

Joy in Integrity

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Readings:

The Chance To Love Everything - Mary Oliver

All summer I made friends
with the creatures nearby ---
they flowed through the fields
and under the tent walls,
or padded through the door,
grinning through their many teeth,
looking for seeds,
suet, sugar; muttering and humming,
opening the breadbox, happiest when
there was milk and music. But once
in the night I heard a sound
outside the door, the canvas
bulged slightly ---something
was pressing inward at eye level.
I watched, trembling, sure I had heard
the click of claws, the smack of lips
outside my gauzy house ---
I imagined the red eyes,
the broad tongue, the enormous lap.
Would it be friendly too?
Fear defeated me. And yet,
not in faith and not in madness
but with the courage I thought
my dream deserved,
I stepped outside. It was gone.
Then I whirled at the sound of some
shambling tonnage.
Did I see a black haunch slipping
back through the trees? Did I see
the moonlight shining on it?
Did I actually reach out my arms
toward it, toward paradise falling, like
the fading of the dearest, wildest hope ---
the dark heart of the story that is all
the reason for its telling?

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front – Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers....
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts....
Practice resurrection.

Sermon:

Sometimes on Friday mornings I'll bring Ceili, my little dog, to the office here at Unity Church, so she can play with Abby, Duncan Baird's poodle. The two dogs both drop down on their front haunches in that classic 'let's play' stance, and then they tear off in a game of chase around the Center Room and up and down the halls. Now when dogs play chase, the fun is in the chase. They switch roles back and forth, chasing and being chased. The game is more important than winning. Dogs will even handicap themselves, slowing down when they are playing with an older or slower dog, so that the game remains fun.

For most of us humans, there is a deep, vicarious pleasure in watching dogs play. We tap into the simple joy of play, and remember the kind of undirected, purposeless activity that only children, and sometimes their grandparents, seem to be allowed to enjoy in our

culture. This kind of play is non-competitive and spontaneous and creative, with rules made up and thrown out at will.

Play is more than mere fun. Psychiatrist Stuart Brown has found that play is essential to the development of children. He was able to show that many of the most violent criminals had early lives where parents kept them from any kind of play. This resulted in these people being unable as adults to connect meaningfully with other people, and they turn to violent behavior.

Play is essential not only to social development, but also appears to encourage cognitive development and even moral behavior. According to a recent article in Harvard Business Review, neurological research on mammals has “identified play as a primary human drive and the brain’s source of joy.”

I’d like to invite you, if you are willing, into a little time of exploration. The subject of this exploration is hands – your own hands. If you will, take a look at one of your hands. Stretch your fingers out, and notice the tendons running along the back of your hand. Turn over your hand and notice the muscles, especially as you begin to close that hand into a ball. Try opening it, and marvel at the beautiful pattern of folds and lines. Make a shape with your hand and fingers. Make any form. Your hand is so flexible. Make another shape. Don’t worry that it is the right shape. Make another shape. Rearrange things. Make another. Your hand has so much creativity in it. Make another shape. And another. Make shapes so fast that your mind cannot think ahead, cannot judge the shapes. Now make smooth and gentle shapes, slowing down. Soft and easy. Thank you.

This little exercise came from a program of improvisation and movement called Interplay. Interplay invites people to creatively explore movement and voice and story in a non-threatening way through small exercises like this one, that build up incrementally into larger creative forms.

I want you to notice for a moment what that little exploration felt like for you. What thoughts and feelings did you have? Whether you participated yourself or observed others, I’m sure some of these thoughts and feelings came up.

I’ll bet some of you may have thought: Am I going to look silly in front of friends or my family? This is awful risky!

Or you thought: can I trust this person, who has never spoken in this pulpit before today? Can I trust him to not ask me to do something embarrassing or stupid? After all, isn’t he from that flakey seminary in Berkeley?

Or you might have thought: I finally persuaded my out-of-town guests to join me at church, and this is happening? After you told them, don’t worry, this is Unity Church and we don’t do those weird things that some other Unitarian Universalist churches sometimes do?

So not only was this little exercise about play and creativity, it was about risk and trust.

Mary Oliver, who is in a way the de-facto Unitarian Universalist poet laureate, explores this risk taking in its full ambiguity. She describes her encounter with the creature outside the tent: “some shambling tonnage [with] red eyes and broad tongue” :

Would it be friendly too?

Fear defeated me. And yet,
not in faith and not in madness
but with the courage I thought
my dream deserved,
I stepped outside. It was gone.

So, to play, to explore, to move into the space that creativity requires, is to take risks. We have to call up a certain kind of courage. Not necessarily the courage of life or death, of firemen entering a burning building, or even the moral courage of standing with your principles against an angry crowd, but a more subtle, but no less essential, courage. Creative play calls on the courage of being in touch with your body and your self in all its wholeness, and exploring its possibilities and limits.

This is the courage that The Interplay improvisation program required of me. If you had suggested to me that before I started Interplay, I'd be dancing and storytelling, solo, before an audience of maybe a hundred eyeballs all focused on me, I would have said you were dreaming. Yet, that is what I did a few months ago, before I left California to come out here. That experience was both terrifying and intensely joyful.

It was terrifying because I was sure that I would dance badly, and I probably did. I had so many preconceived notions about how this should be done. I should be more prepared for this improv segment. I should make my stories funnier. I should make this piece shorter, or longer. A whole cloud of 'shoulds' often murmurs in my head as I step in front of a group. When I am able to transcend these 'shoulds', then there is the pure joy of spontaneous creative action.

