

Wonder, expertly defined is a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable. Wonder is the theme of this month, which makes so much sense. The month of advent. The month of approaching the sun/son. It dovetails perfectly with our candle of joy. With Donna's words this morning and our reading and our story for all ages. Surprise and admiration caused by beauty, unexpected, inexplicable, mystery matches with the definition of joy which is pleasure and great happiness. Exuberant happiness.

Sometimes joy is sold to us. On t.v. on the radio, on billboards (if you live in other states), on social media for sure. It may be false joy, in fact I believe it often is. It may have the trappings of smiles and expressions of astonishment. I venture a guess, a pretty seasoned observation actually, that those commodified parcels and packages of joy, are fleeting, sometimes empty. When my kids were little, we tried to create and live into the Hallmark holidays. We succeeded at pieces and parts of it. But I think the pieces and parts that brought the most meaning, the Christmas fairs, advent calendars, caroling, school concerts, the friends and families. Those did bring true pleasure and great happiness. But/and there was also the chasing after the joy that was to be had under the tree. The lists, the shopping, the wrapping, and the orgy of Christmas morning mostly left me exhausted. Having adultish children now, has given me the space to center myself on the meaningful and let go of the rest. The pleasure and great joy of the season is you. It is them. It is us.

Richard Rohr, the modern-day monk who writes reflections on meditation and particularly focused to the recovery community but are also very relevant to all says that faith is participatory. Thoughts about faith, creating words, theologies, creeds, catechisms doesn't grow faith. Participating in faith practices, putting oneself into one's beliefs, living them out day to day is how faith is realized, made manifest. I believe that to be true about joy. And that is exemplified in my reflection on Christmas's past. The joy of it all was always in the activities of the season. Not in the stuff that we bought or received but in participating in the meaning making of the season. Not to say that making Christmas special for children or others through the giving of presents isn't participatory. But the undertones of commodification of resources and commercialization of joy feels like a diversion from full participation and realization of the WHY we set aside December as we do. The admiration of beauty and in the unexpected may come in the form of a gift but it most often comes in a kindness offered without expectation of return. In a grace, in grace.

Holidays, in general, set aside a day or a time period to focus on the wonder. Often coupled with joy, but not always. Or at least not hallmark joy. Holidays or Holy Days, set aside time to focus on mystery. To lead us into ourselves and our world, to make meaning, redefine purpose, check our values, assess our relationships and invite us to reflect on the bigger whys and hows. Most religions give us some answers and focal points. Through creeds and catechisms, wisdom literature, prescribed prayers, and rituals, religions provide a framework for people's spirituality that is culturally grounded. That defines and affirms one's tribe. Religion even provides a framework to step back and see oneself as a part of a larger cultural context.

## 12.11.22 Wonder and Joy

Lori Whittemore

Religion can also translate and broaden one's sense of connectedness. Think of the 2.2 billion Christians in the world, for instance. Christianity looks very different in Georgia than it does in Rome than it does in England than it does in Mexico. And yet there is a sense of belonging to something larger than any given country, family or specific place of worship.

Try as they might, however, religious creeds, and catechism and myths can never touch the ultimate reality to which they point. They are guideposts. They try to make the Source with a capital S accessible to people in their time and context. Humans are meaning making creatures, after all. In addition to all our pieces and parts, we are instilled with spirit. With consciousness. With self-determination. That is indeed very mysterious, awe inspiring, wondrous. We lose sight of the extent of the miracle of it all. And in huge part for self-preservation. Because if we remained fully present to the wonder of it all we might forget to tie our shoes or shut off the coffee pot or look both ways before crossing. Walking around in awe can be distracting from the activities of daily living. Things that having a routine for or at least muscle memory to complete, help considerably preserve and perpetuate our humanity's presence here on earth, let alone getting through our day to day life.

Sometimes our wonder and joy is disrupted by sickness, injury, heartache, anger. Interesting to note here, is that wonder and joy often coexist very closely with these things. Sadness and pain and anger often create a real presence of consciousness of the here and now. After all, you can't saunter mindlessly through your living room after stubbing your toe, or breaking your hip, or losing your eyesight, or ...you fill in the blank. Pain and suffering bring you directly into the here and now. Living out your activities in pain takes all your attention for good or for not and you therefore come to appreciate each step you take without falling or of any moment you are not in pain. The presence of mind that the harsh and troubling experience cause, can therefore keep you mindful and present for when wellness and joy return. You don't think about a toe until it is sore and then just after it is better. Emotional challenges also cause us to take inventory of what is really important to us. Especially if we pause and do some self-inventory.

The afternoon that I sat waiting to hear about the results of the surgeries of Pieter and Sammi are poignant examples of this for me. The pacing, the nervousness, the awareness of breathing and fluttering in my heart. I remember feeling ever breath and heartbeat for hours. And reflecting on how miraculous our bodies are that my lungs were breathing and my heart was beating, albeit erratically, while I was suspended in a bubble of fear. It was that fear and anxiety that brought that awareness. I remember the inventorying. And the bargaining. And the meaning making and the gratitude bumping up against despair. Juxtaposed with my remembering after I heard of the great success of the surgeries and gasping and heart fluttering in a different way. And when I hung up the phone, and I had said my prayers and called my relatives, and texted Brian, I was awestruck once again how my body just kept working while my world had turned upside down and back again. The lungs had worked, the heart kept beating. All was still there. The joy and the pain, the light and the dark. I was fully present in it all as I was an active, aware participant that day. And to experience the joy in life, one must participate in the fullness of it all.

