

Weavers of the Web

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First Parish in Brookline

Perhaps this sermon ought to come with a disclaimer: your minister is about to make some audacious and outrageous claims about how participating in a faith community can greatly enhance the quality of your life and even your meaning making. We're going to talk about love in community, which one of you said last week is about as difficult as talking about God. In fact, depending upon your theology, they may be the same thing.

How is it with your spirit these days? Are you living the life you always dreamed of, or are you barely managing to survive? I worry about many of us as we seek to build meaningful lives in the new economic reality this Great Recession has brought. How would our friends describe us? Does our generosity spring forth from our sense of great abundance in this life, or are we more fixated on scarcity, poverty of spirit, and what we lack? For joy to become manifest, it is important we live abundantly.

Now you may tell me it is difficult given your circumstances, and I will tell you that difficult is not the same as impossible. We gather here together to make the impossible possible. Living out of a sense of abundance or scarcity has very little to do with what resources we actually have, but rather it is a way of being in the world and rearranging resources to better suit our mood.

As Patrick O'Neill, Unitarian Universalist minister serving our church in Brooklyn, NY, says: "Living in scarcity mode, you realize, has nothing to do with how much money or how many assets you have, how rich you are or how poor you might be materially. Living in scarcity mode means living constantly in negative energy ... it means living a miserly existence, in constant awareness of all the things we lack, all the things we think we don't have enough of, all the things we want more of. It means living fearfully and anxiously, in fear of losing what we have, in fear of giving too much of ourselves away and someday perhaps not having enough for ourselves."

Having just lived through the Great Recession, with many of us losing jobs, income, or assets, it is understandable if this may engender a spirit of scarcity; but for the sake of our spirits we must learn to respond from love. This community of faith is built upon the power of such love.

Now, I'm not speaking about some loosey-goosey, "all you need is love," but rather I am speaking about what we do together as a community that we could never do alone. The Apostle Paul says to one is given speaking wisdom, to another teaching knowledge, to a third a deep faith, or gifts of healing, working of miracles, or prophecy. He calls these spiritual gifts, manifestations of the spirit for the common good, the ultimate value of community. Yet all of these gifts are motivated by a sense of love and kindness, or else they are utterly worthless. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love. This isn't loosey-

goosey, but rather a rich spiritual teaching which can lift us from living a life of scarcity to living a life of abundance.

As the modern poet Diane Ackerman writes: “The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one’s curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills every day. Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and unyielding, and, despite all its dimensions, valleys, pinnacles, and detours, life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography, only a length. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between.” I live and cherish such a love of life.

You may be feeling this morning like your life has about as much mystery and excitement as used dishwater. I am seeking to help us all remember those dimensions of our life we may have overlooked or lost: the deep valleys, high pinnacles, and winding detours that first sparked our love affair with this life.

Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth claims the same spiritual gifts for the emerging Christian church as his followers had previously experienced in the Greco-Roman pagan mystery religions: *Prophecy*, which doesn’t mean fortune telling but rather becoming an instrument to speak on behalf of what is truly ultimate. *Enthusiasmos*, which we translate as enthusiasm, but which means being visibly inspired, and in a sense possessed by the divine mysteries, sometimes through rituals or even by dancing. *Dynamis* involves healing people of their deepest wounds by incorporating and channeling power of the divine mysteries to heal. Access to this transcendent power of the divine for human benefit was the point of all Greco-Roman religions, and in fact is still so in many religions, and also these spiritual gifts described by Paul for our journeys.

Are such powerful gifts available to be enjoyed by 21st Century UU’s? At least since the Protestant Reformation, serious, rational people have been deeply suspicious of these emotive gifts of channeling divine wisdom, knowledge and faith, and myriad reported miracles of healing and prophecy that have often been associated with them. But spiritual teachers continue to teach us that if we live from abundance, all these can also be ours. It requires only that we come together faithfully in community, bringing our most open and best selves, and engaging in those spiritual practices that help us to transcend our mundane reality.

Together in community we find joy in the midst of our brokenness, much laughter and some weeping in the face of this extraordinary catastrophe that is living as a human being. These are gifts of spiritual growth. For those who are willing to pursue them, and those able to risk being broken open in the process, these gifts of the spirit are alive and well and readily available to all of us here today. Ask anyone who joined this year’s Spiritual Autobiography class! We all thrive on love.

