

Meditation and Prayer (Sermon follows)

September 14, 2008

Reverend Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.

Let us join together in a time of reflection, meditation, prayer and introspection.

Spirit of life, source of all wonder and energy, God whom we call by many names, we come here this morning from near and afar, in gratitude and in hope, feeling full and feeling empty, feeling sad and feeling cheerful, seeking to regenerate our spirits, joyful to be together in this accepting, welcoming community.

As imperfect as we are, we know that there is hope and help for us to become more generous, more loving, more compassionate, and that here in this community we can share our hopes, dreams and aspirations.

We struggle to become less judgmental, to forgive those who have wronged us, to let go of old hurts and resentments. We challenge ourselves to incorporate new ideas even though we may think we've figured it all out. We know, sometimes grudgingly, that however much we learn, we have only scratched the surface of knowledge and its possibilities. We struggle to avoid becoming discouraged by our aches and pains, the difficulties of paying all the bills on time, our impatience with a perennially cranky neighbor. We struggle to become more patient with those who walk slowly in front of us when we are in a hurry, or when we are standing in the express line at the grocery store with only our three items.

We need strength, self-discipline, more patience, and to laugh a lot more. We need the love and admiration of others, and we need to spread our own love and tell others how much we admire what they do. We need to walk with a quicker step, to read more poetry, to donate all the old *National Geographic*s and *Harpers* we intended to read but haven't. We need to clean out the closets of our lives, and look out at the world afresh. We need more joy in our lives.

Let us begin by giving thanks to all who protect us – police, firefighters, our troops serving at home and abroad, the government servants and doctors and nurses and trash collectors and letter carriers who serve us on a daily basis. Let us honor them, not take them and their service for granted.

Let us be grateful for the animals and the birds, and for good health. And let us remember to visit the sick and the homebound, the lonely and the elderly who may be too shy to let us know that they are feeling lonely as they live alone.

Let us remember to smile at the children and admire the babies of strangers, and free our hearts from anger. Let us not be afraid to let joy into our lives, and to share it with others. Let us make music with our lives, and dance each day in body or in spirit.

Sermon

Where is Joy?

Sermon Delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

September 14, 2008

The Reverend Lyn Oglesby

It was a sunny and breezy day, the day that I decided what to talk with you about this morning. Flowers were rampaging about, saucily offering up their blossoms. People were smiling on the street. Even drivers seemed more than usually polite and generous. I sat down in my living room and picked up a book of poems by Mary Oliver. They were sitting right there on the coffee table, two books I'd bought after hearing Mary Oliver read to us at General Assembly; a poetry reading to thousands. What a joy that must be for a poet; to read to thousands.

And it came to me...Mary Oliver's poems vividly describe the smallest details of nature, metaphors for her heart, and she notices the tiniest marks on animals and plants, and somehow, her sense of wonder and the joy of being alive gathers itself and leaps out at the reader. Yes, it is indeed a joy to be alive, to notice, to feel, to experience, to wonder, and even sometimes to worry. When I finish one of Mary Oliver's poems, I feel like I want to feel when I leave church – hopeful, encouraged, convinced that with a bit more effort I can become a better person, if not the ideal person I'd like to be. Joyful, friendly, loved, comforted, and ready to continue transforming myself and making the world a better place. So here are a couple of Mary's poems that she read that night. About her little dog.

Percy (One)

Our new dog, named for the beloved poet,
ate a book which unfortunately we had
left unguarded.

Fortunately, it was the Bhagavad Gita,
of which many copies are available.

Every day now, as Percy grows
into the beauty of his life, we touch
his wild, curly head and say,

"Oh, wisest of little dogs."

Percy (Two)

I have a little dog who likes to nap with me.
He climbs on my body and puts his face in my neck.
He is sweeter than soap.
He is more wonderful than a diamond necklace,
which can't even bark.
I would like to take him to Kashmir and the Ukraine,
and Jerusalem and Palestine and Iraq and Darfur,
that the sorrowing thousands might see his laughing mouth.
I would like to take him to Washington, right into
the oval office
where Donald Rumsfeld would crawl out of the president's armpit
and kneel down on the carpet, and romp like a boy.
For once, for a moment, a rational man.

What lessons to be learned from puppies, children, birds, ants and spiders – and especially from poets!

