

Opening to Joy

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 12, 2021

Snow can be magical in its simplicity and beauty – crystalized water drifting slowly and gracefully from the clouds above, coating the land below it in a sheet of white, sometimes intermixed with glittering flakes that make the world sparkle. An abundance of ordinary wonder. I think of snow through the innocent gaze of a child – the collection of these crystals gleefully transforming into life-size snow angels, or three-dimensional snow people comprised of packed together snow and other basic items – sticks or carrots. This simple result of the chilly air becomes an opening to joy to those of all ages, if only we set the intention to notice.

Not only does ordinary snow bring us delight, but it serves as a source of faith and connection with the holy, with the sacred. Does not every act of joy and wonder connect us to something greater than ourselves, our inner beings interacting with that which sustains a fulfilling and meaningful life? May this be an open invitation to that curious, overlooked, magical joy all around us.

Ordinary snow offers divine connection in some Christian beliefs that connects us to the heavens, as well. In the beliefs of some Christians, just as we “emanate from the heavens,” so, too, do those tiny crystals. Both our souls and those flakes descend from a “state of being,” beautiful and sacred, and, inevitably, to those of this belief, both our souls and the snowflakes

will again ascend again to the heavens. Through snow we find connection to the sacred; through snow our souls are fed.¹

Through snow – the ordinary, the inevitable - this connects us to the holy. I wonder if nature serves as a prayer, a connection between mortal life and that which is greater – those simple, ordinary things, simple expressions of the divine. Perhaps ants creating secret burrows in the ground beneath them, or salmon swimming upstream to protect their offspring. If we notice this, do we notice the holy? Do we notice a sacred story of creation, the wonder and awe of evolution intermixed with that we do not yet understand? Let the snow and all other ordinary things open us to joy that elicits faith and enhances the life of each person who notices.

Finding joy is a spiritual practice – it keeps us centered; grounded. It allows us to find the good when we feel lost or drowned in pain, to celebrate that which is all around us, to notice the beauty we are offered in this one, precious life. It is the “delight in being alive!” Joy comes from a dedication to faith and grace, from a practice of gratitude, from a clinging to hope, from a commitment to love.² There are scientific benefits to joy, too. Joy allows us to shape healthier lifestyles, improve our immune systems, rid ourselves of stress and pain, and generally live longer lives.³ This comes with setting intention to notice those delights all around us – sometimes filled with awe, sometimes magical, and, most often, quite ordinary, like those crystalized snowflakes, or an anthill, or the smile of a child. Joy and happiness are in delicate

¹ <https://soulsplunker.com/2012/03/snowflakes.html>

² <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/17>

³ <https://www.healthline.com/health/affects-of-joy#1.-Your-brain>

balance with their opposites: sorrow, sadness, agony; the good and the bad amplifying one another; let us remember that hardship can be a “stepping stone” to joy.⁴

I think of our country – our world – needing healing, aching for the ordinary to bring delight, to counterbalance sorrow and sadness. This need unifies us. Joy has been choked by pervasive disease – a world-wide pandemic wreaking havoc month after month after month, isolating us and leaving us cloaked in fear. We are plagued by the disease of division – politics creating harmful divisiveness in our country. Many may ask, amidst all this pain and fear, how can we be joyful? How can we open ourselves to joy? Let us note that it is times like this when we are called to joy even more deeply! When that church member need bring a plate of cookies to a newcomer, when the glitter of snow calls for us to take notice and delight. When we feel gratitude, or love of a friend. In times of hardship, joy saves – in times of fear, joy beckons. And while this may be hard, it is saving.

In times like this, may we remember that sacred prose offered by Mary Oliver, finding herself lost in the world over and over again, in joy, in acclamation, not by engaging with the extravagant, not the exceptional, but the ordinary, the drab, the “daily presentations.”⁵ In this season, I think of that cloud of frozen moisture leaving our mouths as we breathe heavily into the air – simple magic of the cold weather, or brown and crunchy trees and bushes reminding us of the cycle of life. The connection to our faith. The peace of a moment of silence. No matter

⁴ <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/17>

⁵ “Mindful” by Mary Oliver

what disease is ravaging our society – no matter what political divisiveness permeates our news screens – these simple joys will always be present. Amid this holiday season, I think of the delight of small children penning notes to Santa Claus, or colorful lights illuminating trees and houses alike, or cookies filling the fridge calling loved ones together. In any circumstance, these small wonders can serve to open us to our sacred – to connect us to that eternal holy.

I am reminded of the words by author Howard Thurman, “Whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace.”⁶ In our distracted states, not fully aware, in our anxiety, far from calm, there are these elements of joy or peace that simply fade away. Butterflies do not offer a mosaic of colors to the person who is focused on their most recent mistake; a simple, starry night does not offer awe of the infinite to the soul of one whose insecurities leave them trapped in a bubble. What joy can we carry with us through the stresses of any particular day, sustaining us until we lay our heads down at night? For me, it is those quiet times with a steaming cup of coffee in the morning, or, in this holiday season, the cookies I joyfully and with slight guilt sneak from the fridge throughout the day.

Noticing the holy ordinary – embracing the holy ordinary – remembering the holy ordinary – this comes with a practice of intention. And I call these simple things the “holy ordinary” because it is in the simple and the mundane that we may find our sacred, our own holy, not only in the extravagant. The divine hidden in those small things that cause delight – rejoicing

⁶ *Soul Matters Worship Packet December 2021* excerpt from Howard Thurman

with us when we find these small treasures! The sacred calling to us through the crunch of a leaf or the hug of a beloved or a moment of peace. Is not seeing the holy in these intermittent joys a practice of prayer and connection?

