



JOYFULLY *DEEP*

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A few years ago, when Pixar released the first *Inside Out* film about the personified emotions living inside a young woman named Riley, people started saying to me, "You remind me of the character Joy." We do have a similar disposition in some ways and a similar hairstyle. For those of you who have not seen the film, Joy is this effervescent young woman with a bright blue pixie cut and blue eyes and a radiant yellow dress voiced by the actress and comedian Amy Poehler.

Now, if it were up to Joy, she would be the dominant emotion in all people at all times. And for some people she is. Some people are inclined towards Joy. Others have to work a little harder to find her. Sometimes joy surprises us, other times it's a very deliberate choice, but for all of us, it is something to be cultivated. Now, going back a couple of decades before *Inside Out*, does anyone remember the early '90s animated TV series on Nickelodeon called *The Ren and Stimpy Show*?

In one episode, the happy-go-lucky cat, Stimpy, straps a happy helmet onto the frenetically angry Chihuahua, Ren, forcing him to smile and dance along to a bizarre song, if you can even call it a song, that repeats the words happy, happy, joy, joy, happy, happy, joy, joy. Now, before long, Ren snaps and destroys the happy helmet. It makes me think of when people say to each other, "Cheer up," or, "Look on the bright side," or, "Calm down." It's not the way that we cultivate calm and joy, right? No happy helmet will make us joyful because joy is not the same as happiness, for one. Happiness is dependent on outside factors. It comes and goes. You may not feel happy today, but within you there is joy. It's a quality of the spirit which always exists regardless of our circumstances. The past couple of weeks have lost a lot of amazing wise people, a lot of sages. This week, we lost the farmer and poet Wendell Berry. We've shared his writing many times here from the pulpit, the poem, *The Peace Of Wild Things*, his reflections on Sabbath.

But Berry also wrote these words, "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts." Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. It's a somewhat radical thing to say in these times, radical, challenging, and wise. Now, he didn't say, "Consider all the facts and then if they are good,

be joyful." He said, "Consider the facts and be joyful." His words are a reminder that it is not irrational or insensitive to find goodness and possibility in times of trouble. In fact, it is necessary and life-giving and is what helps us to grapple with the troubles of the world and of our lives. Berry has been called a Thoreau for our time, referring to our Unitarian forebear, Henry David Thoreau. Now, Thoreau, in his book *Walden*, talks about how he found God in the natural world. And Berry, too, found God and he found joy. In *The Art of the Commonplace*, Berry shared a story about this discovery.

He wrote, "There is not only peacefulness, there is joy. And the joy, less deniable in its evidence than the peacefulness, is the confirmation of it. I sat one summer evening and watched a great blue heron make his descent from the top of the hill into the valley. He came down at a measured deliberate pace, stately as always, like a dignitary going down a stair. And then, at a point I judged to be midway over the river, without at all varying his wingbeat he did a backward turn in the air, a loop-the-loop. It could only have been a gesture of pure exuberance, of joy -- a speaking of his sense of the evening, the day's fulfillment, his descent homeward.

He made just that one slow turn, and then flew on out of sight in the direction of the slew farther down in the bottom. The movement was incredibly beautiful, at once exultant and stately, a benediction on the evening and on the river and on me. It seemed so perfectly to confirm the presence of a free nonhuman joy in the world, a joy I feel a great need to believe in, that I had the skeptic's impulse to doubt that I had seen it. If I had, I thought, it would be a sign of the presence of something heavenly in the earth. And then, one evening, a year later, I saw it again."

The story is beautiful, isn't it? A great blue heron doing a loop-the-loop purely for the joy of it. A joy that's present not only in humans, but in other creatures as well, a sign of the presence of something heavenly in the earth. While Wendell Berry never identified as a Unitarian Universalist, he was much beloved in our circles because his faith has, or our faith has a very similar perspective on creation and humanity. Our Unitarian tradition tells us that there is an inherent goodness and possibility in all of creation. And our Universalist tradition tells us that there is enough love and joy to go around. It's not something that's available only to some. There is enough joy in the world to feed us all if we are open to it, if we give into it, if we share it. We can't hoard joy, nor should we resign ourselves to getting the crumbs that others have left on the floor.

