

Resilience and Joy! ©

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee A. Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
June 4, 2017

“A true religious instinct never deprived man (sic) of one single joy...”
– Hosea Ballou, Universalist, 1771-1852

“I believed my happiness would be incomplete while one creature remained miserable.”
– George DeBenneville, Universalist, 1703-1793

“Energy, even like the Biblical grain of mustard-seed, will remove mountains.”
– Hosea Ballou, Universalist, 1771-1852

The other day, I joked with my good friend who is an Episcopalian that I was going to convert her to Unitarian Universalism.

Since she is a priest that is- in truth- quite doubtful.

But another UU from another church overheard me and said,

“What would you convert her to?! There’s nothing to convert to!”

Well, I beg to disagree.

We may not use the word “conversion” very often, but for me,

being a Unitarian Universalist involves a *life-long* process of conversion,

or turning toward something that we want to know, to experience, to embody.

Some might say it’s a conversion to truth or integrity.

Some might say it’s a conversion to witnessing the presence and power

of Creativity or God or the Spirit of Life, to making our lives a meditation or prayer.

Some might say it’s a conversion to gratitude, joy and Love.

I think of those good Universalists of 200 years ago, like the Rev. Hosea Ballou who spoke about Happification and said,

“A true religious instinct never deprived man of one single joy...”

Or the Universalist George DeBenneville who said- like a true Bodhisattva—
*“I believed my happiness would be incomplete
while one creature remained miserable.”*

He said his faith was about sharing *“the universal and everlasting gospel
of boundless, universal love for the entire human race...”* –
the love that he felt from God.

What if when we become Unitarian Universalists,
we chose to turn toward the idea and the practice of oneness,
of a boundless, universal love for all beings?
Can we try saying that? *“Boundless, universal love.”*
As I said to the children this morning, that’s a life-long project!
In fact, it’s a project that most of us don’t get to complete in a life time.

It’s certainly not easy. It’s not always easy to be a Universalist!
I think of a message I saw on FaceBook this week,
after our nation’s President withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord.
It was about a Congressman from Michigan who said,
“God will take care of climate change” if it really exists.
About this, North Parish member Jessica Harris wryly and astutely observed,
“Yeah. God will take care of it-- by killing off the humans that caused it.”

I thought that was brilliant.
As we all know, humans need the earth more than the earth needs humans.
It was here long before we were around and will be here after us.
Still, as some of you know, I put my faith that with or without us, life will survive,
thanks to minute creatures like tardigrades- the most resilient animal known-
tiny creatures that can withstand extreme conditions fatal to all other life forms-
temperatures, pressures, radiation and the vacuum of outer space.
So I put my faith in tardigrades.

But tardigrades aside, we live in interesting times,
in a world where some of us are grappling
with a new sense of existential dread connected to the damage on our planet.
I suspect this cosmic dread and even a sense of helplessness contributes
to high rates of depression, anxiety and addiction among people of all ages.
Many of us do *not* believe that God will take care of it- as a Greek god would-
as if God is a being with superpowers located outside ourselves
and outside of the creative forces of life, the results of cause and effect.

So we're not sure what the future looks like—for ourselves or those we love.
The clock is ticking and we know it, and not only that,
some of our kids know it, sense it, feel it.

This can create a layer of worry underneath the day-to-day cares and
disappointments in our personal lives- which are often enough in themselves.
Or it can lead to denial and inaction.
It definitely leads to a more anxious society.
Anxious societies tend to regress and elect immature leaders,
and have more social tension, scapegoating and even violence.

Spiritually, for some, it can lead to a deep sense of loss
or fear that we can no longer rely in the same way on the earth-
the literal Ground of Our Being—as the theologian Paul Tillich liked to call God.
Concern about the future can certainly make it difficult
to feel “boundless, universal love for all of humanity”--
when you're so angry and fed up with human greed and stupidity that you could spit.

So where do we find the counterweights
to such anxiety, helplessness, fear and dread?
Taking action with others is one solution.
And another is to pause, pay attention and rest.

The writer Barbara Kingsolver writes, *"In my own worst seasons, I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon... until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again."*

What Kingsolver is talking about here is mindfulness. This is no strategy to *deny* or *avoid* despair, but to *come back from it* by paying attention to what is here, now-- to stay in the present moment, and to simply look, or listen, and appreciate something beautiful, something good.

It is a learned skill. Sometimes kids are good at it, but maybe they are losing that skill in the cell phone age. It takes practice to look or listen hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing. It takes practice to let ourselves feel despair yet not be overwhelmed by it. It takes practice to remind ourselves of joy.

That's part of why we come to church every week— to be reminded of what is good, and that life is a gift, to hear or see something of beauty, to re-open our closed-up or disappointed hearts. Church is one place to practice joy... and that is no small thing.

I believe joy and resilience are connected. And goodness knows, these days, we need to be a resilient people.

Those of you who have been part of our recent conversation about the goals of our Religious Education program know that I've been sharing my hope that we might do an even better job of building up the ***emotional, ethical and spiritual resiliency*** of our children and youth.

Emotional resiliency includes things like the ability to bounce back from disappointments or despair, the ability to feel both deep sadness and gladness.

Ethical resiliency includes things like telling the truth or resisting peer pressure, being an "upstander" not a bystander. You can think of your own examples.

