

“Made for Joy and Woe”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading “For When People Ask” by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer¹

I want a word that means
okay and not okay,
more than that: a word that means
devastated and stunned with joy.
I want the word that says
I feel it all all at once...

Sermon

In 1992, the city of Sarajevo was bombarded and much of it was leveled during an ethnically charged war for control of the capital city. Coffee shops gone. Homes turned to dust. Churches left as empty, crumbling vessels of the holy.

Twenty-two people were killed in a marketplace as they waited for food, and in the midst of that destruction, a cellist brought his instrument out into the streets in mourning. The melancholic and hauntingly beautiful notes reverberated against eviscerated concrete walls and through abandoned streets for twenty-two consecutive days. Vedran Smajlovic would go on to play in abandoned buildings and at the funerals of neighbors and strangers who died in the war.

Such beauty. Such horror.

Thirty years later, history repeated itself. The human instinct to reach for delight amid pain again was alive as a violinist brought out her instrument inside the basement of an apartment building turned into a bomb shelter in Kharkiv. A video of Vera Lytovchenko playing a Ukrainian folk song went viral with the caption, “What we do in bomb shelters when they bomb us from the sky.”

¹ <https://grateful.org/resource/for-when-people-ask/>

In these times of terror and horror, what most astonishes me is not our human capacity to wreak havoc and dole out cruelty. It is our capacity to create beauty, offer comfort, and experience joy in the midst of unspeakable pain.

This beautiful paradox became clear to me the other week as I was driving home and listening to the news on the radio. This was just a few days after the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles had barely been contained. A reporter was walking through the Will Rogers State Historic Park with the state's parks and recreation director, Armando Quintero.

With great emotion he talked about the significance of that park for Angelenos especially those who don't have backyards of their own. The park offered a place to roam, to be among the trees, and to celebrate birthdays with family and friends. He looked around and, with grief heavy in his voice, he lamented that it was now gone.

But then, just a moment later, he said, But the birds are coming back, and his voice cracking with awe he noted, "Oh, there's a deer right now." He and the reporter paused and watched.²

Such horror. Such beauty.

These days, I am humbled by the vastness of human experience as we live life on this planet.

Life is scorched earth and ash-laden streets.
It is handcuffed grandfathers and orphaned children.
Life is losing beloveds far too soon.

And, life is the new year marked by red envelopes and moon cakes.
It is circling around a fire and singing songs.
It is opening doors for shelter and a warm meal.
Life is dancing with ecstatic freedom.

Life is unbearably cruel, and life is filled with grace.
The paradox is stunning.

Though this juxtaposition is true. It can feel at times as though we are only living on one side of life's ledger. That all of the cruelty is stacked against you. Or, that none of it is, and you are far too privileged to take pleasure in life's ease.

² "'The birds are back.' Resilience in the ruins of the Palisades fire," *Consider This*, NPR, January 17, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1225172097>.

None of us lives this simply, with only one story to our names. We are all touched by pain, and we all have joy knocking at our door.

One thing I know is true in this moment is that staying in touch with both our grief and our joy is necessary for our survival, personally and collectively.

The social change theorist and teacher, Margaret Wheatley writes: “For whatever future awaits us, we need human beings being fully human.”³

Part of me thinks that maybe humans are the problem with our propensity for greed and seeming inability to learn from the past. But, the deeper and more beautiful truth is that it is our full humanity that will save us. It is only if we touch into our capacities for compassion, generosity, wisdom, creativity, and joy that we will have a future.

To be fully human, we must allow ourselves to be open and responsive to the world as it is. To its horrors and its beauty.

I know how hard this is. The horror is overwhelming at times. It can be shocking and numbing. Our tender souls may seek retreat from all the pain. And, our emotional survival may necessitate occasional withdrawal from the too-muchness of the world.

Yet, we must take care in becoming too tuned out. The activist Joanna Macy has focused much of her teaching on honoring our pain and grief and she says: “There’s no future if we go numb... One of the things I discovered is that you do not numb yourself partially. All your response systems become affected...”⁴

Not only does the pain become more muted but so does the sparkle of the snow, the sweetness of the fruit, the colors of the sunrise, and the laughter of a child.

The sociologist Brené Brown has found that this is true from her research on vulnerability. She says that we cannot selectively block out certain emotions. Wholeheartedness means allowing ourselves to feel the grief and sorrow so that we are more alive to the joy, delight, and contentment that are also part of being human.

³ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Restoring Sanity: Practices to Awaken Generosity, Creativity & Kindness in Ourselves and Our Organizations* (Brett-Koehler Publishers, 2024), 5.

⁴ Joanna Macy, “There is No Future if We Go Numb,” interview by Jess Serrante, episode 4, *We are the Great Turning Podcast*, SoundsTrue, May 9, 2024, transcript, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VFET8dPgugZVEPr5vNSf4ogf2-Ynexk6/view?usp=sharing>.

Joy, delight, contentment, gratitude, awe - this is what sustains us through the hard times. To be resilient, we have to be willing to meet the fullness and complexity of life with open arms. To invite sorrow and pain in alongside joy at life's table.

Yet, being open to it all does not mean having to respond to it all. The challenge is to be open while also giving our attention to what's closest to us and most in our sphere of focus and agency. To find where your grief and your joy can meet and coexist in a grounding alchemy of presence and purpose.

I have witnessed this powerful alchemy in our community in recent days as memories of a loved one were met with laughter and tears, as pledges were made to protect our rights, as teens performing tragedy were cheered and applauded, as a ring shout made way for a dance party.

And also I witness this powerful alchemy of the human spirit right here in our time of worship together. Together, we hold the intention of making space for the fullness of life to be present with us and present in our bodies. We sing together, stand together, pray together, breathe together to settle our bodies as well as nourish our spirits.

We can trust that our bodies and our spirits can hold the complexity of life - the simultaneous delight and devastation.

As we embrace the complexity of what it means to be human in this moment, we can be truly in this world just as it is and just as we are. Each of us can be here fully attentive to how we are called to engage in this life now.

This has been a hallmark of our faith - our concern is not for a heaven beyond this life or this earth, not for the fate of our souls in the hereafter. Instead, our faith beckons us to sink into the depths of life here and now, to embrace all that life presents to us.

To be fully human is to be in the here and now open to life's excruciating sorrow and life's immeasurable joy.

The poet Ross Gay asks: "What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another... What if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other through those things?"⁵

⁵ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays* (Algonquin Books, 2022), 4.

To make it through this moment and the next and the next, we will each need to keep our hearts open, to find the ways we can extend our love and care to those within our reach and to raise our voices in resistance and protest where and when we can. From these acts of compassion and care born of grief and sorrow, joy emerges making more whole what has been broken.

Life contains it all.

Life now is circling around a fire and whispering our most audacious dreams.
It is baking grandma's molasses cookies for the weekly meal.
It is building ancestral shrines and dancing the electric slide.
It is painting and drawing, laughing and singing and beckoning others to join us.

The poet William Blake writes: "Joy and woe are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine."

Our divine souls and tender hearts can hold the breaking and the blessing.
We can hear the birdsong and pluck the fiddle string.
We can meet this moment minds awake, hearts open, and hands ready.

So may it be.