

## Are Woven Fine

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen, June 3, 2012

I was surprised, when I became a minister, to learn how much laughter death involves. During my residency as a hospital chaplain intern I had to do several overnight stints in the emergency room. When a traumatic emergency came in I visited with the patient's family while they waited for news and after they got it. During those visits we would pray, hold hands and sit in quiet nervous expectation. The anxious but somber mood was usually broken by stories. At some point during the night some relative would start telling stories about the patient. As soon as one person started to share another would join in. A lot of these memories were funny. I can remember more than one occasion when a grim and tense gathering suddenly reached a crescendo of laughter.

Sometimes the stories and laughter would start around a deathbed. After a heavyset man died of a massive heart attack his sister started yelling at him, "Wake up you bastard! Wake up! You're gonna' miss the rest of the barbecue! Quick, someone get some ribs! Nothing ever gets this lazy bastard up and out of bed faster than a plate full of juicy ribs! Can you smell them now? There are barbecued ribs slathered with sauce if you will just get off that damn bed!"

By the time the sister had finished her tirade the rest of her siblings were almost paralyzed with laughter. The hospital staff were all smiling, despite their efforts to otherwise control themselves.

Such experiences confirm the truth captured in William Blake's great poem "Auguries of Innocence":

Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A clothing for the soul divine  
Under every grief & pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine

I do not know about you, but it is the times that I feel intense joy or intense sorrow that I feel most alive. One comes with the other. I know what it is like to be joyful because I know what it is like to feel sorrow. But also I sometimes experience the both emotions at the same time.

Late May and early June is the season of graduations. Graduations, like most rites of passage, contain both joy and sorrow. I remember that I when I graduated from college I was proud of my academic accomplishments, excited for my future and more than a little sad that I was leaving my college friends behind me.

Emma's eighth grade graduation was this week. I experienced a similar mixture of sorrow and joy at it. The event had a bit of melancholy of the our little girl is all grown up variety within it for me. At the same time it is wonderful to watch her maturing into a vibrant and smart young woman.

Like graduations, sorrow and joy are also both present at weddings and child dedications. There is a tendency to think of such events as singularly joyous. I imagine most of you have heard the cliché about a wedding being the happiest day of someone's life. But endings are contained within the happiness of weddings. For the couple getting married marriage marks the ending of their lives

as single people. The weddings of the younger generation can be a reminder of mortality for those in the older generation. I have heard many grandparents say that they just want to live long enough to see their grandchildren get married. And I know of more than one instance where an elderly person died not long after the wedding of their last grandchild. I am told that it is not uncommon to reflect that more than half of one's life has passed when one sees one's children get married. Bittersweet.

The same dynamics are at work within child dedications. The coming of one generation heralds the inevitable passing of another. Life moves in cycles. And those cycles begin with the joy of birth and end with the sorrow of death. Birth and death are so interwoven that you cannot have one without the other. Biologists have long argued that the price of sexual reproduction, which brings with it genetic variation and individuation, is death. Put slightly differently, without death we would not be here at all. The only organisms would be single cell bacteria and amoebas, dividing endlessly and functionally immortal--succumbing only to climate and predators. Life without death would be, in other words, pretty boring.

Sorrow and joy, life and death, are like the Taoist symbol the yin-yang. Within each joy there is a little piece of sorrow. Within each sorrow a little piece of joy. Every birth heralds a death. And death, in turn, feeds life and makes way for the new.

Our scene from the hospital is a reminder of how it is all intertwined. The woman was upset because her brother was dead. She was upset because the joys that they shared would now be consigned to memory. She responded to her sorrow by recalling some of the joy they had shared. In doing so she brought laughter to herself and her remaining siblings.

Sometimes I think that we Unitarian Universalists are afraid of the richness of such emotions. We have long praised the rational in religion. In the early 20th century the Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur wrote a comprehensive history of Unitarianism stretching from the early 16th century to the late 19th century. In it he claimed that what distinguishes Unitarianism from other religions was our commitment to freedom, reason and tolerance.

Freedom in Wilbur's understanding was mostly about freedom of belief. To be more specific, it was about the freedom to apply reason to religion and question established religious doctrines. In the early days of the Reformation this was no small thing. Theologians, laypeople and scientists who strayed from religious orthodoxy in that era could face imprisonment or execution.

The Catholic church, for instance, tried Galileo for heresy when he dared to argue, based upon his observations, that the Earth orbited the Sun. After the trial Galileo was placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life.

Galileo's fate was not unique. Many of our religious ancestors were persecuted for their beliefs as well. Michael Servetus, an early theologian whose work has inspired generations of Unitarian thinkers, was burned at the stake by John Calvin because he refused to recant his renunciation of the Trinity.

Freedom of belief, then, is no small matter. In worship it manifests itself as freedom of the pulpit. Freedom of the pulpit gives ministers the right to preach what they believe without fear of censure.

This freedom has meant that Unitarian Universalist ministers have often been at the forefront of speaking out against injustice and for theological innovation. We are called to preach the truth as we understand it, not as it has been delivered to us.

Too much of a focus on freedom of belief, and the reason that is supposed to guide it, can be problematic. An overemphasis on reason in 19th century Unitarianism led Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself a Unitarian minister, to denounce the “corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College.”

I do not think that any of you would accuse me of being as cold as a corpse. But one of things that I have learned about myself as your minister is that I can come off as cool and cerebral. Members of the congregation often describe my sermons as intellectual. In my performance reviews it came up more than once that I appear detached or distant or emotionally reserved. More than one person has told me that I do not show enough enthusiasm in the pulpit and that my preaching needs more passion.

