

## **Homily—Joy!**

**Rev. Rita Capezzi—UUFM 5 23 21**

Is it easy for you to bring to mind a moment in your life when you experienced great joy, even pure joy? It is for me. And I don't mean a feeling of well-being or of happiness. I don't mean gladness or glee or even exhilaration. I mean deep and abiding joy. Joy that extends from your mind, aware of something profoundly good, and drives down through your body like a jolt, infusing every part of your being and radiating out from you? That's the joy I'm talking about today.

For me, I experienced joy at the birth of my children. Each conceived as a choice and at the right time for our family. Each arriving within the prescribed time, and in their own time. Each arriving within the confines of our complicated lives, with competing family interests and the demands of challenging careers and the mundane impossibilities of everyday domestic life.

Especially our daughter, she arrived right on time and at a very fraught time. I was out of scholarship support from my university. I was determined to complete my dissertation before her birth, something I had not succeeded in doing four years before when her brother was born. Every long week was full of classes and department meetings, reading and grading papers. Every short weekend was filled with writing, writing, and more writing. For three solid months, my spouse and older child took a road trip to friends and family so I could have the house to myself, so I would not be distracted by the beautiful and happy and vexing life into which we were bringing a new baby.

Well, I finished and defended my dissertation, and I interviewed for jobs, and I secured one, and all before my second baby was born. But what a hard time that was, what fears and challenges—awaiting the baby's arrival and preparing to move away from our hometown and family and the anticipation of a new and unimaginable career change for my spouse. Our daughter arrived after 10 months of weight gain, indigestion, exhaustion. And then she arrived, in the way all babies do, through waters and blood and pain, or the fog of it. Through labor, physical and mental. She frightened me to the core—slow to cry, taking her own sweet time to change from blue to pink. And then she did cry and she warmed and I held her. And then the joy, the unmitigated and complete joy, piercing me and, for a flash, filling all time and space.

Each week, I say to you in my welcome: "It is a joy to be together," and I mean it. But what is joy, this more than well-being and gladness, this sensation beyond glee or even exhilaration? What was this joy I felt when my children were born, moments infused with pain and even fear physical, psychological, and emotional? I am not saying that childbirth is the ultimate source of joy. I am saying that for me, the birth of my children brought me to that source. What experience brings you to that ultimate source of liveliness, where you know, without question, your connection to the "all" of sweet joy even in this painful and troubling world?

The word "joy" derives from Old French, and it certainly evokes feelings of pleasure and delight. Joy is both "our elated response to feelings of happiness, experiences of pleasure, and awareness of

abundance” as well as “the pure and simple delight in being alive.” And, joy is not simply an emotion but a sensual connection, involving the body as a sensing organ rather than a mere shell for thinking and feeling. Joy reminds us that we are not mere thought, not a ghost in a machine. Rather, joy is something we feel in our blood and in our bones as well as in our hearts and spirits. And joy breaks down these barriers.

Joy is that something everywhere and yet hard to capture. Joy is that which eludes words, often describable only with the kind of non-words we use to portray sounds and sensations combined. Joy is that “whoosh,” that charge and flow of delight in observing delight in others—in the exuberance of a puppy or a child playing, in the sparking light playing across ripples of water. Joy is that overriding and enriching sensation of being in the presence of someone we love, or thinking of someone we love, and allowing ourselves to be lifted and transformed.

For theists and Christians, joy emerges as and is sought as connection to god. The Catholic saint Teresa of Avila is known for her description of ecstasy, where an experience of union with God, manifested as a physical sensation of being pierced in the heart by an arrow launched by an angel. That might sound a little kinky to you, and MUCH has been made of that. But one thing that Teresa and her vision bestowed upon us Unitarian Universalists is a great gift of spirituality inevitably and beautifully wrapped into physicality. Body and spirit not opposites but united, joyfully one and the same.