As a chaplain, I consider the most important verb to be “listening”. To truly hear someone’s story. This allows or actually causes me to be awestruck. To really see someone, experience them in the fullness of their humanity. To be with them, truly be with them. Part of that listening, is listening for their spirit. Behind the pain or sadness. What gives them meaning, what is their ultimate purpose, what are their values, what are their important relationships, what do they consider to be the explanation or point of it all. As a chaplain, I listen for these things. I try to figure out what, if anything, is blocking this person from their connection to those things. When it feels appropriate, I highlight the things I hear and try to reconnect the person in front of me to their own connection to the big hows and whys. I try to remind them that the sacred is within them and they have the wisdom to connect to it. That there is joy bumping up against their pain. That there is light beside their darkness

Holidays/Holy days are a corporate way of chaplaining the world. Holidays are a pause to the day to day living. For both joy and for sadness. While western Christians culturally and religiously often highlight Christmas as the ultimate holiday, as a holiday filled with joy there is lent and Easter that remind of the darkness and sacrifice and emptiness and hunger. And it is in the extremity of the experiences and feelings that accompany the flavor of each holiday, that humans are invited through various rituals to inventory their souls. Again corporately as a society and a culture as well as individually. To ask the same questions and listen to the answers. How do I make meaning in my life/how do we make meaning in our lives. What is my/our specific purpose for this one wonderful life. What values do I/we use to navigate our journey. What relationships give my life meaning, how do I nourish them? And by the way, what is the point of it all? Holidays often help us answer these questions. Keep cultures and tribes on the same page. Keep them organized and pointed toward a common purpose.

Holidays also highlight the vacancies that exist in our lives in response to these questions for us. Where does my life lack meaning or purpose, where am I not living my values, what relationships are broken and what is the point of it all. Holidays highlight the joy and the pain that is present for us. Where truth and wisdom can break through the day to day unconscious, muscle memory moments. Joy and grief, dark and light.

This season of Advent, of the approach, and during this Christmas season, I invite you to cultivate some joy. Notice and recognize then there is grief and pain, but spend time cultivating, creating, and making space for joy. Use the many tools we have as UUs and as humans to create the best climate for your joy to be kindled.

First, lets use the chaplain spiritual assessment to identify where you are. Take an inventory of yourself and use the tool of listening.

1. What is meaningful to you right now?
2. What gives your purpose?
3. What are you doing that reflects your values?
4. What relationships give you joy?
5. What is the meaning of it all and how do you make sense of it, with a capital I?

## 12.11.22 Wonder and Joy

Lori Whittemore

Next ask yourself, what stands between you and the answers to those questions. What is sapping your sense of meaning? Is something disrupting your sense of purpose, your values? What relationships aren't working or need repair and is there a way to repair them? Or do you need to let them go and make peace with that? AND what is the point to it all anyway? Make a note where you are with these important questions.

Lean on the rituals we make here together to create and highlight our communal life. Enjoy the music that is made for you and/or the music you make. Ask for help, offer to listen, share a meal, visit someone who can't get out and about. Have some fun. Practice mindfulness. Find something to be grateful for and reflect on it. A lot. Gratitude corresponds directly with feeling joy. You can chaplain yourself in this holiday season. In fact, I think holidays are meant to teach us that.

Consider advent to be your approach to your own center. Your fullest self. Where are you with that right now? Where is joy and wonder, wonder and joy in your life right now? What miracles can you observe in your life that create awe? Did you notice the full moon last Wednesday? Can you feel your toes? Have you ever seen the backside of the organ where boys used to have to work the bellows to make the organ work? What is the greatest mystery you can think of right now? From our Story for All Ages, does it give you comfort to know that others are awestruck by that same mystery. Because for UUs in this liberal tradition, the sense of belongingness comes in the connection to mystery rather than in the answers to the questions. It is in the interdependence to creation and the joy of our part of it that fosters the belongingness. That gives us courage to nurture our own unique spirituality. To create meaning, define purpose. We have shared values that promote our own personal growth and our participation in shaping values that guide us. We place a premium on relationships, which in turn deepens connection between us and with people we are close to and people we don't know at all. What is really cool about being a UU, I think, is that we don't have to have or subscribe to one ontology. That means we don't need to agree on the Source of it all. We grow our spirituality by exploring our truths with people exploring their truths. And we are expanded. We hold each other in communal wonder and joy of the actual journey. Not the destination.

Our openness to other paths up the mountain and to other holidays and beliefs makes space for each other. Not everyone here will enjoy every holiday or ritual that we experience here. Our principles require that we make space for that. Like our lungs and our heart that function even when we don't think about it, our community functions when we rely on our principles to guide us and our covenant to hold us together. Even when we disagree. And by living by our principles, we will find belongingness and wonder and joy of being seen and welcomed in the fullness of our own humanity. Even when our toes are sore, or our hearts are broken or we are filled with joy, we all belong here. And that the wonderful and joyous truth.