The sense I have been given is that many of you would rather that I portrayed more joy and sorrow than reason in the pulpit. I am sorry if I have disappointed you. The truth is that I am something of an intellectual, whatever that word is taken to meaning. And I do have a fairly calm demeanor. I do not tend to portray my excitement with what one of my Baptist friends calls a lot of whooping and hollering.

These are both my strengths and weaknesses. As you look for your next minister you should consider if they are the sort of characteristics you want in a minister.

I am uncertain that they are. When I have received your feedback I have wondered how much joy and sorrow, how much passion, members of the congregation are comfortable with on Sunday morning. Last year I gave a sermon entitled “Collective Joy” in which I claimed that collective joy was one of the most dangerous ideas in America. During the sermon I encouraged you to make some joyful noise. You dutiful did. Afterwards, more than one person came up to me and expressed discomfort with the noise in the service.

In the autumn I gave the sermon again at West Shore. Again I encouraged people to make some joyful noise. And again after the service some people in the congregation shared with me their discomfort with the presence of joyful noise during the service. Truthfully, we Unitarian Universalists have a somewhat staid worship culture. There are exceptions, but in most Unitarian Universalist congregations people do not respond during sermons the way they do in some other religious traditions. Amongst many Baptists, for instance, it is not uncommon to encourage preachers by yelling out “that’s right” or “Amen” when they make an important point. Without such encouragement it can feel lonely up here in the pulpit. How passionate can a preacher be when he or she looks at onto a congregation of silent faces?

I remember when Leah Lewis, the Associate Minister of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church, came to worship with us. She got up to preach after one of Karin’s wonderful musical meditations and said, “I feel so relaxed right now.” If the preacher feels relaxed at the beginning of a sermon it is hard to get up the emotional vigor to appear passionate. Most of the passionate preaching I have witnessed has followed a build by the congregation--a funky house band, a gospel choir or rousing

hymn. We tend not to do such things. Without them it is difficult to shift the emotional tenor of the service from cool to hot.

If passionate preaching is really something that this congregation wants then during your interim you should look at the whole of worship. This means that visiting and studying other congregations with vibrant worship. All Souls Unitarian in DC would be worth a field trip for some of your worship leaders. Middle Collegiate Church, a liberal Christian congregation in New York, puts on a fantastic annual conference. Rina and I went to it this year and experienced their vibrant worship. During the Sunday service the music ranged from classical to gospel to jazz and soul. The passing of the peace, which is when members of the congregation greet each other like we do during the welcome, was raucous.

Middle Collegiate and All Souls are both much larger congregations with big budgets for music and multiple musicians on staff. You might think that my suggestion that you look to them, or congregations like them, is unrealistic. But the experience of Middle Collegiate proves otherwise. The majority of that congregation's musical diversity comes from its members. Many of them view performing during the services as part of their stewardship of the congregation.

What if that were to happen here? I know that this congregation has many musically talented members. Our annual Mother's Day service contains a range of wonderful performances. What if some of you who perform during Mother's Day were to perform throughout the year? How would that change worship? Would it make it more participatory? Would it broaden the emotional range on Sunday?

Would you be ready for that? Would you be ready for services that brought more joy and more sorrow into them? That kind of emotional presence can be scary. I have been told before that some people do not like my meditations when they contain too many references to the world's problems. "They make me feel depressed," someone once said to me. "I come to services for something other than being reminded of the world's problems."

I understand that. And in doing so, I understand that facing reality can be emotionally fraught. It is like Susan Sontag once wrote of the New York Times, "An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the great newspaper of record each morning, given the likelihood of seeing photographs that could make you cry."

Certainly, the news of the week, this week or any other, is tilted towards the horrific. There are natural disasters, civilian massacres, the ongoing, never ending, economic troubles, attacks on reproductive health care, the threat of ecological collapse... The solutions to many of these problems are hard to grasp and require a major rethinking of how we as human species relate to each other and to the planet.

I think that it is easier for many of us Unitarian Universalists to try to address these issues on a rational level than open ourselves to the complexity of emotions that they bring. How horrifying is it to consider the ongoing massacre of women and children in Syria on the basic human level? To picture toddlers being shot? What about the awful reality that humans are causing mass extinctions across the planet?

But to open our services up to more of this sorrow would also mean opening them up to more joy. The two are intertwined. Joyful worship is hollow without an acknowledgment of the deep sorrows of the world. And there's no release from sorrow like a joyful moment of shared ecstasy. The whole tradition of the Blues is a prime example of this.

A greater emotional range during worship services will bring with it an increased sense of vulnerability. To be open to both joy and sorrow during a service means being open to being changed during a service. How many of us are ready for that? We do not generally respond to rational arguments. It is the ones that reach us emotionally that can cause us to change our minds. The truth of these statements will be affirmed over and over again in the coming months as politicians use emotionally laden political advertisements, rather than rational arguments, to try and win election.

For the preacher such worship calls for an ability to be vulnerable. We who preach are constantly haunted by the question of whether our words are adequate and our sermons good enough for the congregations we serve. We are like the poet Pan Chieh-yu from our poem earlier, worried that if you stop liking our sermons--like she was worried her lover would stop liking her fan--you will stop loving us.

I have tried my best to be vulnerable from the pulpit. I have shared stories of my joys and sorrows. I have tried follow's Emerson's advice on preaching and deal "out to the people... [my] life,--life passed through the fire of thought." I leave it to you to decide as to whether I have been successful.

On some level it has been my objective in each sermon to offer you a little sorrow, a little joy, a little hope and a little love. I know that not all of my sermons have accomplished this. But that has not been because I have not tried. Indeed, in all that I have preached I have tried to remember Blake's words:

Joy & Woe are woven fine  
A clothing for the soul divine  
Under every grief & pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine

May we all remember them and in doing so open ourselves, and our worship, up to ever growing richness.

Amen and Blessed Be.