

To Love a Parade

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland, June 12, 2011

Yesterday I spent the late morning and early afternoon holding up the back end of a dragon costume. As the back end of a dragon I marched, danced and sometimes stumbled my way through Parade the Circle with the Possibilitarian Puppet Theater. It was hot, sweaty, a little smelly and physically exhausting. My four year-old son was with me and the heat of the costume, coupled with the long walk, made him more than a little cranky.

Despite our discomfort both my son and I had a great time. Participating in events like Parade the Circle is, for me, an opportunity to lose my sense of self and connect to something larger. Such events offer a religious experience, a time when the banal worries of the everyday melt away and I am present with the present. In the back end of my dragon costume I could only focus on two things, keeping step with my companion operating the dragon's head, and ensuring that my son did not wander too far outside of the costume. Any other thoughts vanished from my head. I attuned myself only to the tasks at hand. The anxieties and worries that sometimes make up my individual identity disappeared and I found myself lost in the now.

In a recent column in the New York Times, David Brooks wrote about the meaning of life and losing one's self. Contra our society's incessant focus on following your dreams and finding yourself, Brooks argued that "[the] purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself."

This morning I want explore Brooks assertion through what I consider one of the most radical ideas, perhaps the most radical idea, in American culture. That idea is collective joy. Collective joy is often experienced at carnivals, rock concerts, events like Parade the Circle, dance parties and ecstatic rituals. It is difficult to define. Collective joy is a physical experience, not a mental construct. It runs counter to the Western concept of the self--being a collective experience it undermines the idea that we humans function as isolated individuals--and has long been deemed dangerous by religious, military and civil authorities.

The author Barbara Ehrenreich offers two definitions from anthropology and sociology to clarify what she means when she thinks about collective joy. She believes that the first element of collective joy is composed of what the sociologist Emile Durkheim named "collective effervescence: the ritual induced passion or ecstasy that cements social bonds and, [Durkheim] proposed, forms the ultimate basis of religion." The second element is what the anthropologist Victor Turner "called *communitas*... the spontaneous love and solidarity that can arise within a community of equals."

Such academic definitions may fall short of the mark. Collective joy is fundamentally an emotional, embodied and non-rational experience. Thus describing it in words is probably an impossible task. Therefore, I want to take what amounts to a risk this morning. I want to invite you to experience a little collective joy. Let's make a little joyful noise together. Clap your hands, stomp your feet, let out a whoop or a yell if you feel like it.

Such expressions of joyful noise, of collective joy, run counter to the Protestant liturgical tradition. Indeed, joyful noise during a worship service in some eras would have been seen as an act of religious rebellion and a sign that a congregation—and its minister—had strayed from godliness.

The history of religion amongst Europeans is a history replete with tension between those who wished to experience collective joy, and insert it into religious services, and those who wished to suppress it. Collective joy is difficult to contain, difficult to direct and threatening to the established social order. There is good reason to believe that the Protestant liturgical tradition is constructed the way it is specifically to limit embodied experiences of collective joy.

Take, for instance, the fact that you are all seated. Pews and chairs were not introduced into churches in Europe until the 13th century. Prior to that when people gathered for worship they gathered in spaces with open floor plans. During the service most people stood and, it appears, they often danced. A twelfth-century traveler in Wales provided this description of dancing during a saint's day celebration:

You can see young men and maidens, some in the church itself, some in the churchyard and others in the dance which wends its way round the graves. They sing traditional songs, all of a sudden they collapse on the ground, and then those who, until now, have followed their leader peacefully as if in a trance, leap up in the air as if seized by frenzy.

That sounds to me more like the description of a really good party than a religious service. And there is a reason for that. Such ecstatic dance rituals offer participants the experience of a direct connection with the divine. The medieval Catholic church imposed priests as mediators between the realms of the divine and the human. In doing so, the church solidified its religious authority—only its priests could know anything through direct experience of the mind or heart of God. Therefore, the church sought to stamp out such dance rituals and proclaim them to not religious but satanic. In doing so, they preserved the church's religious authority. There is a reason why in some Western literature the Devil is portrayed as a fiddler. Fiddlers lead dances. And dance, the logic went, can lead people astray by tricking them into thinking that they, and not the priests, know something of the divine.

This hostility towards dance is not a uniquely Catholic problem. It carried over into Protestantism with the dour theology of John Calvin. Calvin saw pleasure in any form as a trick of the Devil and banned dancing, gambling, drinking and sports. The followers of Calvin were expected to sit still during church services, perhaps sing an occasional hymn, and listen to the dry intonations of a preacher who warned them of the impending threat of eternal damnation all but a few—the elect-faced. For the Calvinists success in this life, often brought about by an adherence to a strict work ethic, was a sign of God's favor in the next. Those who frittered away their time seeking pleasure were surely doomed. Joy in religious services was just as troubling a sign of one's straying from God as any form of pleasure outside of it.

