

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Graceful Delight”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 8, 2019

Call to Celebration

Our service today is in the service of delight. The artists who understand how to squeeze delight out of words are poets. I've been reading a lovely [anthology of poetry](#) on the theme of joy assembled by Christian Wiman. In it, I found this delightful poem I'd like to share with you to begin our service by Wislawa Szymborska titled [The Joy of Writing](#).

Why does this written doe bound through these written words?
 For a drink of written water from a spring
 Whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?
 Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?
 Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,
 she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.
 Silence—this word also rustles across the page
 and parts the boughs
 that have sprouted from the word “woods.”

Lying in wait, set to pounce on the blank page,
 are letters up to no good,
 clutches of clauses so subordinate
 they'll never let her get away.

Each drop of ink contains a fair supply
 of hunters, equipped with squinting eyes behind their sights,
 Prepared to swarm the sloping pen at any moment,
 surround the doe, and slowly aim their guns.

They forget that *what's here* isn't life.
 Other laws, black on white, obtain.
 The twinkling of an eye will take as long as I say,
 and will, if I wish, divide into tiny eternities,
 full of bullets stopped in mid-flight.
 Not a thing will ever happen unless I say so.
 Without my blessing, not a leaf will fall,
 not a blade of grass will bend beneath that little hoof's full stop.

Is there then a world
 where I rule absolutely on fate?
 A time I bind with chains of signs?
 An existence become endless at my bidding?

The joy of writing.
 The power of preserving.
 Revenge of a mortal hand.

In the joy of writing and the power of preserving, let us join together in the Celebration of Life.

Spoken Meditation

This lovely meditation is [a poem](#) by William Stafford titled “After Arguing Against the Contention That Art Must Come From Discontent”

Let us turn inward to receive Stafford’s words

Whispering to each handhold, “I’ll be back,”
 I go up the cliff in the dark. One place
 I loosen a rock and listen a long time
 till it hits, faint in the gulf, but the rush
 of the torrent almost drowns it out, and the wind—
 I almost forgot the wind: it tears at your side
 or it waits and then buffets; you sag outward ...

I remember they said it would be hard. I scramble
 by luck into a little pocket out of
 the wind and begin to beat on the stones
 with my scratched numb hands, rocking back and forth
 in silent laughter there in the dark—
 “Made it again!” Oh how I love this climb!
 --the whispering to stones, the drag, the weight
 as your muscles crack and ease on, working
 right. They are back there, discontent,
 waiting to be driven forth. I pound
 on the earth, riding the earth past the stars:
 “Made it again! Made it again!”

Readings

[From Blossoms](#) by Li-Young Lee

From blossoms comes
 this brown paper bag of peaches
 we bought from the boy
 at the bend in the road where we turned toward
 signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,
 from sweet fellowship in the bins
 comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
 peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
 comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
 to carry within us an orchard, to eat
 not only the skin, but the shade,
 not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
 the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
 the round jubilation of peach.

These are days we live
 as if death were nowhere
 in the background; from joy
 to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
 from blossom to blossom to
 impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

[A Brief For the Defense](#) by Jack Gilbert

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
 are not starving someplace, they are starving
 somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
 But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.
 Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
 be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
 be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
 at the fountain are laughing together between
 the suffering they have known and the awfulness
 in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
 in the village is very sick. There is laughter
 every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
 and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
 If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
 we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
 We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
 but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
 the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
 furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
 measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
 If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
 we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

We must admit there will be music despite everything.
 We stand at the prow again of a small ship
 anchored late at night in the tiny port
 looking over to the sleeping island: the waterfront
 is three shuttered cafés and one naked light burning.
 To hear the faint sound of oars in the silence as a rowboat
 comes slowly out and then goes back is truly worth
 all the years of sorrow that are to come.

Sermon

An inspiration for my words today comes from poet Ross Gay. Almost four years ago he had the idea to set a timer for thirty minutes then put pen to paper about his daily experiences of delight. This inspired him to try this every day for a year. The third day his delight project almost failed. He liked what he wrote on the third day so much, measuring up to that standard on day four seemed impossible. Still he persisted. Not every day but at the year's end he had over a hundred brief essays celebrating his daily experience of delight. In the preface to [the book of these essays](#), he wrote:

It didn't take me long to learn that the discipline or practice of writing these essays occasioned a kind of delight radar. Or maybe it was more like the development of a delight muscle. Something that implies that, the more you study delight, the more delight there is to study. A month or two into this project delights were calling to me: Write about me! Write about me! Because it is rude not to acknowledge your delights, I'd tell them that though they might not become essayettes, there were still important, and I was grateful to them. Which is to say, I felt my life to be more full of delight. Not without sorrow or fear or pain or loss. But more full of delight. I also learned this year, that my delight grows—much like love and joy—when I share it.

