

**Finding Joy Amidst the Noise©**  
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz  
Sunday, June 4, 2023  
Unity Church – Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

This winter, my husband and I attended a Bob Weir and the Wolf Brothers concert at the Palace Theatre--a small venue where we were smashed next to one another, but everyone was having a good time. The horn section was blasting, and the violins were soaring and the vocals were rocking and everybody was moving and grooving with hundreds of other Grateful Dead fans and and in that moment – I was completely swept up in the joy of that shared experience- BUT THEN – cutting through the ecstasy of that moment are the two guys behind me, who are holding a conversation at top volume. One is saying “yeah, I flippin love these guys...I was at their concert a year ago...they were great...” And then they continued to carry on their conversation, talking about what they had for dinner, where they were going to travel to this summer...all the way through the song I was really enjoying, through the break and into the next set.” I debated about turning around and telling the men that I would love to hear more about their private conversation but unfortunately the music was getting in the way, but that would be unnecessarily unkind so I just tried to block them out – to no avail. These two guys were just enjoying themselves and their conversation – but for me – they were the noise that stood between me and my jam – my joy.

This sermon kicks off the theme for the month of June – which is joy. As I wrote in my monthly column, Joy is seemingly a pretty simple idea right? Feelings of ecstasy and pleasure; happiness and contentment. That’s what most of us associate with joy. But is that all there is to it? What is joy, really? Is it by definition momentary and fleeting? Or can it be a stable state of being? What could it mean to live in joy?

Most of us experience joy as a fleeting moment – a high – a memorable day – when the baby comes home, the adoption finally takes place, that moment when you say “I do” seeing your child get an award, the rush of falling in love; the pleasure of being with another body; that moment when you meet someone at the airport that you haven’t seen for a long time. We want those moments to last forever, but then the child has a tantrum, and then the child grows up and you don’t see them as much as you had hoped; the days are filled with the old ordinary press of life. Joy seems to be reserved for only moments which are spare and few. Obviously, I want that ecstatic experience of a concert which happens when live music is shared by an appreciative crowd, but without the two guys absorbed in their own conversation. I want the joy but not the woe. I want the experience, without the noise.

Despite the joy of being alive and living into this Minnesota summer already well underway, there is a heaviness of woe that I am also feel at this season. Much of the domestic news feels like verbal fisticuffs, followed by awful violence. The

almost daily mass shootings resulting in loss of life and permanent injuries; and the accompanying fear that lives like a permanent buzz of tinnitus in our ears about the possibility of one of us – or one we love – being involved in a mass shooting. The resurgence of white nationalism – in all its ugly and devastating forms – and with it a sense of powerlessness. How to combat such an invisible monster? The assault on transgender, gender queer and non-conforming persons is real and has terrifying consequences – not only for those individuals, but for the world I/we want to create. The world is getting hotter; the oceans are rising, the ice caps are melting, and soon it won't be just polar bears standing alone on a shrinking iceberg. It's us. I want to turn down my political hearing aids so as to tune out the noise. The world keeps getting louder.

So noise is real and it takes many forms. The earliest noise complaint was recorded some 4,000 years ago, in the Epic of Gilgamesh which recounts one of the gods, unable to sleep through humanity's racket and presumably a little cranky opts to "exterminate man/humankind."<sup>1</sup> Hey, I know the feeling Gilgamesh! Noise, or what the professionals will call "a very dynamic acoustic environment" can provoke people to murderous extremes. In an article from the Atlantic magazine, the author recounts a few of these tales – which also point to the dangers of having easy access to firearms: "After repeated attempts to quiet his raucous neighbor, a Fort Worth Texas father of two, perturbed by loud music at 2 AM,

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<sup>1</sup> Atlantic Magazine, November 2019

allegedly shot his neighbor three times.” Then, there’s the man who fired on a mother and daughter after griping about sounds from their apartment and a woman who shot at a neighbor after being asked to turn down her music....Noise is never just about sound, it is inseparable from issues of power and powerlessness. It is a violation we can’t control and to which, because of our anatomy, we cannot close ourselves off.”

There’s verifiable evidence that the world around us is indeed, getting louder. But there’s the internal noise too – the voices in our heads which can present a never-ending stream of regrets about the past, anxiety about the future and boredom with the present. It is of course, the noise that the Buddha realized that he had control over – that there was a way through the noise of our ever-chattering monkey minds – through the practice of meditation, of counting our breath, of simply noticing the thoughts as they arise and letting them go. It’s like turning down the volume on the radio - or better yet, turning it off to hear the sounds of silence, the rich, full place of silence where – I often like to say – great things may fashion themselves. For those who are deaf, they may not hear noise in the same way as the non-deaf, but noise can also be experienced as visual distractions. Too much color, too many visual stimulation can be just as distressing as too much noise. Turning down the noise – the visual or aural overloads and overstimulates our adrenal system is a daily spiritual discipline that many of us don’t realize we need to do.

We talk a lot about spiritual practice here and our intention is to provide you with a reason to engage in spiritual practice. Certainly the practice of daily meditation or reflection or prayer is a time-honored technique to dial down the incessant noise that accompanies us. But there's another part of that practice. Just as we can learn to dial down the noise that surrounds us – so too we can learn to dial up the joy. When we do that, joy can become an act of resistance to the despair that also surrounds us.

Joy is our birthright. Anyone who has spent more than a minute with a child knows that joy is something that is not calculated or generated. This past weekend I was able to visit my two three-year-old grand twins. As part of that visit, my husband and I took them to the park. And there, one of them proceeded to climb a jungle gym way past my reach. I was terrified. In my mind, I saw them slip out of my grasp, land with a crash on the ground. All I could hear in my mind's ear was fear – the constant buzz of catastrophe waiting to happen. I was so into that moment, that I almost didn't hear my granddaughter Ellis stand solidly on the two bars, arms stretched out to the sky and say – literally “I did it! O My Joy!” O my joy!

