



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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JOY AND WOE ARE WOVEN FINE

It may have been odd to anyone visiting the Palliative Care Unit to hear laughter bursting out of one particular room time and again, but my family has always enjoyed good-natured joking and teasing. For about a week, everyone was home in Fredericton, a relatively rare event for us; we spent most of that time in the hospital.

While Dad held his place amongst us, we told funny stories about him: like the time he went to hang up his jacket on the hooks at the top of the basement stairs; a moment later we heard a metallic glissando: the inimitable sound of an avalanche of coat hangers falling downstairs. And then, a shout: "I hate coat hangers!" It became a phrase we teased Dad with for decades after.

Or the time we were on vacation in Nova Scotia, when Dad was under the hood of our over-heated car by the side of a road. Though we were visible for a mile in either direction, a car whizzed by way too fast and close, its horn honking only when it was practically beside us. Mom was so mad she blasted the horn right back at him. We didn't have to see Dad jump out of his skin to know that had been a big mistake, and his profanity-free rage was much funnier than if he'd sworn like a sailor. "You... dullard!" That was a new word for us boys. Now, I'm making it sound as though Dad shouted a lot, but that was the funny part of it. He was so patient and self-contained that those times when he lost it were doubly hilarious.

But to get back to the time I'm talking about, there we all were for another week of summer vacation, this time spent in the Fredericton hospital, telling these stories again, laughing, adding our two bits and then all going quiet, retreating into private thoughts for awhile. Dad lay there, saying nothing – he was in a coma during the last few days of his battle with cancer.

Yes, it must have sounded odd to people visiting other patients, but my family and our closest friends were living one of our most precious, memorable and bonding events, laughing and laughing... and aching and grieving. You may well have memories of such a time: your own proof of why the words, 'bitter' and 'sweet', go so aptly together.

My first spiritual director happened to be Rev. Dr. Peter Short, the past Moderator of the United Church; he is the senior minister of my family's church and before I was Unitarian Universalist, I sought him out, in particular to talk about this issue. I'd always expected that I'd simply be happier as I grew spiritually and became more accepting of life. Instead, I was discovering that, as spiritual growth continues, ambivalent feelings become more frequent; neither pure happiness nor pure sadness lasts for long, but increasingly they are tangled up together. Upon hearing this, Dr. Short went over to his bulletin board and took down this hand-made greeting card; just a few weeks ago, I remembered where I'd squirreled it away, so I brought it with me. Years before that day when Peter gave it to me, one of his parishioners had sent it to him after she'd given birth on the same day her mother had died.

I recognized it as a poem of William Blake's, but only later did I realize that these are the lyrics for hymn #17 in our hymnbook. It goes:

*Joy and woe are woven fine, A clothing for the soul divine,
Under every grief and pine, Runs a joy with silken twine.
It is right it should be so, Man was made for joy and woe,
And when this we rightly know, Through the world we safely go.¹*

Now, I understood these lines very little when I first read them as a 17-year-old freshman, but now I understand perfectly. Blake addresses a core, continuing, spiritual struggle: how to accept and value both joy and woe.

Pondering this problem, I looked up "joy" in the Encyclopedia of Religion. It isn't there! I ask you: What possible good is religion, if you can't find 'joy' in its encyclopedia? But then, "woe" isn't there, either. Religion seemed to be telling me that I have to figure it out myself.

In our younger years, most people experience joy as elation and excitement, in other words, a kind of high, like surfing on the crest of a ten-foot wave. This kind of exciting joy can become an end in itself; we pursue it like a country dog chasing every passing car – maybe this time I'll actually catch it and grab hold of it. We continue to hope that our own story will end in "happily ever after." The novel, *Nobody's Son*, by Sean Stewart, a Canadian fantasy writer, *begins* at the happily-ever-after moment, and then goes on into the nitty-gritty that comes *after*.

After we live through some of that nitty-gritty, we may give up on elation; it passes so quickly. Then, we have to figure out how to endure all those times in life that hurt so much – disappointment, loss, rejection, failure. The lucky amongst us receive a balanced measure of positive and negative experiences, and find a smoother, though no less valuable path towards wisdom.

¹ William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*.

Some of us who appear to be the most fortunate, those to whom nothing bad ever seems to happen, are too often, I fear, unprepared for that first, inevitable, big bump in the road; the first stop sign; the first casualty. If you feel you are one of these people, you can ready yourself by sticking with those around you who aren't so fortunate. You can become an adept companion for those who are suffering. You can learn to become someone who is seen as a true friend, not as one who runs away from uncomfortable situations. You can be one of those who do some of the dirty work in the world.

There are, of course, those of us who seem cursed with troubles. Problems pile upon difficulties complicated by disasters. Nothing like the right answer for us appears in any self-help book or on any Oprah show. When we have this kind of life, we might find meaning in a text like the *Book of Job* in the Hebrew Bible. Even the non-believer can read it as a mythical, eternal tale about facing personal disaster. I'll come back to Job shortly, but there are a couple of points that I must make first.