I imagine we too would be happy to have our lives more full of delight. I appreciate he doesn't sugar coat this. We are still going to experience the miseries and sorrows of existence. Yet, to have daily access to delight can make all the difference when times are stressful, and troubles press in on us. Might make this time of year when there is more than a little bit of social pressure to be joyful and jolly easier to bear.

Ross has some familiar examples of delight that are easy to relate to. Sitting in a café on a warm, sunny morning enjoying an espresso or freshly brewed coffee will connect with many of us. Ross enjoys community gardening and tells a wonderful story of visiting a woman's garden. After the tour, they sit together on her deck. As they talk a hummingbird brushes past her gray hair to drink deeply of the honeysuckle just behind her ear. Simply delightful!

I wasn't familiar with one delight he mentions several times. Being of African descent, he notes the delight he experiences in "the nod," he calls it a "negreeting," people of African descent offer each other. It is a sign of a shared wordless solidarity as they endure existence in a society that regularly diminishes their humanity.

His words reminded me of how I felt attending my first Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in 1986. I noticed I could quickly identify other UU's on the street. I also felt a sense of familiarity and religious solidarity with these folks, with my people, even though we'd never met. I sensed a kind of UU solidarity of mutual acceptance as we endure living in the midst of religious intolerance and conformity.

Reading through Ross's other short daily essays connected me with other experiences of delight. I'm no stranger to enjoying these tasty experiential morsels. One of the gifts of meditation practice over time is that it sharpens one's attentiveness to what is happening in the present moment. The daily delights often are just there, like a red, delicious strawberry just waiting to be noticed, picked and eaten.

The sensual delights are the first that come to mind. Rather than coffee, my morning mug of sweetened tea with soy milk gets the day off to a good start. As I get older, getting a good night's sleep on a comfortable mattress is frequently delightful, especially as I recall some uncomfortable nights on awful mattresses in the past. There are few delights as wonderful as a warm shower in the morning, the slippery smoothness of soap suds and then drying off with a soft towel. The sun low along the horizon makes for beautiful sunrises. The warmth of the winter sun on my skin in the afternoon is another reliable delight. Eating lunch with sun on my back in our kitchen makes whatever I'm eating that much more delightful.

And then there are delights that are more perceptual than sensual. Watching the snow falling last Sunday afternoon was deeply enjoyable. Imagining skiers headed for the mountains and the pleasure they would be having on fresh powder was empathetically enjoyable too. (Confirmed this with Mike Babala)

And there are delights that go beyond perception. Every time I come into this hall, especially when I show it to visitors, I feel a sense of enormous delight for the success of this undertaking and the beautiful result. It is hard to describe how delightful it is just to stand here and speak to you on Sunday!

There are delights that happen in politics when my candidates win. The election of Obama in 2008 is a delight I will cherish for many years to come. His inauguration in 2009 was another special delight we enjoyed together here in Channing Hall. This year, I was delighted by the East Greenbush Dems winning five of the six offices they were after. I was especially appreciative to see the tears of [first time candidate Ellen Pangburn](#) elected to Town Clerk as she heard Town Supervisor Jack Conway's praise.

And then there are more nuanced delights. After years of squirrels raiding our bird feeder, I developed a formidable barrier system. I feel delight as I watch the squirrels attempt to get past my efforts, fail and fall to the ground.

This kind of happiness actually tips into another kind of delight that isn't so wonderful. That is the delight of seeing those who we don't like have bad things happen to them. There is a German word that captures this kind of negative delight: *schadenfreude*. If someone is going to get killed off in a movie, the screen writers strive to stimulate our dislike of them by making that character flawed,

cruel or disgusting in some way so we'll enjoy seeing them finished off. Not a feeling I want to encourage. It interferes with striving to seek the worth and dignity in all people.

The qualities of delight can be sensual, relational, intellectual, social, nourishing and challenging. Initially they are experienced immediately and sometimes they can be reexperienced through memory. Yet they aren't necessarily predictable or reliable. And sadly our state of mind can make them inaccessible. One of the crushing indignities of depression is the blunting of the experience of delight. The previously dependable sources of delight can become tasteless and joyless, reduced to empty shells without pleasure or pain.