Author Brené Brown urges us to connect with that holy ordinary – reminding us that joy comes to us in “moments – ordinary moments.” While that extraordinary joy we experience from time to time holds its own sacred place in our hearts, souls, and memories, serving to connect us to the awe-filled and the spectacular, she writes that we miss out on that ordinary joy when we chase down the extraordinary – we become unaware of the beauty around us.⁷

There are simple moments we don't seem to pay much attention to at the time but that in retrospect are what we hold most dear. Brené Brown worked with those who had lost a beloved near and dear to their hearts, and in their reminiscing of that love that transitioned to another realm, it is the ordinary they recall. A husband, vocally angry with each morning paper. The laugh of a small child. The incomprehensible text messages of a loved one who never quite conquered cell phones.⁸ I think of my own beloveds. Of a cherished aunt who passed away – I still hear her laughter, and her sarcastic humor. Of a grandmother – those cookies she baked when my sister, father and I crossed the Canadian border to visit her every summer. Or my stepfather, when I would stumble upon him while he was deep in meditation or prayer – the sacred moment I experienced by accident. That is what I hold in my heart – that

⁷ *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown

⁸ *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown

holy ordinary, that sacred that connects me to those I have lost – laughter, cookies, and prayer.

We heard Ostara read early Brené Brown’s ideas about intermittent moments of joy – not a “floodlight” of joy, but moments of trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith strung together like a strand of holiday lights – this is what comprises a joyful life. Not searching for the extraordinary but immersing oneself in the ordinary – the ordinary that might otherwise be missed. What about those moments in which we are so afraid of hardship we forget to notice the good all around us?⁹ Is this not reminiscent of the fear of COVID many of us hold close? A joyful life as a string connecting joyful moment to joyful moment – the holy ordinary strung together by strands of the monotonous, or the difficult – those inevitabilities found in any life.

I think of that joy that strings me along from one Christmas to the next. Not quite ordinary, but not extraordinary either. I have reflected before on the time my family lost beloveds to tragedy and how we sought to cope in the aftermath. On one Christmas that could easily have been cloaked in sadness, my mother instead opened us to joy. One day on a week leading up to Christmas, she sent my sister, cousins, our newly adopted brother and me on a mission: find the tackiest Christmas decoration possible and the winner gets a prize. She split us into teams, gave us fifty dollars each, and sent us on our way. I remember roaming the halls of Target with my cousin Kelly, belly laughing as we sorted through aisles of shining lights and glittering figurines! In an hour, the teams returned home. My sister Annie, cousin Rosie, and brother

⁹ *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown

Jonny came back with a Christmas hippopotamus. Kelly and I had a lit up pink flamingo. Together, we proudly set up our display in my mother's front lawn, filled with delight and the cheer of the holiday. The competition opened us up to joy amidst hardship. I cherish that day and that simple, joyful memory in my heart, and still adorn my lawn with that pink flamingo to this very day. The joy of laughter and a reprieve of sadness; and of those tacky decorations. Between moments of sorrow, we found that simple joy.

I would be remiss to talk about the holiday season without acknowledging the hardships it offers many. For many, this will be the first holiday season without a lost beloved. For others, it will elicit painful memories of holidays past. It can offer a time to slip into the throws of addiction. I see you. I hear you. You are loved. Maybe we do not feel ready to open to joy right now – and yet I invite you to notice one beautiful thing around you this afternoon – perhaps a tree still holding its leaves, or a smile from someone you hold dear. A simple opportunity to heal yourself and connect with your sacred.

For we are in the midst of the holiday season - a time that can serve to honor those extraordinary joys! In many ways, these ancient, holy stories that these celebrations draw from work to bring light and joy to a darkened world. Those of the Jewish faith recognize a miracle of a candle flame amidst oppression in the celebration of Hanukkah – and to this day light candles on a menorah each night for eight days. During Christmas, Christians celebrate the birth of a savior; their God sending God's only son to journey the earth with them. In this celebration of Christian joy I am reminded of St Lucia, a martyr mythologized as bringing the "light of [Jesus]"

into a world of darkness.” The celebration of St Lucia, often celebrated with cookies and a procession of children “is said to help one live the winter days with enough light.”¹⁰ This day is important to pagans as well, coinciding with the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, marking the rebirth of the sun. In this season, surrounded by extraordinary and ordinary joys, can this remind us to bring forth our own light to a darkened world? I think of those simple joys of the holidays: the cookies, cider, cocoa, bringing friends and family together, the holiday lights offering happiness, the love of beloveds and the generosity of gifts. Those ordinary ways this season invites us to joy in our own lives. Fellowship, tradition, family (whether by birth or by one’s own choosing) – everything else in this holiday season is an embellishment of those three core elements that serve to open us to joy.

In reflection of this ordinary joy, I offer the words of poet Li-Young Lee:

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.¹¹

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lucy%27s_Day

¹¹ “From Blossoms” by Li-Young Lee

May we live a life of ordinary joys strung together, moment to moment, a reprieve from the mundane and the difficult, healing our bodies, minds, and souls. May we notice the shimmering snow and may those crystalized drops of water connect us to our sacred, an invitation to the holy ordinary. May nature be our prayer, “from wing to wing, from blossom to blossom.”¹² May we rejoice in the awe-filled and may we rejoice in the simple, grounding ourselves in the simple delight and ordinary beauty that surrounds us. May we revel in delight, and of those sacred stories that bring light to the world, and may we open to joy, this day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹² “From Blossoms” by Li-Young Lee