

# “Your Joy is Your Sorrow Unmasked”

A Sermon by The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones; June 10, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

Kahlil Gibran was not the first to notice that joy and sorrow are inextricably mixed. I like joy more. Our Unitarian forebear Herman Melville had the preacher in Moby Dick tell his congregation of sailors “Shipmates! On the starboard hand of every woe, there is a sure delight; and higher the top of that delight, than the bottom of the woe is deep.” (MB, Ch.9, p. 53.)

I say I prefer joy. Wouldn't we all say that? I think Herman Melville preferred sorrow. Not steadily, but as the source of his wisdom. Later in Moby Dick he has the narrator of the tale (who is really himself) say “that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, *that* mortal man cannot be true—not true, or [is] undeveloped. (MD, Ch. 96, p. 454)

As Kahlil Gibran expressed it “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” You must have known sorrow to understand the height and depth of joy in this age that seduces us with trinkets and gadgets. They only divert us from the wisdom in each of us.

As I grow older I find sorrow becoming a more frequent companion. We lose people we love as we age until sometimes we feel as if we geezers and crones were the only ones of our circle left. The deaths of our friends and loved ones teach us how to share pain and to reach out to one another.

If we have survived deep losses we've learned there is no full consolation. Yet we have to console one another and go on with life. Sorrow lets us listen to words we would otherwise avoid or ignore. It lets us hold on to people who otherwise feel distant to us even when we are close to one another, even when we are intimate.

A few years ago my wife's mother died following a short but intolerable sojourn in a hospital. Mary and I were surrounded by grieving Southern Baptist relatives. When we had been together before I had always felt like a religious foreigner among them, anxious that they might call on me to do a blessing or to pray. I knew I couldn't do it right—for them.

Our mother Tressie who was also Baptist protected me. She knew I was the wrong person to speak and that whatever I would say just wouldn't work. She kept me under wraps. I think they all knew it.

At her funeral I listened without embarrassment to her preacher talk about her new home in heaven. He said nothing about her at all. When he finally got through I got up to speak about Tressie on behalf of the family. I felt as supported by them as I had been by my own relatives two years earlier when I spoke at my own mother's funeral, surrounded by Unitarian Universalists. The presence of death as a common bond brings people together in loving gatherings as joyful celebrations cannot.

I love to officiate at happy weddings. The best are light and airy. I enjoy them because usually the couple has shared deeply with me their expectations and apprehensions that they tell few others. But funerals are more rooted, more real. Grieving folk take stock of their loved ones who have died, and inevitably they take stock of themselves in the process.

Hidden within our sorrow is an awareness of the tenuousness and preciousness of each of us. We look into the faces of our brothers and sisters and know that the children around us belong to us all to tend. In good funerals (if you can abide that use of the term “good”) we know we are all family.

In her novel *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes spoke about dealing with the death of a loved one. “The unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy,” she said. “When you are joyous,” said Gibran, “look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.”

Some years ago I officiated at the marriage of a paraplegic woman and her lover who had the full use of his limbs. As we talked about what had brought them together I quickly found she held as much joy as anyone I had ever known.

She sat in a wheelchair in my study holding her lover’s hand. Like most couples I marry they’d been living together a long time. I asked how she had become paraplegic and she told me that ten years before, she had been terribly injured in a car accident that had required her to spend years in hospitals and caused her awful pain. “I wouldn’t give up any of it,” she told me. I’ve learned so much about joy in my life since the accident that I would never have known if I had not been so badly hurt.”

I was stunned. I could imagine such a philosophical statement being made by a person who had withstood the trauma of ordinary human events or even awful pain—and recovered—but I would never have expected it of a person so badly injured who would have to carry the consequences deeply in her body, permanently disabled for the rest of her life.

“We could never learn to be brave and patient, if there were only joy in the world,” said Helen Keller who was completely deaf, dumb and blind. Of course no one wishes for sorrow to give us depth. But it does just that.

I hope you do not hear me making light of traumatic loss. “There is no despair so absolute,” said George Eliot, “as that which comes with the first moments of our first great sorrow when we have not yet known what it is to have suffered and be healed, to have despaired and recovered hope.”

