

Take Joy
A sermon preached by Rev. Diane Teichert
Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
February 28, 2010

I'm glad you enjoyed this morning's reading by Roald Dahl (*The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*)! It was a bit long for a reading, so I want to assure you that the sermon will not go on too long!

The aspiring vicar, Robert Lee, was able to "gratify his ambition to go into training for the ministry" because he had mastered his dyslexia to the point that his writing and reading were up to the challenge.

In my preparation for ministry, I did not have such a major challenge as the Reverend Lee. But I *was* told early on, for my own good as well as any congregations I might serve in the future, that I ought to "lighten up."

So, I endeavored to lighten up... without making it a serious project!

At that time there was a shallow shelf at the top of the window over our kitchen sink at home. I began placing humorous things on that ledge, to give me a daily reminder to "lighten up." Some, such as this zany monster finger puppet and these colorful cloth turtles were gifts. And others are souvenirs I purchased because they made me smile: this funny monk from the gift shop at the monastery where I once went on a five-day silent retreat and these cute frogs from the Boston Garden Show.

Around that time of the advice to "lighten up," which was fifteen or nearly twenty years ago, our family went to visit another family with whom we are still close though our respective nests are now empty. Their kids are the same ages as ours, so that our get-togethers were occasions to which everyone looked forward: the kids would go off to play and the adults could talk for long periods without interruption, even preparing dinner, which then all eight of us would sit down to enjoy. Such was expected that evening.

As we came up the stairs to our friends' second floor apartment, I noticed a little yellow post-it note in my friend Jan's handwriting on the wall in the foyer up ahead. It said, "Take Joy". When we dropped our coats on our friends' bed, I saw another post-it note on the mirror over their dresser: "Take Joy." Throughout the evening, I spotted several others, all saying the same thing. "Take Joy."

I wondered to myself, was my long-time friend Jan trying to "lighten up" too? Was she too hoping to find more joy in daily life? I was amazed to think that, unbeknownst to the other, we each were taking on the same challenge in our lives.

It wasn't until we were putting on our coats to leave that I had a chance to take Jan aside and ask her about the post-it notes.

She looked at me quizzically. "Oh, those!" she exclaimed. "You know we're leaving on vacation tomorrow and I want to be sure to remember to take Joy to our downstairs neighbors, who are going to take care of her while we're gone."

Joy was their hamster!

We both had a good laugh when I told her what I'd been thinking about her notes!

The ability to laugh at ourselves must be either the prerequisite for spiritual growth or its product, or maybe it's both. As everyone knows, there is no such thing as perfection. The very best we can hope to ever be is perfectly imperfect.

Even the word "utopia" which I think we all would agree connotes the idea of an "ideal place," actually comes from two Greek words, one for "not" and the other for "place." Utopia, therefore, is no-place, nowhere, not existent, impossible!

And, likewise, we humans just have to settle for being "good enough" because our perfection is not possible. So to is it with our congregations, they are never perfect! Perfection is not possible!

That is why there was a certain passage in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which used to trouble me. Jesus is recorded as saying, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." (Mt 5:48) Well, I wasn't at all sure that my perfection was possible, or even desirable! No doubt, being taught from an early age to aspire to perfection contributed to my seriousness!

However, when I was older I learned about a translation of that verse that works better for me. It's by a Biblical scholar, Clarence Jordan, a minister who founded the experimental interracial Koinonia Community in southern Georgia, as early as 1942, far ahead of its time especially for that area. Clarence Jordan translated some of the Christian Scriptures from the Greek into the vernacular of the American South, which he published with the name *Cotton Patch Gospel*.

(Here is a digression. Last year, where I was one of the ministers in Bedford Massachusetts, our UU youth group planned a trip to Koinonia and other civil rights movement sites in Georgia for their February school vacation week. Because I had lived at Koinonia as a volunteer for two months when I was twenty, I volunteered to do a Bible study with the youth group using Jordan's translations. That's why I had reason to reacquaint myself with the *Cotton Patch Gospel* and rediscover his translation of that passage. End of digression). ?

His translation of the passage that troubled me, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," is based on the fact that the Greek word *teleos* has complex meanings including not only "perfected," but also "complete, mature, whole." So, Jordan's translation reads, "Now you, you all must be mature, as your spiritual Father is mature."

That I like! Maturity is worthy of our striving, but not perfection!

I do not mean that we should accept ourselves as "second rate" just because perfection is impossible. Nor does it mean we should be self-centered, failing to each do our part to make our world a more just and peaceful world.

Mature people take good care of themselves *and* they look out for others, too. Mature people do not expect perfection of themselves nor do they expect utopia of their family, friends, congregation, community or nation. Though we are imperfect, we can strive for excellence anyway.

The Buddhist tradition teaches to let go of expectations and attachments. It teaches that we suffer because of our attachments. Anyone who has ever experienced disappointment knows that it's painful to expect something—a job, a place to live, good health, happy children—and then not get it. Buddhism teaches ways (such as meditation and yoga) of centering ourselves into the present moment, so that regrets about the past and hopes for the future recede from our awareness and instead our attention is on the present.

However, for me, I'm not there yet. When I am facing a disappointment, I find myself first reaching out to friends and family for support. Then I look within for the strength to face the disappointment.

How do you deal with disappointment?

If I get a dose of a loved one's care and concern, *then* I can take a solitary walk or bike ride or do sitting meditation or write in my journal. *Then* I can recover from the pain of disappointment by letting go of my attachment to whatever expectation it was that did not get realized. And after that I can re-focus myself on a new path or goal ahead.

How do you deal with disappointment?

The poet Rumi, in the Sufi Muslim tradition, said that we should actively welcome disappointment. He wrote

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Last year, I visited the home of an elder in our congregation who was losing more and more of her physical abilities due to Parkinson's disease and is requiring more and more help. She told me she is feeling discouraged, and I sensed a gray bleakness about her, so I asked her how she has faced discouragement in the past. She said she hadn't needed to.

But, then her grown daughter, who had moved back home to help take care of her mother, spoke up to remind her, "Mom, you faced lots of discouragement in the past and you did it by being brave for us kids."

She continued, "But now we are all grown up adults who are by no means perfect. Now we are disappointing to you, Mom, and so maybe you feel you have no one to be brave for."

Somehow, she needs to be brave for herself.

I told her about Rumi's advice to welcome with gratitude whatever comes. She was quiet for a moment. And then she retorted, "What if someone lived in Israel or Palestine and their small child was killed by a bomb, should they welcome it?" It was my time to be quiet for a moment.

"No," I finally said. "In that moment, they would feel horror, grief, and anger—no one would welcome it, you are right. But," I went on, "I think that what Rumi is saying is that, to live a complete, mature, whole life, eventually we must accept even the most horrific thing that befalls us, and see something good that came of it, make something good out of it, or learn and grow in response to it."

We do not know if we will face horrific things in life.

But, we *do* know that we will surely face disappointments--as individuals, congregations, communities, as a nation. We know that we will sometimes disappoint ourselves and others, hopefully not horrifically. We will indeed have regrets for our shortcomings.

What I want to suggest today is that we humans, all of our relations, and all of our creations are perfectly imperfect.

And that we'll become more whole, mature and complete if we cultivate the ability to accept our perfect imperfection with a little humor. *Then* can we strive for excellence.

And most especially, don't forget: Take Joy!