Now, we Unitarian Universalists reject both the theological suppositions of the Catholics and the Calvinists. We know that each of us can have a direct experience of the ultimate mystery and wonder that is the universe. As Ralph Waldo Emerson charged us to ask: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" We have no need of priests to mediate between us and

the divine. We seek knowledge of ultimate reality in the company, with the guidance of, but not the permission of, others.

And we know that there is nothing wrong with pleasure. Contra to the historical tradition of Calvinism contemporary Unitarian Universalism affirms that sexual pleasure--certainly one of the forms of pleasure that Calvinists have been most suspicious of--is a natural and normal part of human existence--provided, of course, that sexual acts are committed by consenting adults. If we affirm sexual pleasure then it is certain that we affirm other forms of healthy pleasure as well.

If we reject the theology that has shaped our liturgy such that it rarely includes expressions of collective joy, why should we not reject, or at least alter, the liturgy itself? Let us have another moment of joyful noise.

I said at the beginning of my sermon that collective joy is one of the most dangerous ideas in America. Let me now suggest why. Collective joy is dangerous for at least three reasons. First, it unites people across dividing lines--be they of race, class, gender, sexual orientation or some other divisor. Second, it undermines established social hierarchies. Third, as I have already mentioned, it provides individuals with a direct experience of the divine.

Collective joy is primarily a physical experience. It is rooted in the body--in the physical sensation of being with other people, moving, shouting, singing with them--more than it is rooted in the mind. Most human divisors are mental constructs. In order to otherize someone you have to be able to label them. And in order to label them you have to use words.

This may be one of the realities behind the ancient story of the Tower of Babel. You probably remember its rough outlines. In ancient times all humanity spoke one language and shared one culture. And it came to pass that this unified humanity decided to create a tower "whose top," the book of Genesis relates, "may reach unto heaven." God was threatened by the construction of this tower. Genesis records: "And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." God, in other words, was threatened by the prospect of a unified humanity. And so God came down onto Earth and confused human language. Instead of one language and one culture for human beings God gave them thousands. The differences in the new languages and cultures were such that people could not communicate across them.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a myth. But it does offer an important truth, language and culture create barriers that are difficult to overcome. When two people do not have the same culture and language it can be challenging for them to communicate or to see each other as equals. Many social injustices are born from the inability of one group--usually, but not always of European descent--to see members of another group who do not share their culture or language as equals. When we use words to communicate we risk misunderstanding each other--or oppressing each other--across lines of language and culture.

Not so with collective joy. Collective joy, because it is primarily a non-verbal experience, eliminates, or at least greatly weakens, the barriers of communication that arise from language and culture.

Rob Hardies, the senior minister of All Souls, Unitarian, in Washington, DC offers an account of collective joy in the wake of President Obama's election. Describing and reflecting upon his experience he notes, that it offered him "a vision of the human family--of all creation--reconciled and whole." That vision was not born of words. It came from his lived experience of college students, homeless people, "progressive hipsters" and "fancy dressers" dancing together. At such a moment the divisions between the individuals in that throbbing mass of humanity were forgotten. The self disappeared. A common experience of joy and celebration was born.

I have had my own such experiences of the unifying and healing power of collective joy. I began to go to techno parties in Detroit--commonly called raves--as a teenager in Michigan. At these all night dance marathons people united across race, class and sexual orientation to listen and jump, jit, jam, pop, break and jive--in other words to dance--to banging rhythms of jazz, disco and funk inspired electronic music. In what may be America's most racially divided urban area--90% of the city of Detroit is black while the surrounding suburbs are primarily white--collective joy brought people together.

That collective joy still brings people together. Memorial Day weekend Sara and I headed up to Detroit for the annual Detroit Electronic Music Festival. And there we saw and were reunited with friends with whom I have been dancing for close to two decades. It is not an accident that these friends represent the most diverse of my friendship groups. Initially we did not have much in common. A shared love of music and shared experience of collective joy has bonded us together over the years.

The healing possibility of the community created by electronic music has not been lost on some techno musicians. Witnessing its dynamics in his hometown led seminal Detroit artist "Mad" Mike Banks to write about the power of music to unify "music is true and ultimately much more efficient than all written language to this date--tribal people have known this for thousands of years. We are all tribal people but some of us have strayed away from the talk of the drum and they talk with words and languages that mean nothing! THE DRUM IS ALWAYS BETTER."