Healing is never complete, but after great loss and pain some healing always happens, or a person doesn’t survive at all. The miracle of being is that hope survives, even in the most desperate of situations.

The Jewish people are among the world’s greatest survivors. They have suffered and survived so much. One of their greatest storytellers was Joseph Krantz, a wandering Polish Rabbi called the *Preacher of Dubno*. Here’s his story about suffering and joy, called “The Poor Man’s Miracle.” He was alone in a strange town, with no friends and no money.

No one showed any compassion for the poor man as he went from house to house begging for a groschen [a small coin] or a crust of bread. Many a door was slammed in his face and he was turned away with insults. Therefore he grew despondent. One wintry day, as he was trudging through the slippery streets, he fell and broke his leg. Thereupon they took him to a hospital. When the people of the town heard that a poor stranger had been taken to the hospital suffering from a broken leg, they began to feel very sorry for him. Some went to comfort him, others brought him good things to eat. When he left the hospital they furnished him with warm clothes and gave him a tidy sum of money. Before the poor man left town he wrote to his wife, “Praise God, dear wife! A miracle happened: I broke a leg!”

The Preacher of Dubno said the moral of his story is that “most people would sooner help one who has fallen than help keep him from falling.” That’s probably true, but there’s deeper meaning to the story, at least for us who are skeptical about miracles. Miracles aren’t impossible things that happen. Miracles are the unexpected, wondrous and completely absurd things that happen when you are sure that nothing good is possible. Then there it is, happening, as if it were quite ordinary. Don’t pretend that they don’t happen to you. They happen to us all.

They bring joy from sorrow because they are ordinary transformative events that happen all around us in the most unexpected of times and places, changing us in the process into people who can allow ourselves joy without forgetting our sorrow. You have to choose joy to have it.

No one gains by interminable sorrow. In a healthy person sorrow subsides into a reservoir of emotion intermingled with memory and hope and joy, all mixed together in a place from which wisdom can rise to nurture them. Their pain is not separated from joy in its own container like a flask of bile to be drunk whenever one falls into remorseful nostalgia. People who keep their pain closest to themselves, nurturing it, frequently drinking from it, poison themselves. Choose joy. You can.

Eleven years ago Mary and I lived for several months on a Greek island, Skyros, during my sabbatical. I had a Greek friend there, Mike Themelides. Mike was an awful and generous, deeply pained man whom I doubt will ever allow himself to feel joy again. You see, many years ago he too was injured in a terrible car crash that left his wife dead.

Mike told us he had been in a coma for many months. Somehow he came out of it. Unlike the paraplegic woman I spoke of moments ago, Mike is quite whole now, physically. But he savors only his sorrow.

He had a reputation on the island as a rover, a man who tried to seduce every foreign woman who came to his store. At least that's what a neighbor told me. Mike likes to tell other men how much a Casanova he is. (I kept Mary close whenever we were near him though I hardly needed to.) But I saw no joy in Mike.

Every person who enters his shop hears, within the first two minutes, the tale of his auto accident years before and how it took his first wife from him. If visitors are doubly unlucky they will meet his second wife in the next two minutes and find themselves trapped in a loud family dispute. Then the ouzo comes out and Mike invites the visitor to drink with him. Every Greek man on the island who has wandered into the shop has heard Mike's story and drunk his ouzo. Most stay away.

Skyros is a small island and Mike is well known. The ouzo is a comparatively benign poison that he drinks. The dangerous stuff is his bile, the bitterness and pain in his psychic flask that he always has ready to soak him back into sorrow. He's a painaholic. Oh, Mike, let it go, let it go.

"Verily," said Gibran, "you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy. Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced." Friends, you too, let go of your pain and accept that difficult balance of sorrow and joy. It's a choice only you can make for yourself.

"When you are sorrowful," said Gibran, "look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Let go of your pain. Only then can your joy and your sorrow remain mixed together in your life and bless you, and bless all of those who love you.

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones

**The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough**

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278, [www.uuchnc.org](http://www.uuchnc.org), 919-644--0567