The Apostle Paul’s tribute to love has perhaps lost much of its power for us through overuse. Not so the 14th Century Sufi poet Hafiz, who is more earthy and wants us to see beyond loosey-goosey notions of love to the enormously powerful engagement that lies just beyond. He writes: “Love wants to reach out and manhandle us, break all your teacup talk of God. If [we] had the

courage, and could give the Beloved His choice, some nights, He would just drag [us] around the room, by [our] hair, ripping from our grip all those toys in the world that bring [us] no joy.”

Here is a poet who knows love. “Love sometimes gets tired of speaking sweetly, and wants to rip to shreds all erroneous notions of truth... [that cause] the world to weep on too many fine days. God wants to manhandle us, lock us inside a tiny room with Himself and practice his dropkick. The Beloved sometimes wants to do us a favor: hold us upside down and shake all the nonsense out.”

Are we open and willing for love to turn our lives upside down and then shake all the nonsense out of us? It isn't enough to just come to church for worship, we must open ourselves to small group experiences, programs that can foster our growth in community. When do we get these gifts? When we are changed or transformed by love in community. When our hearts sing! When we feel the call to dance in response.

That perhaps is the ultimate cure for the post Great Recession blues, or for living in the midst of the volatility and economic uncertainty that is now emerging, to let love and the divine mysteries manhandle us, to rip from our grip all those toys that bring us no joy, to shred our erroneous notions of what we will do with our lives, which cause us to weep on too many fine days, and shake all of our bloody nonsense out. Such is love.

In this place we celebrate the web of life, looking to see divinity within every living thing. Ours is an abundant world, teeming with life, and with opportunities for us to find joy in the ongoing unfolding of the universe. We cannot, we should not, allow fears of scarcity to distract from our love songs of abundance.

We are weavers of the web of life, connoisseurs of deep divine mysteries, and lovers of the gifts that come forth in community. No matter what our particular problems may be, and I do not minimize our difficulties, we each have a multitude of blessings in our lives: friends, family, health, plenty of food, bountiful nature, and all those things large and small that bring us joy.

This is a community of transformation whose product is joy. As Canadian UU minister John Morgan says: “In the end it won't matter how much we have, but how generously we have given. It won't matter how much we know, but rather how well we live. And it won't matter how much we believe, but how deeply we love.” This community is a laboratory fostering love.

In right relationship, we weave together the various strands of our lives to make a web of life that is strong enough to support us through the darkest times that life can offer. Through deep community we engage together in cultivating the myriad and varied gifts that we each bring forth in this community. And by our presence for each other, we encourage and support the spiritual growth of which each of us is ultimately capable. That is what it means to be UU and in community in the 21st Century.

As UU theologian Thandeka writes: “If someone tells you that she or he knows pain, loneliness, loss, fear and dismay, but does not know the feeling of being sustained by a love that is wider, deeper, and infinitely vaster than the sorrows, hear those words as a commission. Hear your

commission to love, to create community, and to heal. One at a time in personal relationships, ten at a time in covenant groups, hundreds at a time in our congregations, hundreds of thousands at a time in our religious movement, millions at a time as we take our commission deeper and deeper into humanity's heart as a justice-loving people who will transform the world. This is the Good News of our faith."

Where do we find our joy, our faith, our hope? We want to evoke your deepest joy even if that feels dangerous and beyond the realm of possibility; we are such a community. As the 19th Century UU saint Walt Whitman says in one of his poems: "This is what you should do: love the earth and sun and animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone who asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people... reexamine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, dismiss what insults your very soul, and your flesh shall become a great poem." I don't think Jesus said it better or more completely.

We are a faith community dedicated to embracing joy, deepening our connections one with another, celebrating our individual and collective transformations, covenanting to walk together and encourage each other upon our spiritual journeys. We seek to be fully human, to be our best selves in community together. This was wonderfully captured by that poet of the spirit Hafiz, who wrote: "Keep squeezing drops of the sun from your prayers and work and music and from your companions' beautiful laughter, and from the most insignificant movements of your own holy body. Now, sweet one, be wise, cast all your votes for DANCING!"

Let our time together be a dance of the spirit. I love you all dearly. Amen, and Blessed Be.