The drum may always be better but collective joy does not always require dance. The founding assembly of the Greater Cleveland Congregations on Monday was probably an instance of collective joy. More than two thousand people, twenty six of whom were from this congregation, crammed into the Masonic auditorium to commit to work together for a better Greater Cleveland. There was music. There were passionate speeches, homilies and prayers. Most importantly there was the sense that the event was something everyone was creating together. It was a collective product and it brought together representatives from Cuyahoga county's many diverse communities. There were Christians, Muslims, Jews and Unitarian Universalists. There were East siders and West siders. There were African Americans, whites, latinos, asians... There were people of different sexual orientations and with different economic situations. Such a coming together filled me with a sense of hope and joy. And I could tell that it filled others with the same. Collective joy is powerful in how it can unite us.

Just as collective joy unites lives across human division, it also undermines social hierarchies. Historically, collective joy, as embodied in the medieval tradition of carnival, was used create a brief experience of a leveled society--one in which hierarchies of class temporarily disappeared. Mocking rituals were a central part of the European carnival tradition. In these rituals someone

dressed up like the local monarch or church hierarch and behaved obscenely. Others mocked and taunted the costumed reveler or joined in the sport of making fun of the ruling class.

Such mocking rituals served as social safety valves. The lower classes vented their frustrations on people impersonating their rulers rather than upon the rulers themselves.

During carnival everyone was on the same level. If the self disappeared then so did the social ranking that went alongside it. People often wore masks and the wealthy or powerful who participated did so anonymously, a sense that everyone was the same pervaded. This sense, coupled with the mocking ritual, served as a reminder that despite the rulers pretensions--this was during the era of the divine right of kings--the ruling class was made up of human beings and those human beings could be challenged.

Carnivals sometimes erupted into social clashes. In the 16th century there are multiple recorded instances where carnivals became opportunities for the lower classes to unite against their rulers. In one instance in Italy a pre-Lent carnival turned into a riot which ended with the sacking of more than twenty palaces and murder of fifty nobles. In others the acts of revolt began with spontaneous carnivals. When a sense of social injustice was at hand, even if no holiday was scheduled, people would take to the streets in carnivalesque rebellions. The social historian E. P. Thompson describes the scene "a language of ribbons, of bonfires, of oaths and the refusal of oaths, of toasts, seditious riddles and ancient prophecies, of oak leaves and of maypoles... whistled in the streets."

Protest as carnival, protest as act of collective joy, continues to be a political reality, on both the left and the right. We have all seen, or participated in, political protests where people dress up in costume, mock the powerful and create an atmosphere that resembles of a party. Such events remain as powerful today as they were five hundred years ago. They still contain the same possibility of social leveling.

The 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, for instance, turned the city--and for a brief moment--the world upside down. With giant puppets, clowns, frisbees, songs, bicycles, mobile sound systems and a pervading sense of collective ecstasy, protestors--and I was one of them--took over the city of Seattle and prevented the WTO from meeting. Dignitaries were stuck in their hotels while groups like the Grucho Marxists roamed the streets chanting "This is what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!"

Such carnival moments might prefigure a more egalitarian society. They can be instances of what the anthropologist David Graeber calls "prefigurative politics" which means "to prefigure the genuinely free society one wishes to create" and act "as if one is already free."

Collective joy offers that experience of freedom. That may explain why in recent years police have targeted puppeteers preemptively in advance of protests. If protests can be kept to sober and somber events then there is little hope that they will effectively challenge pervading social norms. If the spirit of collective joy is invoked then things from, the establishment perspective, may get out of hand and the protest, from the protesters perspective, may actually be effective at shutting down the city and challenging the ruling class.

In the last few months we have again witnessed the power of collective joy to transform societies. Many of the events of the Arab Spring, and now the youth uprisings in Spain and Greece, contain carnivalesque or celebratory aspects. Photographs of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, for instance, reveal moments when people united in joyous celebration against the Mubarak regime across social classes. There are images of weddings being celebrated, food being shared and even hair being cut during the uprising. Such photographs and stories reveal the remarkable power of collective joy to create a feeling of egalitarianism and bring people together for a common cause. In Egypt collective joy made the unthinkable, the end of Mubarak's regime, possible.

Uniting people across dividing lines, undermining social hierarchies, creating egalitarian, if temporary, experiences, offering individuals a direct experience of the divine, collective joy is dangerous to pervading social norms and the dominant culture. It can be liberating for the individual, allowing for a loss of self and a glimpse of the possible. Collective joy may be the most radical idea in America.

That it may be so I invite you to now make some joyful noise.

Amen and Blessed Be.