

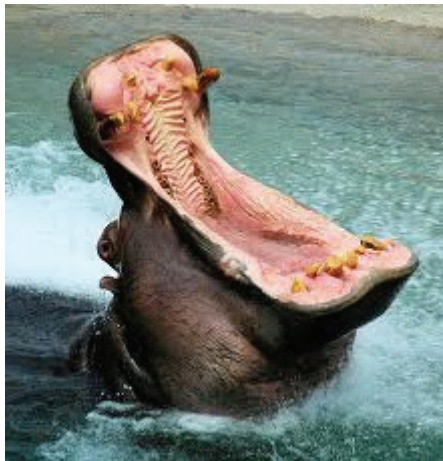
**“DON’T LET THE HIPPOS EAT YOU!”
A SERMON ON THE PURPOSE OF LIFE**

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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On this second Sunday of the brand new year (and my first sermon of 2012), I must be feeling unusually spiritually ambitious...because it is my intention this morning to share with you nothing less than the (capital “P”) Purpose of life! Now...since the dawn of human consciousness – and across the vast diversities of humanity’s many religions and philosophies – there have been countless articulations and re-articulations of what “the purpose of life” for us human beings might be. Well this morning I want to simply give you my personal answer, which comes, of course, from a decidedly Unitarian Universalist perspective.

Now...there is no reason for me to be coy or obtuse here...so let me get right down to it. I believe that the purpose of life -- for human beings on this planet – simply boils down to this...one must simultaneously, over and over again during one’s lifespan : 1) regularly find joy in one’s daily life and, 2) at the same time regularly bring joy to others around you. It may surprise you to learn that this dualistic spiritual idea – of finding the purpose of your life by giving and taking joy – is one of the oldest articulations of the purpose of life known to humanity...and is, believe it or not, where the hungry hippopotamuses come in!

In his wonderful little book *Freethinking Mystics with Hands*, my colleague Tom Owen-Towle of San Diego recounts an ancient Egyptian myth which says that after death, every individual is “confronted by the god Osiris with a quiz that has to be answered honestly. After 42 routine questions concerning how the deceased has lived, Osiris asks a crucial two-part question: First did you find joy? And second, did you bring joy. The petitioners, according to this ancient Egyptian myth, cannot lie to Osiris and much is at stake. If they are able to honestly answer these questions affirmatively, they are returned a measure of continued existence. But if not, they are taken away and forthwith eaten by a hippopotamus.”



And then Tom reflects, “This old Egyptian myth teaches a valuable lesson about joy and the purpose of life...Note that the emphasis is not on what we produce or on our possessions, not even on our creative talents or our good works. The purpose of our earthly journey according to Egyptian religion is simply this: Did you find joy in your own life and did you bring joy to others

during your earthly sojourn.”

Now...I've been a Unitarian Universalist minister for almost 40 years now...and in that time I have heard many articulations of what the “true” purpose of life is...but I have to tell you that I think this simple, old Egyptian answer is about as close to perfect as any I have ever heard. Upon reflection, I do in fact believe we are on this earth to: 1) unashamedly find joy for ourselves...and to (in the same breath, as much as we are able) 2) generously bring joy to others.

All right, so taking and bringing joy is the key to living well...but the question quickly becomes what precisely is joy... and just how can a human being can tell if he or she has got it (or – of equal importance – has given it)? Surely joy isn't some sort of straightforward, simple commodity or state of human being to which anyone can bring scientific or even spiritual precision. The big Merriam-Webster dictionary I keep in my office says joy is “*pleasurable feelings or emotions caused by well-being,*” and that to have joy is to “*experience or show pleasure, gladness or great delight,*” in our living.

OK, that's fine as far as it goes...but I think joy is fiercely personal and subjective. When I think about joy in my own life, I think I intuitively know more or less what that feels and looks like. When I am in a joyful mood, as I was this beautiful Florida morning, as I joyfully rode my bike over the Barber Bridge on my way to work...just as I know when I feel joyous, I think I can recognize joy on the faces of others when they are enjoying themselves and their world. But surely joy manifests itself in thousands of ways over our lifetimes, and is experienced very differently from individual to individual. I mean there are quiet joys and boisterous ones... physical joys, spiritual joys and intellectual ones. There are: 1) momentary, fleeting joys like watching a smile suddenly come across an infant's face, watching a song bird soar through the sky, or witnessing a beautiful sunrise break over the Atlantic; and there are 2) sustained, enduring joys, like living with a beloved spouse for decades, or doing work for many years that you love, or watching your kids all grow up into fine and productive adults. Joy is a vague and complicated thing, but most of us – like that Supreme Court justice who in a famous ruling about pornography simply said in defining it, “I know it when I see it.” And who here doesn't want more joy in their life?