Joy, when it comes in these spontaneous ways, is a sweet surprise. But when we seek joy as a goal we can too easily get focused on things that fulfill the desires and pleasures of our senses. We have a tendency to try to fill our need for joy with external material objects and sensations.

Many of the contemplative traditions express concern about sense attachments and selfish desires, and we would do well to pay attention. An old Zen Buddhist poem warns us, “selfish attachment forgets all limits; it always leads down evil roads.” Yet, we live in a culture where amplifying these desires through marketing messages is a central part of our approach to commerce, and is becoming a central part of the liturgy of what sociologist Robert Bellah calls our Civil Religion.

As Wendell Berry tells us ,
Want more

of everything ready-made...
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.

I know this well, these drawers, these cards: I used to work in product marketing. But we all know this, too. Especially at this time of year, we as ordinary consumers feel we barely stand a chance against this onslaught. Our children need body armor against the targeted messaging they receive. If I'm to believe the paper, soon we'll all be shopping at 2 in the morning on Black Friday.

And then what of the other side –

Vocation, work worth doing, whether raising a family or a job we love, can be a source of joy. But for many of us, the joy of vocation gets blurred over time. We learn to set aside the creative and experimental pleasure that arises from following a vocation we love in favor of the linear, critical-path oriented realm of the competitive workplace. We learn to compartmentalize aspects of our lives, at a minimum to separate work from leisure. We are expected to separate what we truly love from the daily grind that is our working life.

As Wendell Berry says, we learn to:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay.

When we get focused on these, as opposed to doing what we can to make our work, our vocation, truly meaningful, we risk being ready to 'die for profit'.

This can lead to a feeling of ennui, a sense that what we are doing has no value. When this is identified as a morale problem in the workplace, the problem is sometimes oversimplified and the solution becomes not: "Lets make work meaningful," but: "Let's make work more fun."

At the last place I worked before I entered seminary, we had a well-equipped game room full of classic arcade video games. Even though I found time for an occasional game of Space Invaders or Tempest, I remained bothered by this particular juxtaposition of work and play. This may have been because I am a baby boomer, and this is a new era, but I think there is something more profound here. The video games seemed to be a distraction from what was real, they did nothing to contribute to a sense of deeper satisfaction, something that should ideally have come from the work itself.

I believe it is important for us to be aware of the distinction between the ephemeral pleasures that come from satisfying the senses, and a deeper, more integrated joy that comes from action that is aligned with what is important to us: our values and our deep intention.

And Berry reminds us:

Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.

When we do that, when we tap into that intuitive sense that would lead us if only we would let it, then we can be joyful even after considering all the facts.

Several years ago, when I lived in Colorado, a good friend of mine, Dave, had talked to me for some months of his work with Network Coffee House. This coffee house was a gathering place for the homeless in Denver, and Dave encouraged me to volunteer there. I finally took the bait, mostly because I had persuaded him to take a committee position in the church and I felt I owed him one. I must admit that there also was a certain amount of ego playing into this, a sense of yes, I can prove to him I am up to this.

I agreed to work with him on a Wednesday night when he opened the coffee house. My job was simple, just serve coffee, empty ashtrays, and monitor the list of people waiting for the shower stall. Mostly I talked and listened to the men and women who came in as darkness fell. I found myself filled with amazement by the stories of some of this community. Like Harry, a former seaman, who loved to recite details of great naval battles. Or John, who had dreams of get-rich-quick schemes and tried to convince me to partner with him. Then there was Peggy a former street person, who now works as a sort of Pentecostal street minister. She showed me her Bible that she believes is the literal word of God, except for the large sections crossed out because they don't fit her personal feminist theology.

After we closed the coffee house, I said goodnight to Dave, went to my car, and sat there and wept. Certainly, I wept in pain, and in despair. This despair is familiar to us all: the enormity of the problem of homelessness, and how we just can't seem to solve it. And now it was personal: I knew that many of these people I had just met would sleep under bridges by the Platte River that cold night.

In such situations, I always look for glimmers of hope. St. Francis of Assisi reminds us, "where there is despair, sow hope". But in this case it was hard for me to find hope in the current political climate where living on the street is seen as a failure of individual will, where mental illness and addiction are viewed as character flaws and not diseases. At first, I could not find the hope in this.

But as I unwrapped the layers of despair, another emotion was enclosed, and this was Joy. I had done something, however minor, to begin to bridge the gap. So even though there was great pain for me, at the heart of the pain, I was able to find the joy of connections made, of acquaintances established, which continued over the coming months. Joy after all is Hope brought into the present. Joy emerges from compassion, it emerges from doing the right thing, it emerges from connections, it emerges when we act from our human integrity. So even though I went in for the 'wrong' reasons, it was joyful to discover the real reasons. The joy gave me hope when hope was hard to find.

So what brings us Joy? How do we know that we are feeling true joy and not merely some sense pleasure or ego boost or satisfaction of desire? We need to be mindful when

we find ourselves experiencing an emotion that seem like joy. What is the source? Does it emerge from superficial things, sense pleasures, isolating diversions, or is its source deeper, heartfelt, an awareness that we are in integrity with who we really are? Is our joy emerging out of relationships, whether playful or serious, Is it arising from creative expression Or an encounter with beauty? Is it arising because we are courageously taking the small steps to be who we are called to be?

As voices from my Methodist past would say, “our hearts are strangely warmed”. I now understand this warmth. I know this is the strange and wonderful warmth of the Joy that emerges from seeking, little by little, an authentic life, and living bit by bit, a life of integrity.

May it be so, and Amen.