Finding Joy in the Journey
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Susan Frederick-Gray

Reading. Excerpt from “The Prophet” by Kahlil Gibran.

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.
And he answered:
Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.
Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."
But I say to you, they are inseparable.
Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep on your bed.

Sermon: “Finding Joy in the Journey”

Our theme for March is Joy; all month we are looking at what it means to live a life of joy. A couple of weeks ago, I talked about the importance of joy as something that gives us strength and courage in our lives, joy that helps us survive and thrive. I shared a couple of stories -- one about a young girl raised by parents who expected her to be quiet, perfect, seen and not heard. To survive she found a way to express joy by playing dress up and creating a bold and joyful personality, which in the end, she discovered to be her true, dynamic and joyful self. In another story, I talked about the importance of dancing and finding ways to be free to experience the fullness and joy of life to help keep us in the struggle against persecution, to fuel our sustained efforts for justice. Last week, Kathy Baughman, looked to children as our teachers of joy and how they remind us of the joy in life, and how to be present to joy and cultivate it.

Today, I want to look at the ways that joy and sorrow are intertwined. It is convention to think of joy and sorrow as opposites – to think that we are either happy or sad. If this is the case, then we might think the key to living a life of more joy is to avoid what gives us sorrow. But it is not
that simple. In fact, many poets and philosophers tell us that the road to joy runs right through pain.

Take Kahlil Gibran’s words. “The selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.”

Love is where we most often experience the truth of Gibran’s words. The love of *eros* and *philia* - romantic love and familial love. The love we have for our spouses and partners, and lovers. The love we have for our parents, our children, our siblings, our closest friends, even our dearest pets -- those closest to us, who know us -- this is where we know the truth about joy and sorrow being intertwined.

It’s almost frightening really -- to be viscerally struck with both joy and sorrow when love breaks through one’s heart. Have you ever experienced this - the simultaneous presence of joy and sorrow in the midst of love? Do you remember last month, when our guest minister, the Rev. Roger Bertchhausen said in his sermon that if you listen closely at weddings, you can almost hear the funeral bells? His sermon called me back to an early memory of first dating my future husband. I remembered after one of our dates (and a tentative first kiss), how I left struck with sorrow. I’ve always thought that odd, my reaction was so very strange. Yes, there was excitement, but somehow right along side the joy of love was the knowledge of sorrow and the fear of loss. To love -- to give one’s heart away -- is to risk. It is indeed to know sorrow. Sorrow when death comes, sorrow when the relationship ends. Yet our tears and our grief are a tribute to our loved ones, it honors what was shared.

And our joy can become sorrow because even the best and most closely wedded people will make mistakes and hurt one another. It happens in family, in marriage, in friendships, in all kinds of relationship.

To love, to care for others, to trust, to make bonds, means knowing that at some point we will be hurt. For we are human, imperfect, and it is always the mistakes of those we love and respect that hurt us most. When someone we love falls short, hurts us, fails to come to our aid as we would hope, our sorrow often matches the depth of our care. This being human thing is no easy task -- it is no easy journey. Thankfully, we also have the capacity for forgiveness. To reach out, name our hurts, find understanding and offer forgiveness. And sometimes through this, through forgiveness, we find a deeper joy, and a stronger closeness.

*Eros* and *philia* - the love of lovers and family and friends are some of ways that we experience the connection between joy and sorrow. But it is not just through relationships that we experience this truth. I want to go deeper with this idea, to a place we are not always comfortable talking about as Unitarian Universalist -- to go beyond relationships with others -- to consider our relationship with the divine. For some, we know this to be our relationship to God, or the holy, for others of us it is our relationship to our deepest selves -- a personal rootedness and connection to life.
The Muslim mystic poet, Jelaladdin Rumi, writes of this interplay of joy and sorrow with respect to his relationship to the divine. He describes the pure joy, the ecstasy of the experience of being united with the divine, of that overwhelming feeling of connection and transcendence -- a gift of the human experience. But, he has other poems that speak to the sorrow and the longing of not being able to recapture that experience, of feeling disconnected -- lonely -- separated from the holy.

Our personal relationships -- *eros* and *philia* -- these are sources of great meaning in our lives. We are social beings looking for connection and community. But there can be depth and connection and joy in solitude as well. I share this because there is a danger in looking only to others, only to our relationships with others to give us meaning.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and prolific writer and speaker on spirituality, compassion and community, warns us about the ways that we sometimes throw ourselves into relationships, how we busy ourselves with work and tasks, with achievement and activity to avoid the internal pain of loneliness. And how when we learn to move spiritually from loneliness to solitude, we can achieve a deeper sense of calm and actually enhance the quality of our relationships. He writes:

> When our loneliness drives us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are, in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring friendships and suffocating embraces. To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dreamworld. No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. (from *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen, p. 19)

I share this because one of the ways that we lose our capacity for joy is by neglecting our own relationship to ourselves. Without being able to find an internal capacity for connection and awareness, for peace and joy, we increasingly look to outer circumstances, or even to others to make us happy. And in the process, we can be blown about, continually reacting to others, pushed and pulled by the circumstances around us. We believe that until all is well, until all human restlessness has turned into peace and no separation or pain exists, until these things, we cannot know joy. But in fact the opposite is true. Running away from ourselves, running away from painful struggle is not the path to joy.

Another author and speaker, very popular these days, is Brené Brown. She speaks of this need to wade through the difficult stuff in order to get to the joy. She talks about the ways we try to numb or ignore the painful struggles, or existential sorrows in our lives, many of which might be rooted in a longing in our spirit that we have not tended to. But the thing is, when we numb the pain, we also numb the joy. We numb our experience of the world, our experience of living, both joy and sorrow. As Gibran says, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” When we ignore, avoid or numb that sorrow, we limit how much genuine joy at life, at love, at each moment, we can experience. It is natural if we feel like we don’t have enough joy, to try to numb ourselves, thinking that will make us happier. But in that process, we miss the well of joyful contentment, the sense of inner peace and joy that we can contain. So we
must find ways to attend to our heartbreak, our sense of spiritual disconnect, our longings for unity and connection.

Too often we look to external circumstance to find joy. We look to others to make us happy, we look to material things to make us happy, we think we have to wait until all is right in our lives to experience joy -- that our joy is dependent on what is happening to us. And yet, it is possible to be lonely in a crowd. Sometimes we feel most lonely in a crowd. It’s possible to be lonely in a marriage. Loneliness is not dependent on being alone. And finding a peaceful sense of solitude isn’t dependent on being physically alone. Nouwen describes solitude like this “A man or woman who has developed this solitude of heart is no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center.”

And it is from this inner quiet center that true joy emerges.

The philosopher and mathematician -- as well as a Unitarian in his young life -- Bertrand Russell says, “A happy life must be to a great extent a quiet life, for it is only in an atmosphere of quiet that true joy dare live.” I love this quote. I don’t think that a quiet life has to be a life without passion or excitement or community, but it follows what Nouwen says. That there is a quality of joy that emerges from finding a sense of peaceful solitude amid our lives. We may still have busy, full, engaging, even stressful lives -- but the path to find a quiet contentment within ourselves is a safeguard against being pushed and pulled and overtaken by the stress and materialism surrounding our lives. It is a foundation upon which we can build more joy -- more love -- into our lives and into our relationships. This inner solitude and depth is the foundation upon which we are able to live lives of joy.