But back to the Egyptians and the hippos! At first this spiritual suggestion that the meaning of our lives is secured by both taking joy for ourselves and giving it to others may seem a bit contradictory or paradoxical. It reminds me of the famous quote from American essayist E. B. White, who once said, and now I paraphrase him, “*Every morning I rise with the twin desires to savor the world...and save it. This makes it hard for me to plan the day.*”

But in fact I think that this dualism of taking-and-giving-joy (savoring-and-saving-the-world) are two sides of the same valuable spiritual coin that do in fact give our lives their deepest and most satisfying meaning. As I thought about it, I realized that our ability as persons to:

- 1) take or find joy for ourselves is inextricably spiritually and emotionally bound up with our ability to
- 2) give or create joy to others.

Similarly, our ability to get out there and help save the world (making it a better and more joyful place for others) is inextricably spiritually and emotionally bound up with our ability to know how to take joy and pleasure for ourselves. So what at first might seem like selfish pursuits – taking

joy...savoring the world...enjoying our own lives fully – are in fact are the very things which empower and energize us to selflessly care for and nurture life and persons around us.

But let's back up, and take each side of this inter-connected (taking...giving) equation in turn. Let's talk first about the necessity in our spiritual and emotional lives) to know how to take or find joy in our daily lives. A lot of religions, particularly conservative ones, are very hesitant to affirm people finding and taking pleasure in their lives. Perhaps some of you grew up in religious communities where joy and pleasure were basically seen in negative, sinful or selfish terms. Theologian Matthew Fox, who is Episcopalian now but was once a Roman Catholic priest officially "silenced" by the Pope for his teachings, Matthew Fox has long decried what he calls the one-sided and life-hating "Fall/Redemption Theology" so focused on the "Original Sin" idea of much of Christianity, affirming instead what he calls a theology of "Original Blessing" that focuses on our creation's beauty, holiness, and joyfulness. I'll let him say it in his own words: "The scandal [of fall/redemption theology] is one of ignoring – and then despising -- creation and those who love creation. Fall/Redemption theology has ignored the blessing that creation is because of its anthropomorphic preoccupation with sin. The result has been, among other things, the loss of pleasure from spirituality, and with this loss the increase of pain, of injustice, of sado-masochism and of distrust...Creation-centered mystics as well as Jewish tradition have [on the other hand] always begun their theology with original blessing and not original sin...[Knowing life as an original blessing] is about enjoying life's basic gifts." And then he concludes by affirming that we must learn how to take joy from our living, "*If creation is a blessing – and a constantly original one – then our proper response would be to enjoy it...[we human beings must learn the art] of savoring. Pleasure is one of the deepest spiritual experiences of our lives. Ecstasy is the experience of God.*"

In any case...while these ideas about the spiritual value of taking joy from life are anathema to some conservative religious groups – who frown on singing, dancing, sexuality, and almost anything else which feels good – they certainly strike a responsive chord with us life-affirming Unitarian Universalists, don't they? Our life-loving, creation-affirming tradition has always first celebrated and affirmed what is right and lovely, beautiful and joyful about this world. Ours is obviously not a guilt or fear or sin driven religion...and so we easily and naturally embrace any theology which affirms the rightness and wisdom of seeing and taking joy in this wonderful earthly existence we are blessed with. Universalist poet Carl Sandburg affirms that every child who comes into this world is made for joy.

*You were made for joy, child
The feet of you were carved for that.
The ankles of you run for that.
 The rise of rain,
 The shift of wind,
 The drop of a red star on a far water rim...
 An endless catalogue of shouts and laughters,
 Silent contemplations –
They made you – from day to day – for joy, child, for joy.*

Our prayer must be that as we move into adulthood, we never lose this awareness that we are made for joy. Another one of my favorite poems, which I have used at least on one occasion as my opening words here at the Fellowship, is "*Welcome Morning*" by poet Anne Sexton. The poem is all about having the spiritual and physical wisdom, deep to the heart and bones, to know how to take immediate joy from everyday life and things:

There is joy in all: [Sexton wrote]
In the hair I brush each morning,
In the chapel of eggs I cook each morning,
In the outcry from the kettle that heats my coffee each morning,
In the spoon and the chair that cry "hello there Anne" each morning,
In the godhead of the table that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.

All this is God,
Right here in my pea-green house
Each morning
And I mean, though often forget,
To give thanks,
To faint down by the kitchen table
In a prayer of rejoicing
As the holy birds at the kitchen window
Peck into their marriage of seeds

So while I think of it,
Let me paint a thank-you on my palm
For this God, this laughter of the morning,
Lest it go unspoken

The joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
Dies young.

