

“Shout for Joy”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA
June 19, 2011

I’m so glad to be back with you this morning, and this summer. This is the first of SEVEN Sundays I will be with you. I had such a wonderful time leading worship for you last summer, and I was thrilled to be invited back.

And I also want to say Happy Father’s Day to the fathers and grandfathers among us. Do we have any great-grandfathers?

I want to talk with you this morning about the wonder and beauty of life. About taking the time to NOTICE the wonder and beauty of life. I want to talk about making sure we don’t miss what is wondrous and beautiful around us.

Summer solstice is Tuesday, the longest day of sunlight in the year. In Earth-centered traditions, this is a time to celebrate the fullness and abundance of life’s many gifts and expressions.

That sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? The words of the psalm I read are beautiful and call us to reflect on Earth’s bounty. And most of us are able to do that for the space of a psalm, a poem, maybe for a few minutes in the morning, as we drink our tea or coffee. Maybe we notice a striking sunset now and then. Maybe some of us even have time and ability to really get outside and go for a hike or a walk on the beach. Those of us with children in our lives are often blessed with moments of appreciation and joy.

But it’s just so hard to keep up that awareness of what’s beautiful around us. I don’t know about you, but I’m busy. From the moment I wake up in the morning, I

have things to do. Every day I have things to do, every week I have things to do, every month, I have things to do. Every YEAR, I have things to do. And I'm not one of those frantically busy people who over-schedules myself or has an exceptional amount of commitments and obligations. I am actually very careful to keep my life in balance. It is simply that daily living requires a certain amount of activity and focus.

And I suspect that most of us in the room are in a similar situation. I suspect that even those of you who are retired have your own to-do lists. Retired Unitarian Universalists are some of the busiest people I know. And of course, if you have young children, your commitments and obligations can be overwhelming.

But I'm not arguing for a life of sitting around, staring at the views. I don't think it's our BUSY-NESS that necessarily needs to change. The reason many of us have things to do is that we LIKE the things we're doing. You know that stereotypical vision of heaven as sitting around doing nothing while soft music plays in the background? Doesn't it sound awful? That might be all right for a day or two of vacation, but certainly not for an eternity. It sounds BORING.

No, I believe what we need is more mindfulness. Mindfulness is that practice of bringing awareness to our daily lives. Can we do it right now? Bring your awareness first to your breath, as you breath in and out, feeling the air move through your nose or mouth. Feel your stomach move in and out with each breath, feel your lungs responding to air. Bring your awareness to the chair beneath you, offering soft support. Notice the back of the chair, holding you. And your legs and

their position...are you comfortable how you're sitting? Were you even aware of whether or not you were comfortable? Bring your attention to your shoulders now, feel them drop a bit as you relax. Notice who is around you, to your right and left, in front and in back. Notice the warm sunshine filtering in from the windows. Notice the stained glass chalice behind me, the grain of the wood of the pulpit, the details of the room. Perhaps you notice something you have never noticed before.

Now, part of the practice of mindfulness is being NON-JUDGMENTAL in your awareness. So it doesn't count as mindfulness if you just made a mental inventory of things that need fixing or correcting or could be better. That's list making. Mindfulness is simply about observation and being fully present to that observation.

It's a hard state of attention to maintain. Like meditation, mindfulness often results in a wandering mind, making lists, remembering tasks, even feeling anxious. Because being fully present and aware means that we notice not just what is good and beautiful, but also what is challenging or difficult. I think THIS is part of why we keep ourselves SO VERY busy. We keep ourselves stimulated with television and shopping and the internet—I do it too—because if we stop and bring ourselves into full awareness, it can sometimes feel devastating. We might notice that we are not as happy and fulfilled as we thought. We might remember relationships with family or friends that need work. We might notice that the world is filled with injustice and inequity. Yes, if we stop and bring ourselves into full awareness, it can sometimes feel devastating.

But here's the gift. When we are fully present and aware, we notice not just what is challenging and difficult, but also what is good and beautiful.

My mom was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2003. I'm sure many of you have had your own experiences with cancer, so let's just take a breath together as those emotions and memories come up. And let me jump ahead in my story and let you know that my mom's cancer is in remission and she is in fine health today.

