

When Holding Nothing Back IS Healing

11 1 20 UUCU-UUFM Joint Service

Opening Words

Wonderful people! It is so good to be with you this morning. So good to see my companions of the past. So good to have you and my present companions in the same space-time together. Will the wonders of Zoom never cease!? See what we can do when the world is so scary, so threatened, so tragic. Joy breaks out of every sadness, out of every murky depth. It is so good to be together.

When I first found the Unitarian Universalist church back in the early 2000s, I came crawling, with a broken heart that had really just beaten me to the ground. I arrived weary and full of sorrow, exhausted by personal failures and major fears, overwhelmed by frustration that I was not doing the good in the world I knew the world required—even demanded—of a person like me. I had financial security, a good education and a good job. I had a loving husband and children. I had a dependable house and car. And still I felt broken. I had retreated into myself, and all I found inside seemed like destruction. No rest. No respite. No hope.

Well, what did I find when I entered that Unitarian Universalist church? I found music, sung loudly and exuberantly, echoing from the walls and filling the large space with the sound of voices joined together. I found people swaying to the music as they sat and stood, letting that sound wash into their limbs and bodies, pour into their blood and bones. I found laughter—humor from the pulpit and the pews, even as we reflected on the miseries of **that** time, on the injustice, on the failures of our leaders and ourselves. I found joy—joy abundant, joy that sat right down and held hands with all the ugliness of the world. William Blake tells us that “Joy & Woe are woven fine, A Clothing for the soul divine.” I don’t know about souls or their divinity, but I know that it was a Unitarian Universalist congregation, it was the Unitarian Universalist faith which enabled me to see that joy in the midst of sorrow was the most natural thing, one of the most healing things, in the whole wide world. I need no longer feel distraught at the pain of the world and in my life. I had a community. I was not alone. Professor, feminist, and social activist bell hooks said, “Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.” And so it is!

Today, we know well, all too well, the sorrows, the fears that press in upon us. This election is just too, too much right now, isn’t it?! But let us hold nothing back. Let us heal through relationship with each other. Let us greet sadness by seeking loud loveliness and exuberant expression. Both our hymns today come from Black people colonized and oppressed by White people and cultures, and yet the people, they offer music for singing and dancing, for being together in joy. Let’s make some big gestures together—make whatever gestures are big for you. Let’s move our bodies as we can. I come to church each Sunday for this larger connection, for this chance to be in company, to be more than the small self I sometimes find myself to be. To hold nothing back. To heal. To be in company, companioned by other human beings on similar journeys. That’s why I am here. I hope that is why you are here today as well.

Meditation

I invite you now into a time of prayer, reflection, and meditation.
Settle into your mind and your body as it is in this moment. . .
Close your eyes or simply soften your gaze. . .
Bring gentle awareness to those parts of you that hurt. . .
Follow your breath, knowing you are not alone in your pain,

no matter its nature. . .

We breathe together into this time of witness and compassion. . .

Open your heart to the spirit of connection. . .

Hear now these words based on a prayer from Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. David A. Miller:

Broken, battered and bruised, the cries of our country make us weep.

Tears of sorrow. Tears of rage. Righteous holy tears.

We wonder how to stop the free fall of distrust, injustice and pain.

We wonder how to vaccinate ourselves against fear of the virus spreading in rally after maskless rally.

And so, in tears and wonder, we come together today to lift up things of worth, to pray with conviction into the waiting silence.

And so we reflect on the limits of our own certainty, uncertainty within faith yearning for a turn, a recognition, a movement of the collective spirit.

And so, in uncertain faith we come together today, aware of the possibility of disorder that continues to flow through this election season.

And so, we gather our hearts in the promise of this faith tradition to respect, to witness, and to never stop working for the elusive and so badly-needed vision of Beloved Community.

We know, how well we know, that one election will not cure all that ails our country. We know that a political shift will not completely bind the wounds.

Yet let us move through uncertainty in faith that change is possible, that persistent and committed work for justice may be rewarded, that we heed the call to be benders, to bend the arc toward justice.

Whatever happens on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, the weeks to come, may we remember that the seasons will continue to turn, we will continue to gather, we will hold each other in love while we suffer and mourn and work.

Though we may feel sad and angry, confused and frustrated, weary yet committed, though we may feel broken or bruised or battered, as long as the miracle of life flows within and through and beyond us, as long as the web holds us, we are not, we cannot and will not be defeated.

Let us now still a time of stillness together.