"The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young." What could be more true? A joy deferred in this life is usually a joy lost forever.

Friends...Let's stop a minute...and take real spiritual and existential stock of our human situation. Here we all are on this remarkable spinning planet...mortal physical creatures all...with a life span to live of...what?...at best?...80, 90, maybe a few of us 100 years...mortal creatures who find ourselves alive in a creation that is – by almost any objective reckoning – miraculous...rich...holy...generous and beautiful. What, then, as the ancient Egyptians knew, could be of greater spiritual importance than knowing from the inside of our hearts out, knowing how to take joy...copiously and unstintingly take joy on a daily basis from the ordinary fabric of our lives? What could be more important than opening our eyes in the morning and taking pleasure in what is quietly around us...the soft yellow sunlight faithfully working its gentle way through the bedroom blinds...that sweetly slumbering spouse we've managed to live with, more or less peaceably and happily, all these years...birds outside in the palm trees singing their odes to the returning dawn...the inviting smell of coffee wafting down the hallway from the kitchen...the promise of another day awaiting us – work to accomplish, meals to enjoy, kids and grandkids to communicate with, newspapers to digest, books to read, movies to watch, sleep to crawl into.

We imagine "The Gods" have more... but do they have access to any miracles greater than holding a happy/giggling baby in our arms...or than enjoying a simple supper and good wine shared by candlelight with dear old friends...or than watching a gentle summer sunset through the palmetto trees gently swaying in the ocean's breezes...or than snuggling languidly in bed with a dear old loved one after the alarm goes off in the morning? All is spiritually lost, really, if we do not know how deep to our hearts gratefully welcome these simple, miraculous gifts of living, these holy treasures of our ordinary days.

The Egyptians didn't exactly say this, but I will...unless we somehow know how to Take or find joy (and take or find it regularly and unreservedly in all the little ways that make such a big difference to our living) we are already, in a way, "dead," because we have squandered the great gift of everyday life that has so mysteriously and blessedly been bestowed upon us.

Now please hear an important caveat here. Finding joy is, of course, not always an easy or simple thing. Some days and times – when our lives are clouded with complications, depression, grief, or other forms of situational sadness which inevitably come to us over a lifetime – we are unable to conjure up much if any joy at all. No one can or will experience uninterrupted joy in our living. Indeed, if someone reports him or herself blissfully happy all the time, then they are simply either: 1) a moron or more likely 2) simply not facing the ambiguities, sorrows, losses and complications that come into everyone's life. But that being said – that no one can or should be constantly joyous – what the ancient Egyptians knew about life and joy is nonetheless absolutely true. If you are to find any measure of spiritual satisfaction in life, you must know how to look for joy and unashamedly take it in your everyday life. You must be open to the joy that is quietly nested in the loam of your everyday life before it is too late...before your life is used up.

Listen to poet Jane Kenyon:

*I got out of bed on two strong legs.
It might have been otherwise.
I ate cereal, sweet milk, flawless peach.
It might have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.
All morning I did the work I love.
At noon I lay down with my mate.
It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.
It might have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls.
And planned another day just like this day.
But one day, I know it will be otherwise.*

"One day, it will be otherwise"...Little did Jane Kenyon know when she wrote these beautiful words, how prescient she was. Sadly, just months after she wrote this wonderful poem about being wise enough not to miss the quiet joys and pleasures in your life, she was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer that took take her life before her 50th birthday. But the poet – while alive, bless her heart – knew deep to her heart what the ancient Egyptians knew...and that is simply that if we are to know the purpose of life from the inside out, we must have the spiritual and emotional wisdom to seek and take joy...to seek and take joy freely and frequently...everyday that we rise to find ourselves alive and well, with this wondrous and rich world before us...for someday, someday – we all know it's true – "it will be otherwise."

So...teach your heart to take joy now, dear friends. Open your eyes and your heart every day to the "original blessing" of the life that is yours. Be unstinting in taking ordinary, everyday joy wherever and however you can...for none of us knows how long this amazing gift of life will be ours...now is the moment to seize the joy as it flies!

That is the first half of the Egyptian spiritual equation. But as everyone knows, devoting a

lifetime to just taking joy for yourself is a tragically incomplete spiritual and existential plan! If you are to find the full and finest meaning of life, you must not forget the other essential spiritual half of the ancient Egyptian equation! If you are going to successfully avoid the hungry hippopotamuses, you must also regularly strive to give joy, or at least to create opportunities for joy, for others.