I want to be clear that I'm suggesting neither that woe is good for anyone, nor that it is ever to be endured for the sake of some future reward when it should be stopped or prevented; abuse and suffering are not spiritual experiences. We also must never tell someone else that her suffering has meaning, or is part of a plan, or will serve any purpose. To do this is arrogant, as though we presume to know anything about what meaning someone else will find in life. If we are asked, we can offer what meaning we have found, but at first, the person's experience needs only to be accepted and held. Our Unitarian Universalist principles urge us to prevent or reduce unnecessary pain whenever we can, but often that is simply by sitting with somebody in silence.

Rather, what I *am* saying is that woe is inescapable, and it changes us; there's a risk that the change will be for the worse. It is always tempting to surrender in the negative sense; to give up trying, to let our hearts collapse into apathy or lethargy. I think one of the temptations that life dangles before us is exactly this – to let everything go and settle for what little we have as we wait for it all to be over with. But this is choosing to be numb; it is spiritual death, and it denies all that life in the universe stands for. We must ever and again turn away from this temptation to waste life.

An alternative is that, by letting woe truly disrupt us, we can let ourselves be forced to dust off our beliefs and theories and put them into action in reality. We can put our principles where our mouths are and let ourselves be shaken to the core, so new blood can flow into our spiritual and ethical guts.

This brings us back to Job. Theologian Richard Rohr in his book, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*,² says that it is only through woe that we experience authentic joy. If we try to deny or escape our pain, all we can feel is superficial

² Rohr, Richard. *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections*. 52.

happiness. Woe transforms us into beings who can feel deep and expansive joy because we have felt its opposite. In this sense, joy is pleasure that is steeped in gratitude and measured by perspective; it is all the more sweet because its limitations are well-known. Joy grows deep and expansive rather than high, as though it's been enriched by the experience of trouble and difficulty. Joy isn't carefree and innocent happiness, blissful though that may be; it's the appreciation of how blessed we are with good things, when there is so much in life that hurts. Joy is the hearty welcoming of moments of happiness which, no matter how frequently they come, are always too rare. Part of the meaning of suffering is that it opens the possibility of genuine joy.

Rohr also says that "to enter more deeply into this mystery... [of life], we have to... allow [ourselves] to *feel*, not just to *know* [emphasis added]. To *feel* what it means to be empty, abandoned, uncared for. ... [A]n entire life's stance, a standing-under, so that we can 'understand'" (15). What he means is that seeing life from underneath, weighed by burdens, lets us know what existence is really like for most people around the world, and we can feel a greater connection, an empathic bond, an interdependence with all fellow living beings. Our feelings of disappointment, loss, rejection and failure can lead us toward a deeper life. Rohr calls this process 'conversion', possibly giving this word back to us Unitarian Universalists with a meaning we can use. If you prefer, you might think of it as 'spiritual evolution' or 'transformation', but whatever we call it, woe can renovate the heart.

In the arts, I frequently find plans and tools that help with this renovation. One example was the poem I read this morning, not so much because Melvin the collie is so gloriously happy to accept whatever little thing life gives him on any particular day. Rather, it's the narrator's witnessing of the possibility of joy surrounded by muck that touches me; he can barely tolerate being shown how little it could take to find joy in bleakness; his humility at being taught something by a dog.

The film, *City of Angels*, with Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan is another example. Some of you know this film in its original German version, *Wings of Desire*. In this story, beings of light live invisibly right beside we humans; they see our struggles and agonies dispassionately, helping us by giving us a moment of insight, but they themselves do not feel anything except perhaps a distant compassion. Every morning the angels gather to watch the sunrise to the accompaniment of celestial music. One of them, Seth, falls in love with a human, Maggie, making him yearn to feel physical sensation and human emotion. He lets himself fall to earth to be with her. After only one night together, she suffers an accident. As she's dying, she feels sorry that she encouraged Seth to become human, but he tells her that it was worth it to lose his angelic powers in order to feel one touch of her hand.

Though evidently melodramatic, this film teaches us another crucial fact of life: joy and woe create each other. Pain *can* lead to genuine joy, but joy definitely makes us more vulnerable to suffering.

Another bit of Blake, gives us a clue as to how to handle this:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the wingèd life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.*³

We must hold onto joy *loosely*, knowing it is fleeting, but also that it returns. After Maggie dies, Seth goes to the beach at sunrise; he can no longer hear the celestial music, but he *has* known joy. He kisses it as it flies away. And then he races into the ocean, to revel for the first time in the physical sensation of thick salt water against his skin.

Imagine accepting life as it comes, embracing the tide of joy and the ebb of woe, as Seth does; he's reborn from angelic purity into complicated humanity, learning about life through vulnerability and brokenness, not perfection and strength.

We, too, are called to live with vitality despite our vulnerability and to work for the healing of all that's broken in us and around us. To do that we embrace all that life brings. We rush to the beach to kiss away a fleeting joy at sunrise, even if we don't hear any celestial music. We dive into the salt water that caresses our skin, even though it stings our eyes.

Shalom. Blessed be. Amen.

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³ William Blake, *Several Answered Questions*.