Sermon

Let's begin again by remembering what an incredibly excessive, exuberant set of days is the normal transition from October to November, every year and especially this year. First there is October 31, with the pagan and Wiccan celebration of Samhain, when the veil between the world of the here and the elsewhere is said to thin and communication normally blocked can flow freely to those who pay attention. And also, there is Halloween, a celebration of fantasy, of monsters and scary beings, of tooth decay and outlandish prankish behavior. I didn't give out candy this year. Maybe that's why the four teenagers on bicycles pulled out my Black Lives Matter and my Presidential-Candidate-Who-Aligns-With-My-Values signs, those young rascals!

And there's more! Halloween, All Hallows Eve. It prepares the way for All Hallows, All Saints Day, which is today, November 1st, when Christians honor all those martyred for their faith. And All Souls Day follows on November 2nd, another Christian holy day to honor the many, many dead who were not martyrs. And . . . European colonization brought into alignment the indigenous practices for honoring the dead with Christian holy days, and so the Mexican celebration of Dia de Muertos occurs also on November 1st and 2nd, though with an emphasis on ancestors and family rather than mourning.

And this year, in this pandemic year, when we could hardly figure out how to celebrate and if we should, this all happened on a weekend, a weekend with a second full moon, a blue moon. Once in a blue moon. Now that is cause for celebration! Yes, celebration with a tinge of sadness. And celebration with a dose of joy and happiness and community. This is a weekend that's got everything. It holds nothing back.

And what a coincidence that the scariest and weirdest and most hugely consequential election in any of our memories for sure, that, too, is happening as we meet. Election Day is November 3rd, but we have been voting and waiting and fearing and anticipating. It is really so much to bear, too much to bear. Oh, and then there is that pandemic thing still going on. It makes perfect sense that we might want to hold ourselves back from all this excess, all this fearful excitement and overwrought worry. It makes sense that we might want to retreat under a cozy blanket and take a pause until all this foolishness is over. But consider the words of Czech writer Franz Kafka: "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world—that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature—but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid." Kafka, now there's a writer who understood despair and frustration, and he is telling us we suffer more if we hold back rather than by throwing ourselves all the way in.

Yes, certainly, we might want to retreat, and taking a time out might be a good thing for some of us. Everyone needs to rest away in the quiet sometimes. But not a permanent retreat, not a long time out. Pulling in and away isn't the best way to heal. Consider these thoughts of Pema Chödrön, an ordained American nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She wrote, "We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy." That's what she says: There is a rhythm, even a cycle to our emotional lives. Healing comes from making room for all the emotions, all the excessive and contradictory feelings we experience. But especially making room for joy.

So often we want to make joy the opposite of the other so-called negative feelings—hurt, anger, fear, frustration. We set them up in a balance, with the nice feelings on one side and the not so nice ones on the other. And we see-saw back and forth, with some guilt thrown in if we are happy when others are sad or if we think we are supposed to be sad. But if we are to heal—which simply means to cultivate wholeness, roundedness, allowing all the aspects of life to have their place—if we are to heal, that see-saw of emotions, that striving for balance, just won't do all the time. Not if we are to be the loving people our faith calls us to be. Not if we are to use our love to build inclusive community. Not if we are

to express our love out loud and widely in acts of justice-making. What might it look like if healing ourselves and our world required more intense, more loving, more expansive engagement?

Early in the 20th Century, French artist Henri Matisse wrote, and the language is gendered but let us overlook that for now, Matisse wrote, “He who loves, flies, runs, and rejoices; he is free and nothing holds him back.” If we cultivate love within and between ourselves, if we invite a loving spirit to move within and among us, we gain freedom, flying, running, moving, and rejoicing. And nothing holds us back from doing what we need to do, whether it is work from home and home-school at the same time or keep our most vulnerable neighbors safe or overcome a tyrant and a system supporting injustice and oppression.

More immediately in the 21st Century, American feminist and activist **adrienne maree brown** expanded on the idea from her experience and history as a Black American woman. In her book *Pleasure Activism*, **brown** wrote “Pleasure reminds us to enjoy being alive... Pleasure—embodied, connected pleasure—is one of the ways we know when we are free. That we are always free.” **brown’s** idea is a challenging one, because it seems to run counter to the work we do to end oppression, oppression which *presents* as the opposite of freedom. Yet **brown** calls us to deepen our sense of what freedom is, that as much as we must never relent in the dismantling of oppression and injustice, freedom is not oppression’s opposite. Freedom is the state of being that enables us to know, and I quote, “That we always have the power to co-create the world. Pleasure helps us move through the times that are unfair, through grief and loneliness, through the terror of genocide, or days when the demands are just overwhelming.” According to **brown**, feeling pleasure, full embodied pleasure, cultivating pleasure is a sign of internal freedom. She goes on to say, “Pleasure heals the places where our hearts and spirit get wounded. Pleasure reminds us that even in the dark, we are alive. Pleasure is a medicine for the suffering that is absolutely promised in life... Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom.”

