

Religion for the 21st Century: Joyful

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This morning I am beginning a sermon series for the month of January. It is inspired by something that the new President of the UUA, Peter Morales, said while he was running for that office two years ago. He said that “Unitarian Universalism has the potential to be the religion of our time. The religion of the twenty-first century.” Granted this may have been simply a campaign slogan, but many found it to be an inspiring vision for what our religion could and should aspire to become in the decades ahead of us. It is a vision that is at the same time both affirming of the present, and yet asks us to stretch and grow into our full potential.

So this month, starting today, I want to explore what it means to be or to become the religion for the twenty-first century. There are three key features that such a religion would have to have, in my view. The religion of the twenty-first century is joyful, transformative, and relevant. These three features will be the centerpieces of the three

sermons in my series. So today we begin with the first: the religion of the twenty-first century is joyful.

Those of you who were present for the late Christmas Eve service a few weeks ago heard me talk about joy as being in the presence of the Holy, however you come to understand it. Today I want to unpack joy a bit more, for you see joy is a fundamental feature of religion despite religion's reputation to the contrary. One of the key problems is that most of us don't experience real joy all that often in our day to day lives. We may experience comfort, in having our basic physical needs met, we may even experience happiness during the odd moment of reflection that assures us that the life we have built with family and friends has been according to our innermost desires. But even the latter is unusual. Indeed, most of the time I think we are more concerned about avoiding feeling pain, than we are about actually experiencing joy.

In our Modern Reading this morning Michael Schuler describes the experience of being a "hungry ghost" in modern American society. I think his analysis is quite astute here. So often our culture wants us to feel inadequate or fearful and the only way to overcome that fear or sense of inadequacy is to consume the newest and shiniest toy in the toy store or the coolest car or weight loss fad. These messages can be deceptively subtle and can sneak into our subconscious. Christmas is of course the most obvious example of these messages coming to the fore, but they are always there in the background of our mind. As Schuler

points out, just as with the hungry ghosts in Buddhist methodology, when we are controlled by these messages we find ourselves constantly hungry and never satisfied for what we truly want.

The chef Anthony Bourdain has an interesting approach to these cultural messages. Bourdain is well known for his book “Kitchen Confidential” and his TV show “No Reservations.” In his recent sequel to his first book, called “Medium Raw” Bourdain describes his fear that his young daughter will be seduced by the advertising behemoth known as “McDonalds.” In addition to the health issues associated with fast food it also represents to him a flattening of American cuisine. And so rather than lecturing his three year old daughter not to eat McDonalds or making blanket statements that they will never go there, he and his wife engage in a rather elaborate subterfuge. They stand outside their daughter’s room and discuss in a loud whisper, “Yes I heard on the news that a little boy ate at McDonalds and contracted a case of the cooties.” If McDonalds can be sneaky with their messages to kids, then so can Bourdain.

Companies like McDonalds are masters at getting kids to convince their parents to shop there. Not because it is good food or healthy food, but because it puts an end to the arguments and whining. The point is not happiness or certainly joy, it is to avoid getting annoyed on long road trips. So often we can go through life poked and prodded by the twin desires to avoid pain and acquire pleasure. This is not a fulfilling

way to live. It sacrifices long term contentment for very short term pleasure. And any hungry ghost can tell you that is not a very satisfying existence.

Joy, true abiding soul-rattling joy, is much deeper than a temporary burst of pleasure. Joy is the experience of understanding that your life is of use, that it has some purpose and contains some meaning, to the universe. When you know that you are valuable just for being who you are, then you are experiencing joy. It is a sacred moment, and like most sacred moments, it is all too uncommon. Joy happens when you find yourself in a situation in which your skills and knowledge and gifts and passions all line up with what is needed in that moment. Joy is responding to the call that comes from the world's deep need. Any religion worth its salt in the twenty-first century needs to cultivate and motivate joy.

Joy is both an end and means. It is what we aim for with our lives, and it is also what we try to cultivate every day. Certainly our life together as a religious community should be marked with joy, most of the time anyway. I believe that church should be that place where all of our talents and gifts find some outlet, not only for the benefit of the community as a whole, but primarily for the person who has those gifts. So often we let the thing that we do for a living define who we are. It can almost take over our identity. And for most people their occupation is not their full being. I think of Rick in my old church in Omaha. Rick

is a quiet guy, but one of the most spiritually mature people I ever met. I knew Rick as the buildings and grounds guy. Of course there was no custodian in this little church so all of the repairs or fix it up jobs needed to be done by the members of the church. These were specific skills that not everyone had. But Rick was one of my go to handymen. It was a couple of years before I learned that he worked as a data programmer. He created and maintained databases for the big credit card company in town. His son was a bit of a computer whiz, and once Rick told me, “I can’t see how he would want to play computer games. I am on the computer all of the time, and I can’t wait to get home and work on the house.” Rick didn’t hate his job entirely, but it wasn’t his passion; it wasn’t all of who he was. He was more than that. He liked fixing up his house, and working on the church’s bathroom floor gave him a chance to work on flooring material that he never had done before. It gave him joy to be of use to the church that he deeply loved.

Rick is a good example of how joy is a means as well as an end for the religion of the twenty-first century. Everyone, every single one of you out there, should have the same experience of making a difference to your religious community, not just for our sake, but for yours. What we hungry ghosts really crave is not pleasure but that deeper joy of making a difference in the world. That is what satisfies our hungers for meaning and community.