As I suggested at the outset of this sermon -- even though it may seem a bit counter-intuitive at first -- I believe the spiritual impetus to give joy to others is clearly rooted in your ability to first regularly take joy for yourself! Reason with me...if you know how to gratefully find joy in this earthly existence for yourself, then you quite naturally want to create and share that same positive life experience for others. Every joyful person I know -- every last one of them -- is naturally generous toward others. Joyful people -- people who are truly grateful for what they have and for all of life's possibilities -- seem to work from what is called "an abundance model" in their living. Believing there is plenty of joy out there for themselves, their hearts "reason" that there is plenty of joy out there that should be waiting for others too, and that they will do what they can to spread it around. I believe joyful people have a kind of natural empathy and generosity that almost compels them to be joy-givers as much as they are joy-takers, thus rounding themselves out spiritually.

Does this make spiritual and emotional sense to all of you?

Similarly, someone who only selfishly seeks pleasure and takes joy for himself is what we call "a miserable human being" -- literally and figuratively. If you are some sort of inward-turning hedonist, selfishly seeking satisfaction and joy only for yourself, then your entire life will eventually be poisoned by that isolating narcissism. I don't believe anyone can truly: 1) know joy in their own "heart of hearts" if they are not...2) in the regular habit of seeking to share and spread joy to others. And so, if I am right, sharing joy is, in the end, in our own spiritual self-interest, for giving and getting joy are inextricably bound up in one another...and doing one enhances and deepens the other, finally blessing us each as a joy-giver and joy-taker. Let me give a simple, everyday example...when we usually decorous adults take the time, as I did recently when I was back in Wisconsin visiting my family, we take the time to play on the floor with our nieces and nephews or grandkids, not only do we bring laughter to their faces, but we also bring amazing joy to our own hearts. When it comes to joy, what gets around, comes around!

So...if all this (about the absolute interconnectedness between taking-and-giving joy) is spiritually true, precisely how must we try to give joy to others? Well, it seems to me that the life-saving-and-enriching process of giving joy to others happens on two primary levels: 1) as we individually work on an everyday basis to create and share joy with those persons that are immediately around us, and 2) as we together work over the long haul for enduring social structures of decency and justice for all.

Let me take each of these spheres in turn.

Obviously, one sure and simple way to spiritually avoid the hippo's jaws is to share joy with those who are immediately adjacent to you on your everyday life journey. What could be more simple or important than bringing a laugh from the funny-papers to your spouse and kids over the breakfast table...or sharing a kind word or a light-hearted joke with a discouraged co-worker...or offering a friendly glance to a sullen stranger across the subway car...or extending a courteous wave to a nearby driver on the beltway...or sending that slightly-too-expensive birthday gift to your newest grandchild? Every day we are presented with countless small but

sacred opportunities to bring joy to those near us...and, again, our own spiritual fulfillment as persons is dependent upon our doing so!

And so too it is in the larger picture of our lives – with the all-important, ongoing work of social justice. Every time we as people of relative privilege roll up our sleeves, and work with others of goodwill to help create or expand societal structures of decency, comfort and justice for all, we are, first and foremost, doing joy's work. Think about it...injustice in all its many forms – poverty, prejudice, racial and social inequality, in all its many forms – functions to rob countless human beings in our world of much of their joy and possibilities. Not only must we do this work because it is the right thing to do, for all persons are precious and deserve access to joy's kingdom. We also do it out of self-interest...for surely the joy we are able to share from our lives of privilege is always and inexorably diminished if human beings around us are denied access to similar opportunities in their living.

Well...my wrist watch says it's time for this sermon to come to an end. I hope I have persuaded you this morning that the purpose of life is curiously and quietly found in the twin (and intertwined) spiritual practices of both taking and giving, finding and sharing joy in everyday living. It is imperative in your everyday spiritual life that you work, when it comes to joy and satisfaction, from a grateful and generous abundance model.

1) Know, deep to your heart, how to find and take joy from your daily life...whether it be from a sunset, a grandchild, a fast bike ride or a good glass of wine. Be unstinting, even reckless, in sucking from the marrow of your life all the joy that is waiting there for you to discover and know...and don't feel guilty about taking pleasure and enjoyment, because (as Carl Sandburg reminds us, that is precisely what you as a human being were made for!

2) and from that wealth of an ever-more-joyful human being, be unstinting, even reckless, in offering and opening joy to and for others, both stranger and friend. Be kind to others, pay attention to their needs, share from your own wealth, and do all you can in the wider world to end suffering and sorrow.

Let there be no doubt about it...dear friends...the Egyptians were right...the hungry hippos are always out there – jaws open – waiting for you to forget joy's holy work. So don't forget joy's holy work!...both taking and giving joy...for that is where eternity is found.

Amen!