Hers is an important message in these scary times, where we live in constrained ways and feel too that we need to be on the barricades. So how do we cultivate pleasure and freedom and joy in this strange and uncertain time? You may recall the Japanese lifestyle guru Marie Kondo who has encouraged us to get rid of all the things in our lives that do not “spark joy.” Spark joy—this idea has led to some pretty funny quips, like “If I got rid of everything in my kitchen that didn’t spark joy, there’d be nothing left but a corkscrew and an ice cream scoop.” Throw in my coffee pot, and that would cover my four essential food groups—alcohol, caffeine, fat, and more fat. That sparks joy! And that’s pretty silly. Something might be lost in the translation between Japanese and English, because Kondo really seems to mean ridding yourself not of what does not bring happiness but what prevents you from feeling a throbbing, vibrating connection to what matters in life.

Kondo urges us to get rid of the clutter that dulls our senses, because dulled senses disconnect us from each other. When I think of what sparks joy for me, I know and I feel it is that sense of belonging to life—life that extends far beyond me in both time and space, but life that I contribute to in the time and space granted to me. That mysterious gift of life. For me, that is what moving in the light of God means. And as long as I can march and dance and sing and laugh and pray, I want to, even when life seems

really bad and ugly. As long as I can, I want to participate in and I want to co-create, to build that larger community of multiplicity and complexity and diversity. I want to vibrate in all that is good in the world even as I acknowledge the frightening and the horrible. Joy and Woe are Woven fine, and I want to feel I am part of that weave.

As the election looms, with its terrors and uncertainty, I am focused on the role of joy in meeting its challenges. Have you seen the videos of “Joy to the Polls,” the group bringing music and dancing to the long election lines in Philadelphia? Have you seen the stories of ex-offenders tearful as they cast their first ballots after long years of incarceration? Have you seen the people handing out water and folding chairs and snacks? Perhaps you have been some of these people. Perhaps you know the enormous, life-giving value of simply cheering them on, seeing the joy of participation, the co-creation of democracy, in these gestures of kindness and community-building, of connection within the sacred web of life?

What we all know now, if we did not know it before, is that democracy is not a spectator sport. We vote in joy that our actions can bring about the world we want to live in—certainly a world that reflects our Unitarian Universalist values, including the value of paying attention and expressing our opinion in an election, regardless of the outcome. We must be engaged in the process, so that we do not dishonor all those who had to and continue to fight for the right to vote, to be counted. We will insist on the counting of votes and the peaceful transfer of power, because we feel not just urgency, we feel not just terror, but we feel jubilation that our actions make a difference in the world. Our children and grandchildren are watching our example, learning how they might be co-creators of what is right and good. Let them see our joy as we exercise our freedom. Let us dance and sing and make a joyful noise, a righteous and celebratory noise no matter the outcome. For our work is never-ending, not ever once-and-done, and that is not an evil, that is not a problem. That is the nature of this world, the only one of which we can be sure.

Let’s imagine together action that flies and dances and moves toward robust and inclusive relationship and community, holding nothing back. May we have high hopes. Like that little old ant who thinks they’ll move a rubber tree plant. Everyone knows that’s impossible, right?. But the ant gives it a try. The ant’s got high hopes, apple pie in the sky hopes. So any time you’re gettin’ low, don’t let go. Breathe and be. Think of that persistent ant. Anyone how has ever owned a wooden house knows very well what an ant can do when they put their teeth to it.

And because on a weekend like this, on a day like today, two endings are better than one, let’s imagine living into the promise of Jim Henson’s Muppets and Caribbean singer and activist Harry Belafonte. Our world is turned by mountains, by fire, by water—so much bigger than we are. We humans are only a small part of the vastness, any human life a miniscule fragment. So why not know each other, why not relish each other and celebrate. We are so much more alike than we care to admit. Do you know who I am? Do I know who you are? See we one another clearly? Do we know who we are? Water, fire, and mountain depend upon each other, exist in relationship to each other. How much better when we know and celebrate that. How much better when we know that about our human selves, when we hold nothing back, and when we heal ourselves and each other through loving and exuberant community.

American author and artist Julia Cameron wrote in *The Artist's Way*, "The quality of life is in proportion, always, to the capacity for delight. The capacity for delight is the gift of paying attention... The reward for attention is healing, and more than anything else, attention is an act of connection." May it be so.

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