Not all of us are seeking joyful and joy-filled union with god. For us, joy is the deep connection to the forces of life itself, connection to the breath of life not metaphorically but actually. All breathing proceeds us. We did not invent breathing and we cannot do without it. We all breathe, and in that we are one. Thus, joy emerges not simply as a statement of connection but as a fundamental connection, a linkage of human with human, of all of us with the physicality of earth elements. We all are of a piece, at a fundamental level, beyond the important difference of our histories and experiences and identities. The significant differences among us, well, these arise out of the unity that forms us all. We are all star stuff, and joy both emerges from this relationship and explains it. Joy is more than feelings or sensations of pleasure and delight. Joy is the source of these good feelings. The source, the root, the ground out of which the emotions and sensations that I feel surface. Joy is the primordial, the originary, the fount, the cause and the basis for all that I experience and all that you do. We feel it, though we cannot locate and fix it in time and space, any more than we can the Big Bang.

Joy is that which is more than happiness. It is that tender and complex sensation of connection that we feel in our bodies, rooting us to the earth and to each other. Joy is that radical core connection that you feel in the body reaching down and reaching out to the more than self, beyond the self to affinity with all the beings and all the beingness of reality. We make a joyful noise—laughing, singing, dancing, connecting to the source of all liveliness—I say we make a joyful noise by companionship with each other and through deep understanding of the multitudes within each of us, the lingering of generations that culminate in our existence and are both “each of us” and more than us. Joy is “the deep satisfaction we know when we are able to serve others and be glad for their good fortune.”

It is up to us, to each of us, to open to joy—joy that is deeper than happiness and holds all sorrow and pain. We do this by celebrating as we do today, by planning and purposing to celebrate our community, by marking with gatherings and food and music the milestones of births and deaths and graduations and more. And we can also mark joy daily—by laughing and singing and dancing and connecting, by literally and figuratively jumping for joy, for life “is not meant to be endured; it is to be enjoyed.”

And every day, every minute, we, each of us, breathe. In the taking of breath, we are partaking in the joy of life—exuberant joy, painful joy, and joy never isolated and alone, never solitary. In the words of the environmental activist and scholar of Buddhism and deep ecology Joanna Macy, “Basic to most spiritual traditions is the recognition that we are not separate, isolated entities, but integral and organic parts of the vast web of life. [. . .] We are resilient patterns within a vaster web of knowing.” And yet, she goes on to say, because “we have been conditioned to view ourselves as separate, competitive and thus fragile entities, we need to relearn this kind of resilience.” Awareness of ourselves as connected beings enables us to tap into fundamental joy. Meditative breathing is a practice to help us remember.

Across this Zoom reality, across the space and time that seems to separate ourselves from our loved ones both alive and dead, let us intentionally breathe together for a brief time. What follows is part of Macy’s adaptation of Buddhist practice:

“Closing your eyes, focus attention on your breathing.  
 Don’t try to breathe any special way, slow or long.  
 Just watch the breathing as it happens, in and out. ....  
 As you watch the breath, note that it happens by itself, without your will,  
 without your deciding each time to inhale or exhale ....  
 It’s as though you’re being breathed — being breathed by life ....  
 Just as everyone in this [meeting], in this city, in this planet now, is being breathed by life,  
 sustained in a vast living breathing web ....

Now visualize your breath as a stream or ribbon of air.  
 See it flow up through your nose, down through your windpipe and into your lungs.  
 Now from your lungs, take it through your heart.  
 Picture it flowing through your heart and out to reconnect with the larger web of life.  
 Let the breath-stream, as it passes through you and through your heart,  
 appear as one loop within that vast web, connecting you with it ....”

Let us be aware of ourselves in the company of others.

Joy is a small word, a common word, used routinely but manifesting great presence and power. Joy infuses our humdrum everyday lives with the glimpses of total unity and relationship which we crave. And joy reveals that that which we crave is always already undeniably present, if we only perceive with openness and intention. Joy reveals itself as the underlying construction of our being when we tune ourselves to sense it and know it.

We come here together as travelers, all of us human wanderers, converging in this community, choosing this community. Going together, heaven knows where, but, together, we will get there. In this Fellowship of celebration, we hold our individual sorrows in the joyful embrace of compassion and companionship, none of us ever alone. May we remember that all life springs from a common source, a fount of joy within us, between us, and beyond us, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say "Amen."

Resources:

[Breathing Through – New Society Publishers](#)

<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/17/joy>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa\\_of\\_%C3%81vila](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa_of_%C3%81vila)