I'm an anxious person, afraid of failure, afraid I won't be good enough. I even used to be afraid of speaking in classrooms and gatherings like this. I tried to be intellectual. To speak carefully and with perfect grammar, to put away my Texas twang and southern mannerisms. Afraid of the judgment of sophisticates. Uncertain, tentative, apprehensive. I've not completely gotten over that, but I have learned that professors and scientists and brilliant, well-educated people don't come to church to hear a lecture delivered on a high plane. They come looking for encouragement, for hope, for inspiration to become better human beings, to reframe their troubles, and to regenerate their spirits. I'm grateful for the poets of the world who inspire us to goodness, joy, generosity and a sense of purpose.

What is it that brings us joy? What brings *you* joy?

Is it doing for others? Deepening and widening your spirit? The touch of a loved one? The smile of a child?

I live across from a big synagogue that has a school. The children play during recess and at lunchtime on the small lawn in back of my building, a small plot of grass that belongs to the building next door. One of my neighbors, can you believe this, complains frequently about the "noise" of laughter, and shrieks of joy and exuberance that those young children shout when they are outdoors.

Now, I have my father's sneeze. It's genetic. It's loud. I can't help it. It's natural. And if I sneeze more than twice in a day or evening, I'm sure to get a call inquiring about my health. My friends, those people, those neighbors of mine need to learn how to experience joy! They need to come to our church! What could be more joyful than the sounds of children's laughter or a sneeze well earned? I ask you!

Stop a minute. Hold your thoughts. What brings you joy? Think.

The softness of a baby's skin?

The sense of accomplishment and closure when a job is well done?

The call or visit from some who cares, especially when it is not expected?

Here's one from Mary Oliver. I like it because in the morning I can lie in my bed and through the windows I see the sun rising through the trees over Rock Creek park, gently and softly and then brilliantly lighting my room and my new day.

Why I Wake Early

Hello, sun in my face.

Hello, you who made the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety –

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light –
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

Here's another one.

The Sun

Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful
than the way the sun, every evening, relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon
and into the clouds or the hills, or the ruffled sea, and is gone -- and how it slides again
out of the blackness, every morning, on the other side of the world, like a red flower
streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance --
and have you ever felt for anything such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language, a word billowing enough for the pleasure
that fills you, as the sun reaches out, as it warms you
as you stand there, empty-handed --
or have you too turned from this world --
or have you too gone crazy for power, for things?

What brings **you** joy, what memories energize **your** smiles and soften your voice,
gentle your touch?

The sweetness of watermelon, and succulence of summer vegetables, the crunch of
sweet corn dripping with butter?

The songs of birds?

What brings you joy? Tell me, shout it out one at a time....

The exuberance of hiking to the top of a hill or mountain and looking out onto vast

fields and plains?

The exhilaration of exercise, and playing games?

Throwing a ball back and forth with a child?

Opening a get-well card – an unexpected gift of love and care?

Here's another poem by Mary Oliver...She says that if she doesn't read it, someone always asks, so I'm going to share it with you preemptively.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-- over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

What brings **you** joy?

A visit from the minister when you're sick?

Discovering that you're ok, after all?

Opening a gift, or even better watching someone open a gift you've thoughtfully brought?

Some days life's not easy, when we feel overwhelmed, burdened by worries about how children are going to turn out, finances, the state of the world, the state of our mortgages. The high price of gasoline. The health of a loved one or ourselves.

No one has a silver bullet, a perfect recipe for moving us from sadness and sorrow to joy. Sometimes all it takes is remembering that we are not alone. I suggest, not very subtly, that all of us, you and me too, can create and spread joy, even when we are feeling down and out. We can call a friend, smile back at a child, lift our voices in song, bake a cake for a friend, be gentle with the repairman who shows up late and messes up our scheduled plans. We can surprise someone with a tiny gift, hold a door open, welcome a stranger, and maybe even sing as we walk down the street.

We may discover more joy in spreading it than waiting for joy to come to us or pop out from a page of poetry. Write a poem yourself.

During recuperation from my knee surgery, I started a new routine. I write a thank-you note to someone every morning, soon as I finish my coffee. Goodness knows I had a stack to do, still do. I'm always amazed at how much better I feel after telling somebody how much I appreciate their gifts to me.

Joy is everywhere, just like God...just waiting to be created in our hearts and minds. Joy is inside us and outside us, just waiting to be created and discovered.

Enjoy your days, enjoy your week, enjoy your wild and wonderful lives. And smile at the wild geese. Who knows, you may give them some joy and they may smile back – or worse, settle in your back yard! Now there's a challenge for you. Amen