

**Happiness from A to Z**  
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**May 10, 2009**

On a muggy afternoon near Tampa, Florida, a few years ago, I was out walking with friends. There is water everywhere in Florida – in the air, on the ground, and dripping from one’s body onto clothing. All that water means canals and drainage ditches and ponds everywhere. All that water is a blessing for fish and wading birds and alligators. I tried to keep that blessing in mind on the short hike by the canal as my t-shirt became drenched by perspiration. I understand that the human body is about 55% water in adult women.<sup>1</sup> At least 55% of that 55% was now transferred to my shirt.

My friends and I were talking about longing, about desire, about what prompts a fleeting ache or something more durable – the emotional “wallpaper” of our lives. I walked with people whose spirituality had been shaped by Buddhist teachings about the sea of impermanence in which we swim and the suffering which follows attachment. It would have been a good time to minimize longing and desire, but these words were out of my mouth before my inner spin doctor could finesse them: “I want more joy in my life!”

In general, the vivid details of most of my past experiences are lost to me. It is as if some ruthless (or blessed) gardener has moved through my brain with a lopper, pruning energetically. Yet I remember the details of that hike, that conversation, that moment, and that burst of emotion. Years later, that longing led me to purchase Rev. Tom Owen-Towle’s book *Wholly Joy! Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. He is the former co-minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego.

Though a longing for joy prompted the purchase, it was not insistent enough to prompt me to actually read it – until now. Why the delay? Perhaps you have heard this question posed by happiness mongers: “Would you like to be right or would you like to be happy?” I considered the possibility that I would much rather be right than happy, but that shoe pinches and causes a blister – it does not quite fit. Shel Silverstein, on the other hand, offers a comfortable fitting

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body\\_water](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Body_water).

shoe: “Have you been to The Land of Happy, where everyone’s happy all day, where they joke and they sing of the happiest things, and everything’s jolly and gay? There’s no one unhappy in the Land of Happy, there’s laughter and smiles galore. I have been to the Land of Happy – What a bore!”<sup>2</sup>

For those who both long for more joy in their lives and who wonder whether happiness is as “dull as heaven on a Saturday night,”<sup>3</sup> *Wholly Joy* is a relief and a revelation. *Wholly Joy* is a *relief* because it affirms that being joyful is not boring. These are Owen-Towles’ ten truths about joy:

- 1) Joy is our birthright.
- 2) Joy combines grace and grit.
- 3) Joy exists here and now.
- 4) Joy requires staying awake.
- 5) Joy entails progress, not perfection.
- 6) Joy dwells inside.
- 7) Joy is carved from thorns.
- 8) Joy is fulfilled in service.
- 9) Joy means being content – but never satisfied.
- 10) Joy doubles when shared.

*Wholly Joy* is a *revelation* because it distinguishes between happiness and joy. Let us look first at happiness. “Happiness entails living with sufficient satisfaction and significance alongside others doing likewise,”<sup>4</sup> Owen-Towle writes. Satisfaction alone is not enough for happiness. We also need a sense of significance, that our lives matter to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to the world around us. We need both satisfaction and significance.

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<sup>2</sup> Shel Silverstein, quoted in *Wholly Joy: Being Happy in an Unhappy World*, Tom Owen-Towle, Barking Rocks Press, 3303 Second Avenue, San Diego, CA 92103, 2001, p. 53

<sup>3</sup> This phrase is from Leonard Cohen’s song “Closing Time.”

<sup>4</sup> *Wholly Joy*, page 11.

We need “sufficient” satisfaction and significance, not “notable” or “extraordinary” or “mind blowing” satisfaction and significance in order to feel happy. We do not need to have our satisfaction and significance socks knocked off in order to feel happy. “Bloom where you are planted” may sound like a trite phrase, but it contains enough wisdom to fertilize anyone’s garden.

The last part of the happiness definition is important, too. Happiness entails living with sufficient satisfaction and significance *alongside others doing likewise*. Our own happiness depends on proximity to others who live with sufficient satisfaction and significance. It is not easy to tell whether others live with sufficient satisfaction and significance. We are in the habit of saying “Hi. How are you?” as we race ahead to share what is going on with us. We are not in the habit of saying “Hi. How is your level of satisfaction and significance today?” and pausing to listen to what is said and to what remains unspoken. Thankfully, good friends manage to weasel an update out of us anyway.