Spiritual resiliency includes things like being able to admit mistakes, to ask for or offer forgiveness.

It includes being kind and generous, unafraid and compassionate in the face of hate and fear.

It includes practicing mindfulness, awe, joy and even a boundless love for all beings.

So how do we teach such things?

How do we help our kids and youth become *more* resilient and *more* joyful?

I have a few ideas of my own—

but this is a conversation I hope we will all engage in over the next several months.

We'll be asking some questions, such as this:

If you imagine a child beginning here at North Parish as a baby, how would you want North Parish to support that child over their lifetime?

And what are the foundational UU beliefs or practices that you think should inform and guide our programming for children and youth?

As you know, we will soon have a new partner in this conversation.

The Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick will be joining us on August 1st

as our Acting Assistant Minister for Faith Formation-

which is the new UU lingo for Religious Education.

She will not only be running our children's, youth and family ministries,

she'll also be helping us answer those questions I just mentioned.

She'll help us loosen up and experiment with some new ways of doing things.
She'll listen, and help us figure out what we most value and hope for
during our lifelong Unitarian Universalist conversions.

Even if nothing else changes, Rev. Hillary's very presence will be a change.
She *is* a minister, and she'll be approaching her position *as a ministry-*
which in this day and age of anxiety and existential angst, is- I think-
exactly what our kids need.

After the past nine years, during which we've had 7 different Directors of Religious
Education and a number of time periods with no Director at all,
in a state where 11 UU congregations have come up empty in the DRE searches,
it is time to try something new—to try having an Assistant Minister again--
to see how it works and how it feels.

I, for one, am excited. And I know those on the interview team are excited too.

By the way-- Rev. Hillary did mention to me that she had other offers,
but *felt the most warmth* at North Parish. So hooray for us!
I think she's going to love it here,
and I *know* she's going to love our kids and our youth.

I love them too.

And for them, these young people who face a tricky and beautiful and frightening world,
I hope for many things.

Among them, I hope that our church might give them
the strength and the inner resources that they'll need to be resilient people.

What does that mean pragmatically?

It means I hope they'll all learn UU songs by heart,
so they sing them around their homes like the kids in the choirs do.

I hope they'll learn some child-friendly mindfulness meditations or body prayers,
to help them feel grounded and centered whenever they need to.

And I hope we can give their parents more support for doing family-friendly rituals at home.

I want those with special needs and those with mental health challenges to feel utterly at home and strengthened here.

I want their teachers to feel supported.

I want us all- kids, youth, teachers, mentors- to feel a deep sense of belonging and connection to this community, to the earth, and to All That Is, to the Spirit of Love, the Creativity that runs through all Life.

I want the kids to know that- even outside of their families- they are beloved on this earth, and that each one of them matters.

I hope our kids and youth might participate in worship services more often- lighting the chalice, offering words, helping out in skits.

I hope they might mentor each other more often- Senior Youth to Jr. Youth, Jr. Youth to Elementary youth.

I hope the children will have more contact with adults in the congregation who can teach them about things like the healing arts, storytelling, yoga or birdwatching. I hope they can get even more time to celebrate and garden and play with each other, to spend together looking or listening to *one glorious thing*.

I wish our youth- and our adults- will feel knowledgeable about the different UU theological pathways— UU Humanism and UU paganism, UU theism and UU Christianity, UU agnosticism and UU Process Theology.

I wish them clarity about UU views of Jesus.

And I wish for them more experience interacting with youth of other faiths, doing service projects alongside them.

I wish the younger ones might get really excited about service projects *they* get to choose, and that they'll know for the rest of their lives that when you feel down, giving to someone else can be a great way to feel good again.

I wish for these things because I believe they're all pieces to the puzzle of creating more emotionally, ethically, spiritually resilient adults. I believe it's important for our young people to have a profound sense of personal agency and power, while also accepting that they are not in control of- nor responsible for- the whole world.

I believe it's important for them to develop a clear UU identity and UU theology, to experience the hard work and the rewards of service.

I believe it's important for them to feel joy, and to move a few steps down that life-long road towards a sense of boundless and universal love for all beings.

It was the Rev. Hosea Ballou, of "happification" fame, who once said, "Energy, even like the Biblical grain of mustard-seed, will remove mountains."

I know we have the energy here to make all this happen. I know we have the resources, the wisdom and the desire. I know our faith has depths to discover and lessons to teach us still- about discovering joy and receiving, experiencing, embodying and proclaiming boundless, universal love for all beings!

And if not for *all* beings, at least feeling love for the single, glorious thing in front of us, a single flower, a girl in a yellow dress, the crescent moon... the folks sitting near us.

We've got to start somewhere.

It might as well be here.

Amen.

Opening words, by the poet Mary Oliver

“Every day, I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight...
That leaves me like a needle In the haystack of light.
It was what I was born for—to look, to listen,
To lose myself inside this soft world—
To instruct myself over and over in joy and acclamation.”

Closing words, by Anne Frank:

“Nearly every morning I go to the attic
to blow the stuffy air out of my lungs,
from my favorite spot on the floor
I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree,
on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver,
and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind.
As long as this exists, I thought, and I may live to see it--
this sunshine, the cloudless skies-- while this lasts, I cannot be unhappy.”