

## **A Mighty Resistance**

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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“Police seek 2 suspects after a sleeping man is set on fire near New York’s Penn Station”

“Supreme Court halts policies aimed at protecting transgender students”

“Migrants face dire conditions, prolonged waits in US detention centers”

“Rising energy prices from the Iran war could help Russia pay for fighting in Ukraine”

If I’m honest, I sometimes have my doubts about humanity.

And headlines like those I just read don’t help. But I don’t need headlines to sew doubt.

One only need hop on I-95 to witness erratic or angry drivers putting others at risk. Or drive through suburban neighborhoods to encounter signs or flags representative of fierce political division. Some of us have been threatened with or are survivors of violence because of who we are, the color of our skin, or where we’re from. Some have suffered at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. Some, young and old, have been bullied. And some of us have or know someone who has is currently serving in armed conflicts. Indeed, the inhumanity that makes the news is never as far from us as it seems.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing.

For it helps move us to counter inhumanity with commitment to causes and to social justice which endeavor to remedy the threat and damage done by our inhumanity to one another.

But here’s the thing... It’s not enough.

And I’ll tell you something else... It’s never going to be enough.

As one who has supported many causes and engaged in various social justice efforts over the course of my life, it doesn't take much to give rise to doubts about humanity over and over again. A headline here, a personal encounter there, and I can easily find myself in a state of mind and heart that carries significant spiritual risk.

One risk, of course, is falling into despair and giving up commitments to causes and social justice. Which may include or be exacerbated by a phenomenon known as "compassion fatigue."

Another is falling into despair and giving up just about everything except commitments to causes and social justice.

People who go this route often feel guilty, as if they're personally not doing enough to address massive, complex social issues and/or judge or scold others they perceive as not doing enough.

Surely there's other alternatives?

Convention and just about any self-help book out there will tell you the way to mitigate either risk is to "seek balance" between giving up and going all in on our commitments to causes and social justice. Convention however, as is so often the case and certainly in this case, works better in theory than it does on the ground.

For my money - joy - rather than balance, offers a more durable alternative to despair.

Maintaining balance requires constant evaluation, planning, and calculations whereas joy requires only our attention. Which admittedly is harder to give in our current attention economy where there's a lot vying for our attention, including those headlines I read a few moments ago. Still, it's worth the effort to look and listen beyond all that seems too eager to capture our attention and let another world with nothing to sell or convince you of come into focus.

"In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart." These words from Anne Frank, who had every reason to despair and give up on humanity, aren't evidence of balance or the result of pressure campaign to sway her opinion. Her words are evidence of joy. A recognition and genuine appreciation of what is life giving and affirming even in the midst of ongoing death and destruction.

Joy emerges at the heart of Roy Daniells' cautionary poem, "Noah", as well.

Set aside what you may know or have heard about Noah and the flood story from the Bible and imagine Noah in Daniells' poem as someone like you and me. He lives in a world populated by imperfect people, himself included. And he knows this. He's not Pollyannaish in his view of people or the state of the world. There's a lot of bad things going on in Noah's world. Things that threaten its very existence. But there's also things that are life giving and indeed life saving. Joys, if you will. And so without denying all that is wrong, he turns his attention to building an ark, a practice to secure, hold and preserve live-giving, life-saving joy.

Now a lot of people around him, who are also like you and me, see this and start to wonder about him. We can imagine some asking themselves, "How can he see joy in such a cruel world?" While others more stridently protest, "How dare he give attention to joy when so many are miserable and there's so much to do!" All the while Noah works on the ark as those around him attempt to dissuade, impede, and even mock him. He knows what's going to happen. It pains him, in fact. And sure enough, in the absence of joy, mistakenly assumed impossible or a selfish folly in a world of woes, they are consumed and washed away in a sea of despair.

Joy is neither cure nor eraser of all that is wrong in the world, but a sort of life-preserver that keeps us from drowning in the heartache of it all.

And, as Daniells' poem reminds us, it is a form of resistance, not only to the forces of oppression but to the impulse and potential to lose ourselves in our struggle against oppressive forces both external and within.

Indeed, joy is a mighty resistance.

Some time ago I heard Tom Seymour, a journalist for "The Art Newspaper" podcast, report on his travels to the Ukrainian-Polish border. His report focused on international efforts to preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage as more and more of its museums and their collections found themselves at risk due to the Russian invasion. At one point in his story he talked about visiting a refugee camp in rural Poland. There, at the camp largely populated by women and children displaced by the war, he confessed his astonishment to find joy both within himself and among the camp residents. For in spite all they had gone through and the uncertainty they still faced, one of the ways adults and children alike at the camp set about filling their days from the beginning was by creating art: paintings, tapestries, and embroideries.

Make no mistake, their worries are very real, but so is their joy.

Seymour's story is another reminder that joy is not something we choose over the world's troubles, it is something we open ourselves to by shifting some of our attention toward that which is life-giving or affirming in the midst of all that is not right or well with our lives or in the world.

And once we experience, recognize, or find it, we're often inclined to want to share it rather than keep it all to ourselves, as Mira, the little girl in our Time For All Ages story, "Maybe Something Beautiful", with its bold, colorful illustrations powerfully attests. Incidentally, the book is based on a true story. Rafael and Candice Lopez engaged the people of their neighborhood in San Diego and worked together to transform it from a drab urban space to "a place of beauty."

As their story suggests, joy has staying power, the potential to be transformative in ways we might never expect or imagine.

I recall another time just a few years ago when I found myself filled with serious doubts about humanity. I happened to be visiting the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, NY and a number of stories making headlines at that time had me pretty down on human beings.

But as I made my way through the galleries looking at and reading about the sheer variety of techniques, colors, forms, functions, and ornamentation of glass from across the ages and the globe, I started to think about how amazing this all was. How these beautiful objects stood as testimony not just to the science, skills, and artistry involved, but also to the experimentation, creativity, persistence, and sheer luck our species.

More significant however, was the gradual realization that these beautiful objects were created under all manner of social conditions. Times of war, peace, prosperity, pestilence and plague. Under dictatorships, theocracies, monarchies, democratic rule, and every political structure in between. Works of astonishing beauty and ingenuity conceived and fashioned within oppressive and progressive societies and working environments alike. There they were, thousands of pieces of glass, spanning thousands of years of human history, each bearing witness, testifying to my despondent spirit, "We represent humanity too." Representatives I'm sure would not exist absent the presence and recognition of joy throughout the ages.

Joy's presence, of course, is neither a guaranteed feature of, nor limited to objects created by, human beings. The inquisitive tilt of a kitten's head, a grandparent's unique way of telling a story, a babbling brook, or hearing our favorite band perform live can be sources of joy too. Joy hangs out between the covers of a book and slices of bread on a sandwich. It rests inside a goblet made during Spanish

Inquisition and on the walls of an urban neighborhood. It shines through the dust and debris of war and the writings of a holocaust victim. It shows up at church on Sunday mornings in New England and refugee camps in rural Poland.

Joy has accompanied us everywhere and in every age. Not as an escape from the world's grief, but as a mighty resistance that has in fact ensured our survival, buoying our spirits in the face of continual destruction and despair.

And so I say to you, when despair closes in, resist!

Welcome joy into your life.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be