

F.O.M.O. (FEAR OF MISSING OUT)
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
March 18, 2018

OPENING WORDS

Meditation On Letting Go (adapted)

~ Carol Allman-Morton

Many of us carry a burden of worry.
Anxiety over the state of the world
Worries about money
About our environment,
Our families
About peace and justice.
For now, let's just trust that nothing will get worse if we put that burden down for a moment.
Just let go of what weighs you down.
Maybe in doing so, we'll find that we can set down worry for longer and longer periods of time.
And in our experience of letting go, let's also be open to the possibility that we might not need to pick all of those worries back up.
Let's trust that we have the passion and strength to work for change where we have the power to do so, and to let go where we do not.
So...if not forever, let us put down any worries or anxiety, at least for this time.
May we be in this quiet and sacred time together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Too Much Noise ~ Ann McGovern

(A man feels that his house is too noisy because his bed creaks and the floor squeaks. A wise man tells him to get several animals, which only increases the noise. What shall he do?)

READING

In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life

(Excerpts from the prologue) ~ Robert Keegan

Rev. Julie found this book on her shelf and thought the title was apropos for today. It should be said that Keegan is a Harvard educator, with a keen interest in the evolution of the capacities of the human mind, and that this book was published nearly 25 years ago. Keegan writes:

“If the reader is willing to look at contemporary culture as a kind of “school” and the complex set of tasks and expectations placed upon us in modern life as the “curriculum” of that school, then [this teacher wants to extend friendly sympathy] to the student feeling the discouragement, fear, anger, helplessness, confusion, or dissociation that can go along with the experience of not succeeding in one’s studies.

We extend a generalized form of this friendly sympathy to the young all the time...[coming from a] widespread view of childhood as an era distinct from adulthood. ... It does not occur to us to write books about how children might better cope with the stress of their lives. Instead...we write books that remind us that children are only children.... There are depths beyond which they cannot go. Take them there

and they will be in over their heads. Leave them there and even the most resilient of them will only be able to tread water in perilous exhaustion.

...It may still remain for us to discover that adulthood itself is not an end state by a vast evolutionary expanse encompassing a variety of capacities of the mind. ...[So] it remains for us to extend the same disciplined sympathy to adult experience. It remains for us to look at the curriculum of modern life in relation to the capacities of the adult mind.

...the ever-accelerating flow of information to our eyes and to our ears – information competing for our attention, our allegiance, and our money – makes a claim on us to DO something with it, and even before that, to DECIDE about it, since there is no possible way we can do even a fraction of what we are asked.

...[And] the “information highway” we plan for the next century [will] geometrically increase the amount of information, the ways it can be sent, and the number of its recipients. But our experience on this highway may be one of exhaustion rather than admiration for the ease and speed of a new kind of transport if we are unable to assert our own authority over the information. No additional amount of information coming into our minds will enable us to assert this authority; only a qualitative change in the complexity of our minds will.

MESSAGE *Fear of Missing Out* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

It was 1963. I know this because it was the year AFTER the World’s Fair in Seattle, which we missed. My father’s church conference was happening in Colorado, and my parents didn’t want to miss the opportunity to visit family and friends in the Pacific Northwest. This meant, as it did every summer, stuffing six wide-eyed, rural South Dakota kids into a sedan, hooking up the tent trailer, and driving cross country...on a tight budget...stopping for lunch at a picnic table in some random city park after a trip to the local grocery store for a loaf of white bread and peanut butter, or if we were lucky, bologna.

Growing up on the lower side of middle class in the 1960’s among farmers and crops was a limiting reality. The tiny shoe department at the back of the general store had about five styles to choose from. The sewing corner was something out of a “Little House on the Prairie” episode. Maybe fifteen bolts of cloth. And, I am quite sure the Piggly Wiggly carried just three kinds of ice cream... vanilla, chocolate, and neapolitan. And because vanilla was the least expensive, that’s what we had in our home freezer.

On that Seattle trip, we visited family friends of a much higher social class. They took us up to the Space Needle restaurant where my mother sampled frog legs. They took us on a tour of the waterfront where the RMS Queen Elizabeth was docked. And, they treated us to an even more magnificent thing...Baskin Robbins!

I walked up and down the glass case of ice cream, trying to choose, trying to imagine the various tastes. As I pondered my decision, first my brothers and sisters, and then my parents, and then their friends all made their choices. At last, I was told that everyone was waiting on me, and that I should just pick something. I chose vanilla. It’s something my family has never allowed me to live down.

What a different world we live in today! I don't know about you, but I can get peeved if a store happens to be out of my favourite product in my preferred size and colour. There might be 20 similar options...but why don't they have exactly the one that I want? Right now!?