As the poet Mary Oliver wrote, "Joy is not made to be a crumb." Better than all the riches or power in the world, joy is a religious experience of abundance. When I think about the experience of joy in my life and when I hear others describe their experiences, the image that often comes to mind is one of buoyancy. Joy keeps us afloat when life and the world threaten to drown us. Imagine the balloon in the magic box or a ball being pushed down into a bucket of water, but it keeps bouncing back up, and if you push it too far down or too hard, the water spills over. Joy is that deep invisible force of buoyancy that propels us toward goodness and love. Just as some might say, it is God that holds them and keeps them afloat, joy is holy. It rises and rises and rises even when we try to tamp it down, even when the facts make joy improbable, it rises.

And this is why our church uses the phrase joyfully deep as a way of describing our approach to faith and spirituality. Now at first, it may seem like an oxymoron, but the terms are only contradictory if you understand joy as something that's a surface-level emotion. But it's not a surface-level emotion, it's something deeper of the spirit. It dwells deep within us and is at the heart of who and how we are as human beings. Whether we are lonely or in community, whether

we are troubled or at ease, we can draw on it, especially in hard times to sustain us and give us strength and courage and buoyancy that we need. And each of us can develop spiritual practices that help us tap into this joy and embody it in our lives. Sometimes the joy resides closer to the surface and we can access it through practices like mindfulness or being kind to others, being openhearted or through practices of gratitude.

All of these connect us with the interdependence of which we are a part. Joy springs forth when we feel connected to the whole and when we feel like we have a sense of purpose and belonging. Joy can also spring forth, I know in my experience, when we encounter and recognize the truths of life in ways that make us laugh and applaud, like when we experience a play or a film or a TV show that makes us laugh until we can't breathe and applaud uproariously. Has anybody had that experience recently? Yeah, good. Now, in my experience, the deepest belly laughter and the most heartfelt applause is prompted not by goofy humor, but by a deeper recognition of life in all its complexion, complexity, and all its absurdity. We see something that resonates with our own experience, something we know to be true in our heart, and the joy just bubbles up. At other times, we have to tap into deeper wells.

In the film *Inside Out*, Joy goes through this journey of discovery over the course of the film that she cannot always be the dominant emotion. Sadness is an essential part of life too. If joy is not available to you through the channels I've just talked about and the practices, ponder the sorrow within you and how that sorrow moves you toward experiences of joy. Maybe those of you who find great joy in greeting people here on Sunday mornings or creating inclusive communities, do so because you know the sorrow of being excluded or unwelcome. Maybe those of you who find great joy in being with our children here at church and guiding them and helping them stay curious and ask questions, do so because you wish that you had had that kind of nurture and encouragement as a child. That which brings us joy often contains some sorrow, and that which brings us sorrow also gives us the capacity for joy or delight.

I see this, for example, every time we have a memorial service here. When someone we love dies, there is, of course, sorrow and grief, but those feelings are interwoven with the joy that that person brought to us in our gratitude for their life. One thing I know is that we humans can hold great joy and seemingly unbearable sadness at the same time. We are paradoxical, complex creatures like that. Joy is not the absence of sorrow, but a recognition and an affirmation that amidst all the other experiences of life, there is an underlying goodness. Everywhere I go around here, I see us embodying the depths of joy in community. I see it when we sing together and our individual voices become one. I see it when the people gathered for unforgettable friends in the fellowship hall play balloon volleyball. Keeping that balloon in the air buoys their spirits.

I see it when the children realize that the baby Jesus in the Christmas pageant is a real baby. I see it when we serve our community, joyfully gathering food trash and plastic bottles and needles and tires and you name it from the White Rock Lake shoreline. I see it when we celebrate victories like marriage equality and when we come together after setbacks like those to reproductive rights, when the joy of being together is made deeper by the sorrow that underlies it, by all that has been sacrificed to advance the rights and the dignity of our beloveds. I see it when a teenage boy here for his grandmother's memorial service dances his way up the aisle to spirit in the sky as a postlude, something his grandmother would have wanted. I see it when we gather to celebrate the past, the present, and the future of our church while a crowd protests outside because of the

ways we have shown up and lived our values in public.

As a community, we can help each other to choose joy by seeing one another in our fullness, by helping each other connect with that wellspring that is always there because what is the aim of life but joy, deep, abiding, uncompromised joy. So my hope and my prayer for you is that you will feel the power of it within you now and always. May it be so, and amen.