all, Joy was the daughter of Elysium, the daughter of Heaven. It's what Friedrich Schiller is talking about in "Ode to Joy," the words of the hymn we're going to sing in closing, when he calls joy the mightiest cause of all, that which "moves the pinion—[the gear that starts everything else moving]—when the wheel of time goes round," that which lures the flower from the bud. *That* is the kind of happiness that we all deserve to have.

Aristotle wrote: "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." Yes. Singer song-writer James Taylor said almost the same thing: "The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time." Enjoying the ride. Enjoying the moment. May I be happy.

Barbara Ehrenreich, social commentator and historian, and lately theologian, wrote a book called *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* that illuminates one very interesting aspect of joy: communal joy, as expressed in things like feasting, costuming, and dancing. She traces the history of collective joy from the ecstatic practices of the worshippers of Dionysus in ancient Greece, through the medieval practice of group dancing in churches (which I did not know of until I read this book), to what we know today as Carnival. She shows how the Roman

Catholic Church, and later, the Protestant Church, tried to control or annihilate such expressions of communal joy, but that these celebrations continued to survive and can be seen today in places like rock concerts, where you find not an audience that sits still and listens but fans that move and sing and dance together, and in sports stadiums, where you find pumped-up music and half-time shows and the wave. Of course, group celebrations can get out of control, but that may be part of the point; it may be a necessary human release and connection. And I can think of other contemporary examples: gospel singing in the black church tradition, gay pride parades, maybe even the Rochester Brew Fest held every August—that’s a very happy crowd—and sometimes wedding receptions. Ehrenreich concludes that we human beings are innately social beings, impelled almost instinctively to share our joy. And in that sharing, we experience a sense of abandonment and a loss of self, or at least of ego. We become reconnected with community. At least temporarily, we are at one, everybody included.

That may not be exactly what Aristotle had in mind, but it is a wonderful experience of joy, just as surely as being transported by a Bach Partita, or just as surely as maneuvering a kayak through your first rapids. Or ... being filled with loving-kindness. Lynn Ungar, who wrote the reading that [name deleted] and I shared earlier, has a definition of joy that I really like: “Joy is that feeling that comes spilling out from inside of you when you are really engaged with something that you love” [*Quest LXVI*, 1, January 2011, p. 7]. When you are connected; when you are pulled in to something greater than yourself.

So let’s celebrate joy as something that really matters and claim it as something we want. Something that connects us with each other and with all. And *practice* it, and that part is about making choices. There’s a quote I ran across recently by Guillaume Apollinaire: “Now and then it’s good to pause in the pursuit of happiness and just be happy.” Here we have the distinction between running after what we think will make us happy, trying to grasp something that keeps escaping us; and on the other hand just being who we are, where we are, and being good with that. Being here, now, in this moment, in the midst of everything, at home in our own body and mind and heart, engaged in this moment. And then engaged in the next moment, whatever that is. Choose to be present, to be open, to connect. Make time for joy. Choose joy.

I know I’ve been conflating different levels of happiness, and I haven’t tried to distinguish between happiness and joy, but the important thing is to know that there *are* different levels, that some go deeper than others, and that those are the moments when Joy pulls us in, and abides in us, and connects us, and even spills over to others.

Would you join me in the spirit of meditation? Say these words to yourself. May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be well. May I be at peace. May I be happy. And now choose someone else in this sanctuary, someone you love or someone you don’t know or someone

you're in tension with, and say these words to yourself: May you be filled with loving-kindness. May you be well. May you be at peace. May you be happy. ... May it be so, and Amen.