Besides merely caring about the level of satisfaction and significance felt by those alongside us, Unitarian Universalists aspire to act to counter racism and all oppression wherever we find it. That means we must notice not only those alongside us but also those who are *not* alongside us. Lamentably, few of the people alongside me are People of Color. I am delving into layers of meaning related to this through a four-week online course entitled “Transforming Whiteness” which is offered through the Church of the Larger Fellowship of the Unitarian Universalist Association.<sup>5</sup>

Class participants are identifying what whiteness is, clarifying the ways it operates on our lives, and exploring ways of transforming whiteness into a force for justice. According to the course facilitators, “One of the dilemmas we face as whites is how to feel good about our racial identity—our whiteness—in a culture of white supremacy. The challenge here is

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<sup>5</sup> The course is listed here under “Ethics and Social Justice”: <http://www.uurgl.com/learn/>.

to develop a positive white identity that will empower us to work for change.” You will hear more about insights from the class in the coming months.

Back to *Wholly Joy*. It is a revelation because it distinguishes between happiness and joy. Whereas happiness entails living with sufficient satisfaction and significance alongside others doing likewise, joy encompasses the “full catastrophe” of life, to use the phrase of Jon Kabat-Zinn.<sup>6</sup> To experience joy, we must be in emotional touch and in spiritual touch with *all* of life, including our bitter disappointments, dashed hopes, and anger at the betrayals we have experienced. The context for joy includes life’s heartaches, as well as its happiness.

Tom Owen-Towle’s “full catastrophe” definition of joy is idiosyncratic. I suspect that few of us conceptualize joy as including disappointments and heartbreak. However, in our most reflective moments, we may sense that disappointments are as precious as happiness. Joy is like the feathers on the throat of a hummingbird. Sometimes joy flashes bright and dazzling. Sometimes joy does not flash at all, depending on the light. Feathers of disappointment and feathers of happiness are there alongside each other, all the time.

The 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker wrote, “As I look over my life, I find no disappointment and no sorrow I could afford to lose.”<sup>7</sup> Wow! It takes an expansive soul to say that. Speaking personally, I can name a few disappointments and sorrows that I can afford to lose. Yet I would not lose all of them, for disappointments and sorrows have done more to foster in me empathy, humility, and kindness than my successes and achievements combined. Tom Owen-Towle puts it this way: “Joyful people are whole individuals who clasp the expansive range of existence: the tumult and the fury as well as the delight and ecstasy – all during one incarnation.”<sup>8</sup>

Religion can help us to become more joyful, though it can also steer us away from joy. “Healthy religion helps us live more realistically and gracefully with sadness: both ours and others. Authentic spirituality doesn’t attempt to cure sadness. Why? Because sorrow and joy are

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<sup>6</sup> p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Page 55.

<sup>8</sup> Page 47.

equally potent realities.”<sup>9</sup> Our collective wisdom will help shape Unitarian Universalism into ever more authentic spirituality which does not attempt to “cure” sadness.

No one has to tell parents of any gender that sorrow and joy are equally potent realities in life. In tribute to parents in general and to mothers, in particular, I close with a short prayer by Rev. Jill Ann Terwilliger.<sup>10</sup>

“I offer a prayer for mother’s day today. This is who it is for:

It is for all the mothers in this room, in this city, across this continent, and in every land around this planet.

It is for the mothers whose homes resound with children’s laughter, screeching toys, loud music, or the sullen teenage shrug.

It is for the mothers who gave birth in joy or in agony or in grief.

It is for the mothers who have adopted the motherless and discovered how wide love can reach; and it is for the mothers who have given over their children to others.

This prayer is for all the women who have wished to be mothers and are not.

It is for all the mothers whose children have ever gone off to war, for the worry they endure and the tension they carry through every hour of absence. It is for the mothers whose children return whole and unscathed, or who return wounded in mind or body, or who do not return at all.

It is for all the mothers who grieve – lost pregnancies, lost children, lost hopes, lost futures.

And this is my prayer:

May peace come to you.

Peace amid the noise and chaos of active children.

Peace amid the silence and the absence.

Peace with the choices you have made, the paths taken and the ones not taken.

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<sup>9</sup> Page 57.

<sup>10</sup> Used by permission given by the author on the ministers’ email list. This is the author’s blog: [www.whatlovecanaccomplish.blogspot.com](http://www.whatlovecanaccomplish.blogspot.com)

Peace with the grief you have endured.

May peace come to you, and may you greet it and welcome it, and make a place for it to live within you. May peace find a home in you, and from that home, may peace venture widely over this earth.”

May all of us who care for children, regardless of our gender and whether or not we have given birth or parented, find peace amid the noise and chaos of active children, peace amid the silence and the absence, peace with the choices we have made, and peace with the grief we have endured. May we appreciate happiness but revel in the “full catastrophe” of joy. May it be so!