Joy is also an end we seek. We yearn to lead lives joy-filled, joy-full, and joy-fulfilling. Numerous surveys of Americans who attend church regularly show that they are on average happier and live longer than Americans who don't. How is that for getting something for your pledge dollars! Coming to church adds happy years onto your life! These surveys are too numerous to discount. Something real is happening here. Now I am sure some people would claim that this is evidence of the grace of God bestowing blessings onto people. Who knows perhaps they are right, however I would point out that these surveys control for denomination so there are some of us heathen are getting this benefit too. No I think what people are describing in these surveys is a genuine feeling of joy that comes to them by being a part of a religion of the twenty-first century. Religion is all about shaping one's world view, your constellation of meaning and significance that gives you a star to steer by in life. Religion gives us a perspective on the events of our life, and joy is all about perception.

Yesterday it snowed, not heavily but significantly at our house as I am sure it did at yours. I came home from a meeting and saw that my oldest son Thomas was anxiously waiting for my return. "Come on Dad, let's go play outside in the snow!" Thomas has always loved snow even when he was a really little one growing up in Nebraska. The more it snows the happier he is. I grew up in Michigan, so snow was no

stranger to me growing up. We bundled up and headed out to the front yard.

The snow was coming down in these large fluffy flakes, and the snow was powdery and easily compacted. I made some pretty professional snowballs, and Thomas would run go patterns in the front yard and I would try to hit him in stride. Then I would hide behind the cars in the driveway and sneak up behind him. As soon as he turned around BAM! a snowball right in the shoulder. He would laugh both at being surprised but also by getting hit by the snowball. He loved every minute of it.

While we were taking a break, I surveyed the scenery of my neighbors. The sky was grey and the snow was coming down a bit harder but there was no harsh wind that would have cut short our play. It was one of those father son moments you dream about when you hold your newborn boy in your arms and you fantasize about all of the fun you are going to have together. What I noticed was that we were the only ones out there. The only other living soul out in the snow was the mailman, slipping and sliding his way up and down the road. Thomas and I were the only ones throwing snowballs and chasing each other. The cold and wind was mild, and the snowfall beautiful, but no one was out admiring it, enjoying it, like we were.

There are many ways to understand a snowfall. It can be a negative thing, creating difficult driving conditions and low visibility. It might be a neutral thing to you, simply the weather outside while you read the paper or prepare for the Eagles game the next day. Or you could look at the snowfall as a positive thing, an event to be cherished and savored. I must admit that had it not been for Thomas' enthusiasm yesterday for playing in the snow, that I would have simply ignored the weather. I am often bemused at East coast attitudes to a little bit of snow in January, as if it had never happened before and represented some sort of crisis. In reality snow coming down is just snow coming down. It is an objective and undeniable fact. But what that snow MEANS to you, the significance you assign to it, your perspective on the snow coming down, makes all the difference to your life. It is potentially an annoyance, a barely discernable fact, or a chance to bond with your child. Which one of these it actually becomes for you depends on how you see it.

Religion gives people joy not because more good things happen to religious people than to non-religious people. I think religious people experience joy because their religion helps them to have a certain point of view on the mundane events of their life such that they experience things more in the positive than the negative or the neutral. If you or I were to go to California and meet a great connoisseur of wine and drink a glass with them, we could see very clearly these different perspectives.

To you or I, a sip of wine tastes like alcohol and grapes. Yet the connoisseur can drink that exact same wine and tell which variety of grapes they are, where they were grown, the year harvested, and even the quality of the cork. Sipping wine to him is a much richer experience than it is for you or me. The wine is no different, but how he experiences it and appreciates it is very different. So too are the events of our lives. If you are someone who is attuned to the subtle beauty and harmony of nature, then a walk in the woods is a joy-filled experience. If you grew up in Nebraska or Michigan, a snowfall is playtime and not cause to clear the shelves at the local grocery store.

The Buddha made this point to his monks in our Ancient Reading this morning. You do not find happiness by chasing after every little bit of pleasurable stimuli like some crazy hungry ghost. You find happiness and joy by being in control of yourself; by being calm and at peace. You become more mindful and aware of your life, and like the wine connoisseur, you can savor your very being much better when you slow down and pay attention to it. Religion is what helps us to gain this awareness. It helps us pay attention to the things in life that are the most important and that we might otherwise miss in the rough and tumble of day to day existence. But religion sees the big picture and tells us, “Hey, love other people even if you don’t know them. Pay attention to the kind of person you are becoming by looking at how you treat others.” Or perhaps it is the beauty of nature or the wisdom to see interrelated

things that we might otherwise miss. All of these things that religion can do for us, shifts our perspective on ourselves and the events that happen to us. We are then able to see how we fit in to the world, gain some appreciation for the bigger picture, and how we can make a difference to it all. A religion that can help people nurture their full selves, their talents, gifts, and passions for living, while at the same time give them the perspective necessary to best utilize and make real those gifts is going to be a religion that gives people a great deal of joy. That is a religion for the twenty-first century.

The church consultant Paul Nixon tells the story of when he was a minister a bunch of people at his church would wear buttons out in the community that said, “Are we having fun yet?!” He writes, why do we think of church as work, or why do we relate to it as we do our work lives? Sure there are tasks to be completed and big projects to get done, but why be such a drudge about it? Given the right perspective even the most mundane scut work can be seen as a ministry, an act of love for the greater whole that is the religious community. It can be fun. It should be joyful.

May we experience joy this day, and as many days as we can. May we be open to a new shift in our perspective. May we better know and understand ourselves and the contributions we can make. And may we not be afraid of applying those gifts and talents toward making ours a religion of the twenty-first century. Amen Blessed Be.