

Rejoice, Rejoice

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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A statement often attributed to early 20th century theologian Karl Barth says: “We should preach with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” I subscribe to this belief. Though, as a good 21st century Unitarian Universalist, rather than carrying only the bible and the newspaper, I add an armload of poetry, other sacred stories and texts, and the experience of life itself.

Nineteenth century Unitarian radical and reformer Ralph Waldo Emerson admonished preachers to deliver to the people “life, passed through the fire of thought.” This encouragement, combined with the exhortation to preach with a newspaper in one hand, rarely lets a preacher off the hook, nor a congregation. We are called in our time together to delve deep into our own lives and the world around us, and to grapple with what we find there.

So I’ll just say this has been a hard news cycle to prepare to preach with the newspaper in one hand. Especially during a month that the worship team and I decided months ago to spend exploring the spiritual concept of Joy.

It seems we are inundated right now with stories of people failing to see other people as full, dignified, human beings. Stories of sexual assault on college campuses awaken us to cultures of objectification and dehumanization of women. Stories upon stories of grand juries seem to say that lost black lives aren’t worth a trial, worthy of a conversation - awakening white America to the painful reality of our existence within systems of racism that cause human beings to fear and demonize one another – systems that rob us each of pieces of our humanity and divide us painfully from one another.

Add that to our own loss, pain, despair, or discord, which we often feel more poignantly amid the bustle of holiday cheer, and how can we possibly take seriously the season’s calling to rejoice? Weighed down by injustice that threatens to crush us, bodies numbed by various sources of grief, how can we possibly, in the words attributed to Hafiz, cast our votes for dancing?

Rejoice? Rejoice?

Joy at this moment seems a radical act, or perhaps a foolish one. It almost seems unfair, unjust, or uncaring to rejoice.

But what if, instead of being foolish or unjust, our openness to joy is just what can restore our humanity amid systems that would seek to rob us of it? What if wild raucous dancing, a la Hafiz, can re-connect us across the lines that divide?

This weekend a video started making its way around Facebook of a little girl dancing to a bluegrass band on a New York City subway platform. Everyone watching is grinning ear to ear. Soon a few newcomers to the platform join in the dance, and when they do the little girl squeals and dances with them and around them, jumping up and down, arms pumping furiously. She looks almost like a whirling dervish spinning toward ecstasy. Her joy is contagious.

The video was taken just this week in New York City. For all we know it could have been right by one of the locations of the many protests across the city protesting the death of African American man Eric Garner, whose last words were “I can’t breathe” as he was held in a chokehold by a police officer who will not stand trial for his death. Thousands took to the streets of New York this week, filled with hurt, and despair, and rage.

Below ground, on the subway platform, though, a little girl jumps and spins, and, it matters right now that the people dancing with her appear diverse. One of the grown up dancers who doesn’t look just like her connects with her. They laugh together, faces lit up. He takes some of his moves from her, pumping his arms and jumping up and down.

I don’t know anything about either of them, except this: Whatever they carried, in that moment they danced with nothing in between them but joy, and it was beautiful.

Watching them, knowing of the pain in the streets just above their heads, I was glad that they were dancing, laughing, claiming life where life had been denied.

We’re going to have to do some marching, if we’re going to get to the beloved community we seek to co-create – but I think when we’re there, it will look a lot like dancing together, and we need to practice now.

The womanist (that is, black feminist) author Alice Walker recently published a book of poetry entitled “Hard Times Require Furious Dancing.” Despite losses and struggles, she writes, despite these times of war, poverty, environmental devastation and greed, she writes: “I have learned to dance.” She describes dancing as an act of resistance, a preservation of sanity, a necessary act for balance in this world. It is a reclaiming of life, where life has been denied.

“Hard times require furious dancing,” she writes, “Each of us is the proof.”

Dancing, rejoicing doesn’t mean we ignore deep sorrow, or suppress righteous anger, or sit back and wait for the world to right itself, but perhaps it keeps us moving when these feelings threaten to overwhelm us. Certainly it keeps our hearts whole for the road ahead.

It is a wisdom both ancient and current. The psalms call for rejoicing and well as lament. When Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt through suffering and struggle, Miriam led them, too, in dancing. The Dalai Lama leads his people in exile from Tibet with a quiet radiance and a smile never far from his face. The sufis whirl closer and closer to ecstasy and their God. And a little baby brings glad tidings of great joy to all people during an unjust tax under a murderous king, simply by being born, new life in a lowly manger stall.

Rejoice, Rejoice.

Rejoicing keeps us open to a world that will otherwise shut us down and close us off.

Whether literal or metaphorical, dancing connects us in a culture that is otherwise rigid in its divisions.

Rejoicing can even help keep our tender hearts from hardening into brittle bitterness and hate.

Kurt Vonnegut, a man practiced at finding beauty in ugly places writes: "Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let the pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place."

Rejoicing, dancing, keeps us flexible, maintains our capacity for softness, for sweetness, for love, for all the very things that make us the most human.

And it seems to me, in a world where injustice thrives every time someone's humanity is ignored – doing what we can to be more human is radical, countercultural work.

To reclaim our humanity, we must risk delight in one another – especially in those from whom we would be divided. Then we can delight together in the beautiful parts of our world. As the poet Jack Gilbert writes: "We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world." Or else, I'd add, we'll all get burned out.

Even when it seems foolish to do so, when joy comes dancing, a surprise, into our lives, can we accept our gladness?

Those who most openly and most fully express joy are often considered childish or foolish. Most of us would need a child to lead our dancing on the subway platform, because to do so on our own feels embarrassing or somehow naïve. "How can you dance at a time like this? Don't you understand the world around us?"

But what if openness to unbridled joy were the wisest course for us as adults, as justice-makers, as those who would have our broken hearts laid open, rather than shattered to pieces...

My colleague Tamara Lebak recently posed a challenging question: “What joy have you kept quiet for fear of being deemed foolish? Have you swallowed whole the cultural message that joy and wisdom are incompatible? What if your excessive seriousness or lack of joy is exactly what is keeping you stuck?”

When we talk about justice, we get very serious, and that is sometimes necessary. But it doesn't always move us anywhere. We must also risk delight... squeezing drops of the sun from all we do, harvesting the energy to get unstuck, to keep on whirling in the dance. “Be wise” says Hafiz, “cast all your votes for dancing.”

Joy calls us out beyond our divided hearts and minds, bubbling up past every notion of right or wrong, this way or that way, us or them. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann says: “Joy is a deeper feeling of the whole existence. [...] You can experience joy only with your whole heart, your whole soul, and all your energies.”

Joy and sorrow are woven fine. Both can overtake us entirely in the briefest moment. But of the two, it may be that sorrow is the more demanding of our attention – joy the quieter, subtler bubbling forth... the surprise to which we must attune ourselves, or miss it entirely.

Joy lifts us into communion with whole heart and whole soul, but only if we are willing to stand with it and dance.

Sorrow will come and it is good to weep. Joy will come too, and when we are prepared to risk the foolishness of pure delight, when we are attuned to joy as well as our rightful sorrow and rage, we will find our hearts whole and ready to dance together at last.

So rejoice.
Be fully human.
Claim life where life has been denied.

I leave you with the poet Rumi, that bard of ecstatic joy in hard times:

“Dance, when you're broken open.

Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.

Dance in the middle of the fighting.

Dance in your blood.

Dance when you're perfectly free.”