Thus there can be a graceful dimension to delight. The key feature of grace is that we don't create it or control it. Whether grace is chance or the charm of divine favor, when it arrives, there is a felt sense of gratitude and appreciation.

I experience a little of this on Tuesday mornings when I go to the Honest Weight Coop for a gluten free, Pumpkin Spice Muffin. These muffins are not like the standardized foods you'll get at McDonalds that taste exactly the same every time. These muffins are different each time depending on how carefully they are made. Sometimes they are overcooked and a little burned like the batch last Tuesday. Other times they aren't cooked all the way through and have an unpleasant soft center. On occasion the leavening isn't right or the spices too strong or too weak. Once in a while, though, they come out just right. They have a gluten like texture to them, a crunchy browned top and a delicious flavor that stimulates a delight that keeps me coming back again and again.

Another way to access delight is through poetry that creatively draws on our shared human experience attempting to launch us beyond it. The first poem I read about the brown paper bag of peaches has the juice virtually dribbling down my chin they are so ripe. I'm right there delighting in the sun blessed food of the Gods, glazed with a fine dust of soil that make them even better.

The second poem takes on the challenge of experiencing delight amid suffering and defends the experience. Such a bold assertion in the first lines:

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that's what God wants.

Jesus famously is reported to have said, "For the poor will always be with you, but you will not always have me.(Mt 27:11)" He said those words while fine perfume was being applied to his head by a woman. So difficult to hold delight and suffering together – how can they coexist? You have a poet's answer – that's what God wants. We must admit there will be music despite everything. The faint sound of oars of a rowboat in silence can be truly worth all the years of sorrow that are to come.

The sage I'm reflecting on right now as I hold delight and suffering together is Mister Rogers.

After Thanksgiving, Philomena and I went to see Tom Hanks playing Mister Rogers in the movie Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood. I had tears running down my cheeks as I watched its magical portrayal of Fred Rogers. The movie is loosely drawn from an Esquire Article by Tom Junod. Tom

developed an appreciation for Fred Rogers and a friendship with him as he was writing the piece. The movie has fictional elements to it but what rings true is Tom Hank's loving and compassionate portrayal. I read a beautiful tribute to Rogers by a UU ministerial colleague that got me to the movie and inspired me with the power of Rogers ministry as a guide for UU ministers.

Rogers, who died in February of 2003 at the age of 74, was an ordained Presbyterian minister who decided to do his ministry on children's television. He led an extremely disciplined life, swimming every morning after inspirational reading and prayer. He had an extensive prayer list of those who had written to him looking for support. When he traveled, he'd try to stop by and visit some of those people to give them encouragement. A talented musician, he wrote most of the music for his show as well as the scripts. He voiced his puppets, his favorites were King Friday the 13th and Daniel the tiger. The puppets allowed him to give expression to more truculent and vulnerable parts of his personality in the service of his message of how valuable and meaningful our feelings are.

Rogers comes across again and again as just a delightful person. The delight is partly in his humility, partly in his interest in others, and partly his unconditional acceptance of whoever he is with at that moment. If a crowd gathered around him on the street, he'd want to engage with every person, at least with a smile and a friendly greeting that subtly said, "I see you. You are special too and I like you just the way you are." How delightful to get that kind of attention as a child from an adult!

Rogers was at home in the world doing his ministry and at the same time had an otherworldly quality. He did have a very happy childhood, a fulfilling marriage and raised two boys. But his devotion to his ministry, ministry to both children and adults through his show and in person was the focus of his life. He had tough challenges to face talking about difficult problems on his show and offering love to severely ill and disabled children. That work didn't diminish his delight following his calling to live for the good of others. A darn good model for ministry and for all of us.

What I love most of about Mister Rogers the host and Fred Rogers the person is the integration of delight with ministry. The unrelenting positive message that comes through again and again is the affirmation of the worth and dignity of each child. That worth wasn't conditional on behavior, it was inherent in their being. His delight was in drawing that out of the child so they could see their own beauty. One of the beautiful ways he did that was to ask troubled children and adults to pray *for* him. He sensed their trials and tribulations brought them closer to God. True or not, that request for their prayer had a transforming power to give new meaning to someone in difficult circumstances.

So, though some of us may be enduring hard times now, do not turn away from delight when you happen upon it. The more you look for it, the more you will find. And be inspired by Mister Rogers to share your delight with a world hungry to use it to find meaning and value even in difficult times.

There will be grace in those delights.

Benediction

I close with these words by William Butler Yeats

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

May we be blessed and bless as we experience the delight of the December holidays.