

INVITE JOY
December 30, 2018
Rev. Lisa Ward

One favorite image I have when thinking about my life's path, which is encouraged this time of year, is a time some years ago when I used to walk our dog out in the back field around my labyrinth in Maryland. Something unusual occurred one winter, due to the combination of snow and cold, that presented its own kind of wonder and beauty even with the icy danger. That morning, while walking our dog, I noticed that we were not making tracks. The crust of ice over the snow had created a kind of sheet – a kind of luminescent linoleum – bits of ice sparkling -- over the field. I looked back and saw that I could not detect from which way we had come.

What would that be like (I asked myself)...to have nothing trailing behind me? What would it be like to take every step forward, fresh and free, with none of the baggage and “used to be” behind me. What would it be to just come to the next moment in life, knowing that I may not make an impact, knowing that I may not leave a trace, but simply come upon what I come upon, walk in the rhythm of the moment, build on what comes with me; the flow of consequence, the growth of awareness.

Would I misbehave (I asked myself)? Would I take advantage of leaving no trail and wreak havoc, take what I wanted to take without thinking of consequence, let go of responsibility and indulge?... No. It didn't make sense...it didn't fit the beauty before me. The shimmering icicles on the ground and trees, the cleansing wind, the wakeful cold,

the expanse of sky and flight of birds....why would I respond to this with such ugliness, with such disdain for the gift of the moment?

It reminded me of the anecdote about Hosea Ballou, Universalist forebear of the 18th and 19th centuries, who preached of universal salvation, rejecting the concept of hell, which he believed made no sense in a world created by a loving God.

“Ballou was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one day, arguing theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."¹

Well, I wouldn't go as far as to say that the idea would not occur to us. Many ideas occur to us, all the time. It's how we choose to navigate our busy minds that gives us a way of being. It is how we choose to see what is before us that guides our way.

This is an important distinction, though; one that informs our Unitarian Universalist faith. For it has to do with deep and abiding trust in creation and a confidence in our own true nature, our inherent dignity, our kinship with all that is. We do not need the fear-based merit system of a future heaven and hell to come to the fullness of life (which is

¹ As told by Rev. Elizabeth Strong (found in Wikipedia: “Trinitarian Universalism”)

heaven) and transcend our distorted, sin-sick souls (which is hell). What we need is reverence and humility – getting out of our own way when we think we are the center of things and claiming ourselves when we sense the invitation to live with and for each other.

The force of Creation has the wisdom within it to teach, guide, inspire and challenge our journey toward truth and sacred knowing. The bit of the universe that is us can come into harmony with the Source of all Being and manifest its wisdom in our lives. There is a natural creativity within us that sparks the courage to love life and recover its wonder. It simply depends on how we pay attention.

So as I continued to walk our dog, leaving no visible trail behind me, except , of course, my shadow -- which is always with me... And I continued to ponder a life without baggage, without looking back, without proof that I had been there...what *would* that be like? I felt a hint of freedom rise within me, a lightness of being. The freedom that I felt was a freedom to embrace where I was at that moment. It was all that I had and it was abundant. It triggered an impulse within me toward harmony with Being -- an impulse toward joy. With this feeling came the understanding that we have to give up the weight of our impact, and realize that as we journey on in life we have the moment to experience, which brings us to the next thing to do. If we get all caught up in the impact that we make in the world, we can get lost in the shuffle of our competitive society and look outside ourselves for assurance of the worth of our lives.

Creating an attitude of walking freely, each step brings the opportunity for gratitude and new knowledge to our being. We are not weighted down by the heaviness of relevance, the lure of purposefulness or the weight of judgment. This calls for a great deal of trust in ourselves and in the unknown, trust beyond clinging, trust beyond controlling, trust beyond self sufficiency. It is giving ourselves over to on-going creation and finding ourselves in it. It is practicing the art of being and welcoming praise of life.