I'm sure she picked that up from her mother, who would scoop her babies in her arms and snuggle them and say “oh, my joy,” even when they weren't being particularly joyful. Even when they were screaming about a real or imagined slight.

What happens to us that we forget that joy is also in the background? As I said earlier, we tend to think of joy as something that is the ecstasy of a moment, like that moment of being swept up in the music – an intensity of feeling. But we discount the joy that is at the other end of the scale – we take it for granted. There is joy that comes with privilege, and so that is some joy we take for granted that deserves a second look. Living in neighborhoods that aren't pocketed by gunfire every night; having access to good food and clean water, having a car or reliable transportation; access to health care, the ability to travel or move about the world freely without fear of being harassed or violated; this is a background joy that some of us may have and others don't. With privilege comes freedoms, and the enjoyment we derive from them invites us to look at where we find the joy of freedom as a source of strength, no matter what our circumstances.

I want to acknowledge that while joy is our birthright, for some, it may seem inaccessible because of depression, mental illness, unrelenting grief. If you have experienced this, you know what I mean. I know from my own experience with depression and anxiety, that that's a hard place to be, but with medication and help, you don't have to live there. It can and does get better.

You can and will feel pleasure and joy again. Trust the experiences of those who have struggled and survived and are striving to live lives of integrity, service and yes – joy.

I've been inspired by adrienne marie brown's latest book called "Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good." In *White Protestantism*, influenced by Puritanism, the concept of pleasure for its own sake, was seen as a gateway drug to debauchery. Its impact can be felt on some areas of white culture and even in Unitarian Universalism. Brown writes that the ability to feel pleasure is as essential to our being as food, shelter and clothing. She writes this: "Pleasure reminds us to enjoy being alive. Pleasure – embodied, connected pleasure is one of the ways we know when we are free. Pleasure helps us move through the times that are unfair, through grief and loneliness, through the terror of genocide, or days when the demands are just overwhelming. Pleasure heals the places where our hearts and spirit get wounded. Pleasure is a medicine for the suffering that is absolutely promised in life. Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom."

She writes explicitly about black joy as an act of resistance and liberation against oppression, and the dominance of whiteness. Too often in my white-dominated world, I too, tend to discount joy or pleasure as being frivolous. I used to believe that if something were hard or painful or had gravitas, it was deep and I wanted to be deep – not shallow.

Yet, as we move along this journey of ours, we come to see the wisdom of the poet, William Blake, who reminds us that: *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, We were made for joy and woe, And when this we rightly know, Through the world we safely go.*” It’s like the poem you heard Worship Associate Lorelee read this morning “I want a word that means okay and not okay, more than that, a word that means devastated and stunned with joy. I want the word that says I feel it all – all at once.”

That’s what we’re doing here – as part of a religious and spiritual community. Part of our task is to enlarge our capacity to hold it all – to understand the swirl and how the churning of opposite feelings weave through us, as the poet says, ‘like an insistent breeze leads us wordlessly deeper into ourselves...’ I’ve spoken with widows and widowers who have felt guilty for feeling joy and pleasure even in the midst of their deep grief and loss. I’ve sat with parents who, while missing their children who have launched sometimes unevenly into adulthood, are relieved and grateful that they are finally out of their childhood home. Grief and Gladness. Joy and Woe. Noise and Silence. When this we rightly know, through the world we safely go. It is the ultimate act of acceptance. It is the final act of resistance to a world that would oppress, silence and dismiss joy.

This is particularly meaningful for those communities which have experienced long-standing oppression. How then, do those communities find joy? In the summer of 2020, the national Museum of African American History and Culture, produced a series on *Black Joy: Resistance, Resilience and Reclamation*.



Kleaver Cruz, founder of The Black Joy Project, a digital and real-world movement wrote this: “ Black Joy is not ... dismissing or creating an ‘alternate’ black narrative that ignores the realities of our collective pain; rather, it is about holding the pain and injustice...in tension with the joy we experience. It’s about using that joy as an entry into understanding the oppressive forces we navigate through as a means to imagine and create a world free of them.” *Black Joy* is an affirmation and an action that claims control where we can. It is not escapism or a way of avoiding reality. It is active acknowledgement that your reaction to even the most horrific encounter resides with you and not someone else. It is an internal choice that is not a fantasy. It is not delusional. It is real.”

So joy is real and it is really accessible. In a few moments, we’re going to sing a closing song that I’ve loved for years, but never dared to sing in a Unitarian Universalist Church because of one line: “I told Satan, get thee behind, victory today is mine.” I don’t believe that Satan in the way that he has been depicted over the centuries. I’ve never been able to find a metaphor for Satan that worked for me, until recently. One of my friends is a social worker in South Carolina and we’ve been exchanging our thoughts about the novel we both read, by Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*. The book is about struggling families and poverty, drug abuse and violence. My friend wrote: “I’m about a third of the way through the book. It’s tough. Sounds like a few of my clients. I don’t believe in

this red man in hell, but if Satan is real, he doesn't have to work hard. We can create hell on earth..." and I would add...we also can create heaven.

That's why now I can sing "I told Satan, get Thee behind," not the red man with a pitchfork and a tail, but all of those things which inhibit and prohibit our ability to experience pleasure and joy. Get thee behind, depression; get thee behind me anxiety and doubts; get thee behind me fears of what may come; get thee behind me all the things that make me feel less than and afraid and uncertain and depressed..Get Thee Behind Me and claim that victory is Mine, Victory Today is mine...come on, it sounds like this (start playing) and let's sing...