

From Morning to Mourning

A reflection by the Rev. David M. Horst
Unitarian Universalist Church of Norwich.
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*Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.*
Psalm 30:4b



Sunrise over Rockwell Street, Norwich, Conn.

Is joyfulness permissible as thousands of Americans are infected with the Coronavirus daily and one of our citizens dies every minute? As individuals and families struggle to keep safe while maintaining their work and school commitments? As businesses and their owners and employees face economic hardship? As a large proportion of Americans are seduced by lies and conspiracies that threaten our very democracy? Is joyfulness permissible?

Yes, joyfulness is not only permissible but *indispensable*. Now and here. In this moment. You and me and we the people. Despite widespread suffering and deep anxiety, the soul calls us to joy — not only because we are celebrating end-of-the-year holidays but also because joy is a part of our collective psyche and soul.

For sure, anger, fear, and grief are present still. And for many, disgust for all that is unhealthy in our body politic is very much heavy on our hearts.

In this season when a child of God is born to us, when darkness gives way to light, when life prepares to spring forth again, may the healing balm of joy give us comfort and remind us *what really matters*.

In "The Book of Joy," His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu identified and articulated "The Eight Pillars of Joy," life-affirming values shared by Buddhism and Christianity as well as all the major world religions.

The first of the eight are qualities of the mind: *Perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance*. The others are quality of the heart: *Forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity*.

You see, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu believe *joy* is the happy by-product of these qualities. If you or I say, "I am *determined* to be joyful" without committing to and putting into practice the underlying values, we'll just be joy *pretending* rather than joy in *being*.

Right now, I'm committing to *humility* in my thoughts and *compassion* in my heart — and I think these two qualities complement each other and

suggest a daily spiritual practice that could bring joy to this time in our lives and the life of our nation, this time when we are poised at the threshold from grief and mourning to a bright and joyful morning.

In “The Book of Joy,” Archbishop Tutu recalls the joke about humility of three religious leaders standing before the altar, beating their breasts with great humility, say how, before God, they were nothing. Shortly later, one of the lowly acolytes in the church approaches and starts to beat his chest, professing that, he too, is nothing. When the three religious leaders hear him, one elbows the other and says, “Look who thinks he’s nothing.”

True modesty is quite different, of course — and both the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, despite their moral and religious stature, remain uninterested in status or superiority. They agreed that when they speak to audiences they consider themselves just people, just like those before them — one human being talking to other human beings.

In my ministry with the homeless, formerly homeless, and ex-offender population I try to follow the same guidance: I am one human being talking to another. If anything, I am constantly reminded of my privileged life without the challenges of serious mental illness, physical disability, or a substance use disorder or to have ever experienced a traumatic incident resulting in PTSD. I know that privilege should make me humble, not proud, as I see almost every day my life might have been otherwise.

From a humble quality of mind, a compassionate quality of heart naturally flows. My ministry now and throughout my years of ministry in congregations, compassion and lovingkindness been my prayer and practice — and I’ve yet to become the compassionate person I aspire to be. At times I can be as impatient, unkind, thoughtless, and judgmental as the next person. For these lapses of compassion, I humbly ask forgiveness as I forgive others for theirs.

I believe, as the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu believe — as well as scientists — that compassionate concern for others is instinctive. We evolved as social beings and learned to bond and cooperate with each other because that was, for us humans, our best chance to adapt and survive.

May I suggest a practice of humility and compassion to begin your day?

Before you set out for your day, find or create a quiet place in your home where there are no distractions. Feel your sense of presence in the here and now, a deep groundedness in the earth, and a consciousness of interconnected life on earth and beyond. Breathe and bring into awareness all the parts of your body. Think or speak these guiding words:

I am one of many. I am ordinary.

I am extraordinary. I am human.

You are one of many. You are ordinary.

You are extraordinary. You are human.

*We are the many, both ordinary and extraordinary,
merely humans, sublimely human.*

Perhaps you could carry this *thought* of humility and this *feeling* of compassion throughout the day.

If you need a more portable version, try this:

I am one. I am many. I am human.

Or find your own words to begin the day and to carry with you as your day unfolds.

Mindfulness. Presence. Awareness. Connection. You see, spirituality and spiritual practice do not shield us from the world but plant us more deeply in the world and the reality of *being* and *being human*. In this way, spiritual practice is *life* practice.

In this way, joy comes every morning and with every moment.

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The qualities of compassion and humility — as well as all of “The Eight Pillars of Joy” — have certainly been supporting us these past four tumultuous years and we have surely experienced moments of joy — but it’s been so damn hard. My humility and compassion have been sorely tested. Not just me. Not just the progressive community. It’s been a joyless time for *all* Americans, whatever their political persuasion. Differences have turned to demonization. Democracy has turned to desperation. Dreams have turned to despair. This is not who we are. This is not how we want to live.

Soon, my friends, I believe the long night will end. Our mourning and despair will cease. The morning sun will rise and dry our tears. Days of joy will return. With humility and compassion, we will move forward — slowly, yes, but surely — to become the individuals, the people, and the nation we have always dreamed we could be.

This is my hope. This is my prayer. Amen.

Rev. David M. Horst served Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Boston area, Nantucket, and New Jersey for 20 years and now serves as a community minister at the New London Homeless Hospitality Center. He is the founder of The Open Circle, a spiritual direction practice for individuals and groups based in Norwich. He blogs regularly at the-open-circle.com. He holds an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School and a Certificate in Spiritual Guidance from the Unitarian Universalist Rowe Center. He and his family are residents of Norwich.