This takes courage, but with that courage comes joy. Paul Tillich, in his book, The Courage to Be writes:

“The affirmation of one’s essential being in spite of desires and anxieties creates joy... Joy is the emotional expression of the courageous Yes to one’s own true being.”²

When we are attentive to our own true being, we enter the world of possibility. We see ourselves as active partners, co-creators in the world in which we live. We realize our power to harm and to heal. We realize we work with the greater life by tapping into the creative energies that generate its life.

And because the greater life is far more encompassing than we can imagine, we risk bringing ourselves into the unknown, equipped by being, so naturally prepared.

² Tillich, Paul. The Courage to Be, p.14

Living with the tension of unknown answers and the risk of an open future is much of what Unitarian Universalism is about. Unitarian Universalism calls us to engage a creative spirituality, applying our innate affirmation of life to the living of our lives. It enters the sometimes chaotic diversity of individual response and works toward a collective creation of a just and compassionate society.

Guided by our own sense of integrity, we must engage the choices we make. It does not confine spirituality to a certain ritual or dogma, nor necessarily to the day of gathering. It acknowledges that the in breaking of spirit can happen anytime. Anywhere. Any how. And because of the interdependent nature of creation, we must risk connection to come to our fullest selves.

That's a risk that can feel very dangerous, welcoming a vulnerability and loss of control of outcome that causes many of us to avoid or shut down through the varied distractions that we can convince ourselves are more important than the focus of opening our spirit.

When we pay attention to our innate creative spirit, we find a way for our lives to respond, we step into life with assurance that we are able to respond and contribute. It is then that we begin to fill the emptiness, heal the brokenness, create new avenues for growth, and engage ourselves in something beyond the simple business of our lives.

But how do we come into contact with that innate creativity? First, we need to clear the debris of expectation, of competition, of the shame-

blame-guilt hooks, of the many identities we claim. We need to make room for our natural affinity with the gift of life.

This doesn't happen all at once. We've been conditioned through society and in childhood, by our experiences and what we, as a culture have chosen to tell each other. We have habits that may be hard to notice, they've become so much a part of what we do.

This is called habituation: we do not even notice that we are making a choice – we simply assume we must live a certain way. We habituate to busy-ness because we've told ourselves that that gives us purpose – importance. We habituate to competition because we have constructed an attitude of hierarchy of being. We habituate to belief systems and the defense of them, to prejudices and the assumed safety within them, to body disciplines and the physical benefit from them. Habituation is value neutral – it is not a good or bad thing in itself – but it is something to be aware of: that what we do creates habit and we choose what we become.

So we need to be aware enough to be able to find the freedom to choose and recognize the responsibility of that choice. This takes practice and a willingness to trust a natural wisdom within.

Let's try something. ******(a short exercise was done to explore a sense of self and assurance therein)******

We choose what world we want to advocate. Every day of our lives.

So we enter this new year, this time of believing in a new day, this calling for a sense of strength to claim steady ground; this time to recognize our habits of thought and ways of relating. This calling to be a true participant in our being.

It is then that the joy of living has room to find expression. And your joy may not be my joy, which simply means we are expressing our unique selves.

There's the nagging assumption that we have to fix things before we get started, that we have to figure it all out before we make our next choice. No wonder so many of us feel paralyzed by too much choice or weighed down by the enormous burden of the world and ourselves in it.

Don't sabotage yourself before you get started.

In the words of Buddha: "Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past no longer is. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom. We must be diligent today. To wait until tomorrow is too late."³

This calls for a tending and a nurturing of spirit. It takes gentle reminders and well timed wake up calls. It encourages sowing seeds and cultivating health. We come together in faith community to remind ourselves how to come to our full selves, to gain insight from different

³ Buddha, as quoted by Lama Surya Das. Letting Go of the Person You Used To Be, p.142

perspectives, to embolden projects of love and justice and to grow in understanding of life in its majesty and mystery.

So take that next step, not judging your impact but claiming your engagement, whether or not a trace is found. You will be a part of it all, and the all will respond. You belong as you.

So may it be. Amen.