But of course, back then we had no assurances of a good outcome, my family and I were scared, and as the youngest in my family, I was especially scared, afraid to face my mother's mortality. As my mother underwent surgery followed by chemotherapy, I slept poorly for months. I would sometimes be in the car and realize I didn't know where I was going, or that I was driving my car in a different direction from where I needed to be. I was fully present to my pain and fear, and those emotions overrode all else. All I wanted to talk about was cancer. All I could think of was cancer.

My parents and siblings were similarly absorbed. This remains one of the most difficult times of my life. But here's what I want you to know: it was also a time of much LOVE and much LAUGHTER. My family developed a rather macabre sense of humor built around hospitals, nurses, doctors, chemotherapy, and the awful nutrition shakes my mom had to drink to keep her weight up. Nobody else thought any of this was funny, but we did. We became closer together than we had ever been before. Life seemed frightening and uncertain, of course, but it also suddenly seemed richer and more meaningful than I had previously noticed. The

sky was awfully blue while my mother had cancer. The flowers were tremendously beautiful.

Since this time, I have often said that I would never wish cancer on anyone, but that I couldn't deny it had brought incredible gifts to my family.

When we are fully present and aware, we notice not just what is challenging and difficult, but also what is good and beautiful.

The classic Chinese text, the Tao Te Ching, tells us: "When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad. Being and non-being create each other. Difficult and ease support each other. Long and short define each other. High and low depend on each other. Before and after follow each other."

In other words, our recognition of the good and beautiful **DEPENDS** on our recognition of the challenging and difficult. One does not exist without the other.

Now the Tao Te Ching would advise us to let go of our judgment of what is beautiful and what is ugly, and that's a wonderful goal to aspire to. Wonderful, but not easy. What I'm inviting us to do today is to remember the balance, to remember that beauty and ugliness, joy and sorrow, ease and struggle, that these things go hand in hand. To be fully present and aware is to notice **ALL**, not just one or the other. Not **JUST** the joy. Not **JUST** the sorrow.

If all we notice of the world is its beauty and goodness, then we are **NOT** fully aware. For those of us who lead comfortable lives, it can be easy to ignore the problems of the world, the injustice, the suffering. We avoid eye contact with the

homeless person on the street. We don't know the effects of immigration policy on the people in Marin County. We distance ourselves from family members we don't understand. But that is NOT full awareness. That is NOT mindfulness.

Likewise, if all we notice of the world is its tragedy and heartbreak, then we are NOT fully aware. For those of us whose lives are struggle, it can be easy to ignore the beauty of the world, the love, the generosity. We overlook all the good work being done to make the world a better place. We don't see the love and friendship that abounds. We ignore hope in favor of despair. But that is NOT full awareness. That is NOT mindfulness.

What I'm inviting us to do today is to remember the balance, to remember that beauty and ugliness, joy and sorrow, ease and struggle, that these things go hand in hand.

I think this is PART of the reason why volunteering time—working at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen, teaching at a community center, helping at a local hospital—has been shown by multiple studies to improve depression, pain, mobility, and life satisfaction. I'm sure there are many factors as to WHY this is, but it seems to me that when we volunteer our time somewhere, we bring ourselves into full awareness that the world is not quite all right on its own, that our time is needed to help make this a better place.

And if we are fully present and aware, when we notice the world is not quite all right, we also notice that the world is nevertheless joy-filled and amazing.

And how wonderful to know that if you tend towards either extreme—seeing only joy or seeing only sorrow—that the remedy is still the same: to volunteer your time somewhere.

The tendency of most of us, I think, is to want to avoid extremes in favor of...routine. To-do lists. Television, shopping, internet. Avoiding the lows, we also avoid the highs.

So let's honor this time of year as a time to embrace and celebrate the beauty and wonder we tend to overlook.

On Tuesday's summer solstice, we will have 14 hours and 47 minutes of sunlight here in the Bay Area. The sun at the fullness of its power. The Earth rich with life.

Each one of us here is blessed. I'd like to invite you to speak out loud the beauty or joy you see in your life. <<TIME FOR SHARING>>

The pastures are perfumed with dew.

The hills deck themselves with joy.

The meadows adorn themselves with flocks,

The valleys gown themselves with grain.

We shout for joy;

We join in song.