I'm not sure how I feel about the premise presented in the excerpt that Paula read a bit ago. Based only on my read of the prologue, the author feels the problem of overwhelm in our modern life is not to be blamed on the existence of too many options and too much information, but rather on our un-evolved consciousness. The quality and complexity of our minds are not up to the challenge, he says. I don't appreciate being treated like a child...being told that the 'curriculum' of adult life is beyond my capacity. I would like to believe that I have the ability to walk down that glass case of life's options and competently choose the one that is just exactly right for me.

But the reality is that I often experience, and perhaps you do too, the "discouragement, fear, anger, helplessness, confusion, or dissociation" that comes with feeling that I'm not keeping up. In fact, I had never even heard of FOMO until I was preparing this month's theme packet on Balance. I mean, how could I have missed that?

F.O.M.O., which stands for Fear Of Missing Out, and was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013. The phrase was first coined in 1996 by Dr. Dan Herman¹, a world-renowned authority on consumer behavior. While we don't have time to talk about that today, it should not go unnoticed that he works in marketing; the machine of consumerism regularly uses FOMO to its advantage in making us feel that there's something else we need.

FOMO is defined as "the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that we're missing out – that our peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of something more or something better than we are."² It is based on the perception that something awesome is happening elsewhere,³ producing anxiety or apprehension...that others might be experiencing what we're not.⁴

FOMO, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, came into being along with the internet and social media. We have at our fingertips information about nearly all possible experiences, and thanks to platforms like Facebook and Instagram, we see our friends experiencing them. For some, FOMO causes a toxic addiction to the on-line world, to the exclusion of live in-person connections.

So how many of you think that FOMO is a problem within our culture? And, if you're willing to self-disclose, how many of you personally experience FOMO?

What I'd like to do is expand the conversation a bit; I assume that given our demographics, (and that informal poll) FOMO, narrowly defined, doesn't resonate with all of us. But FOMO is not only fear of missing out; it's also what some have called fear of mind overload.⁵ It's

¹ <http://fomofearofmissingout.com/dan-herman>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563213000800> as noted in <http://time.com/collection/guide-to-happiness/4358140/overcome-fomo/>

³ <http://www.artofwellbeing.com/2017/06/02/fomo/>

⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/courtney-jones/if-you-dont-have-fomo-you-dont-know-what-youre-missing-out-on_a_21374198/

⁵ <https://www.inc.com/tom-marchant/a-new-fomo-to-fear-this-new-year-3-tips-to-manage-it.html>

about feeling paralyzed by the choices in front of us. What I do hear from you, and experience myself, is the struggle of living among too many choices, and too much information, along with too many pressures to do it all.

Should I devote my free time to playing music, or to volunteering at the One Roof Diner? Do I have time to take on one more responsibility? If an opportunity comes up for a great weekend outing, can I let go of the commitments I made to help a friend move, or to sing in the choir? What about the fact that I'm feeling run down and really need some extra rest and a visit to the gym? And that nagging feeling that I'm not keeping up with the news, and with reliable commentary that will help me to process it so I can converse intelligently. Maybe I should just stay home and do all these other things. Oh, but that trip sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

Is it better for my kids to play soccer, or have more free time? What about the extra tutoring they need? And will they grow up okay if they never learn to play a musical instrument? What if they never get to Disneyland?

If our lives are well-rounded and balanced, shouldn't we be able to experience it all??

'Fear of missing out' is perhaps just an 'on speed' iteration of 'the grass is always greener' or 'keeping up with the Jones.' FOMO would have us compare ourselves to others and find ourselves somehow lacking. Research has found that those most susceptible to a crippling version of FOMO are those who don't already have their basic psychological needs met – needs for feeling engaged, nurtured and acknowledged.⁶

And what makes it a double whammy is that given the nature of screens and social media, we turn to our screens when we are feeling low, and new stimuli there gives us a little jolt of adrenaline, and we scroll on, seeing things that make us feel worse about ourselves, which propels us back to the screen to find another new thing. As co-founder of Flickr, Caterina Fake, once said, "Social software is both the creator and the cure of FOMO. It's cyclical."

Again, I suspect we all experience some version of this whether or not it's from social media. Walk into any store. Visit any travel agency. Read the billboards. If you have the money and the time, nearly ANY experience you can think of is available to you. And we are constantly reminded of what we're missing out on by the proliferation of the things we're able to pick from. But no one can ever have enough time or money to do it all. (For example, 72 hours of video, or 12 years of content, is uploaded to YouTube every minute...it's impossible to watch more than a week of uploads in a lifetime!⁷) One think-thank co-founder says that we may have reached 'peak eyeballs' ... an information-rich and attention-starved society in which we simply cannot take in any more information.⁸

I love how this dilemma is framed in a blog post by Mark Manson:⁹

If you have two breakfast burritos to choose from, you'll pick whichever looks better and not think anything of it.

⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10061863/FoMo-Do-you-have-a-Fear-of-Missing-Out.html>

⁷ <https://www.nurun.com/en/our-thinking/emerging-behavior/multitasking-focus-and-dispersion-in-the-age-of-fomo/>

⁸ <https://www.nurun.com/en/our-thinking/emerging-behavior/multitasking-focus-and-dispersion-in-the-age-of-fomo/>

⁹ <https://markmanson.net/fear-of-missing-out>

But if you are offered 37 different varieties of gourmet, artisanal breakfast burritos with locally sourced goat milk ganache, then you're likely to torture yourself, and not just in making the decision itself, but you'll wonder for the next five hours if that was the best burrito you could have had in that situation or any situation ever and then decide that you have to go back to try the other ones. Except this is the fourteenth brunch cafe you've said you have to go back to and not only are you not even hungry anymore, but you don't even like burritos and OMG THERE'S JUST NOT ENOUGH TIME TO DO ALL OF THE AMAZING THINGS.

(Big Breath) Does that sound familiar?

So, what's the cure? What do we do? How do find our balance and get our mojo back? Actually the answer is in getting our JOMO back, which is the JOY of missing out. If FOMO comes from dissatisfaction, finding more happiness, more joy, is the antidote. And happiness is determined by how we allocate our attention¹⁰... intentionally missing out on some things in order to enjoy what we have. It's about turning away from what is negative and attending to what is positive in our lives.

(I'm hyper aware that it is downright awkward to be talking about such first-world problems in the presence of new friends from whom so much has been taken...who have lost their homes and their livelihoods, who been long separated from their families, and who have seen so much violence and oppression. I also acknowledge that the 'first world' is not a perfect place, and that our problems and anxieties are very real. The last thing we need is to compare our struggles.)

So back to this JOMO thing...

If I'd been able to find my copy of "The Three Questions" by Jon Muth, it might have been our story today. That book is a retelling of a Tolstoy story which asks key questions about attention: when is the most important time, who is the most important one, and what is the most important thing to do? And it answers: the most important time is now, that most important one is always the one you're with, and the most important thing to do is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. That story always reminds me of the late Rev. Forrest Church's personal mantra: "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are."

We could worry that we didn't get to hear that story, all because I couldn't find the book. Was the story we read, "Too Much Noise", a bad choice? It still had a great message, didn't it? ...about becoming grateful for the life we have by paying attention to it? Maybe that's the message that one of you needed to hear this morning. We'll never know which choice was best. I made the best choice I could.

And, did any of you feel like we missed out on singing that other hymn?¹¹

Indulging our worries about what we're missing out on can only lead to us miss out on enjoying where we are and who we're with.¹² FOMO drives us to distraction...with a constant urge to find the ultimate experience, which ends up taking away our stability and our sense of

¹⁰ <http://time.com/collection/guide-to-happiness/4358140/overcome-fomo/>

¹¹ An oversight in printing the order of service left two hymn possibilities in one time slot.

¹² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10061863/FoMo-Do-you-have-a-Fear-of-Missing-Out.html>

home and our chance to make strong connections by being there for those we care about.¹³ Just maybe choosing to miss out, in favour of what matters, is that more qualitative consciousness that Keegan speaks of.

As Anne LaMott wrote on her Facebook page a couple of years ago¹⁴, "...while I have some heartbreaking and highly stressful things going on even as we speak, as everyone does...I'm in a dangerously good mood. Why? Because I have community...Because I got a second chance at life...Because the day is young and only I can wreck it..."

JOMO. Find your joy. Brain research says that joy, and happiness, can be found when we do four things:¹⁵

First, by asking, "What am I grateful for?" Even if you don't find any answers, just asking helps.

Second, by giving a name to whatever negative emotions you're feeling. Once they're named, your brain isn't so bothered by them. So name your anxiety and your loneliness. Call them what they are.

Third, by making decisions. Go for "good enough" instead of the "best decision ever made on Earth." Sometimes vanilla is what you want and need. Practice accepting that you're making the best choice possible.

Fourth, by touching someone. Give hugs. Get a massage. Hold hands. Put the phone away when you're with friends. Build community. Connect.

And I would add a fifth. Know who you are. Be who you are. There's no need to do or be more.

Lamott finished her Facebook post with these words:

I've done my prayers, meditation and been to the Church of the New York Times. I am in my own home, where there are pets, autumn apples, unread books, clean sheets on the bed... I get to go for an hour's hike. And then, OMG, a hot shower. I get to put lotion of my beautifully, ripply, sturdy, work-horse thighs; the laying on of hands.

...Then I am going to flirt with every old lonely person I see. And I am going to walk with my dogs through the 'Hood, even though Bodhi is old and aches, and I will pick up litter, even though there will be more tomorrow, because that is not my business. Love and service are my business. Walking the dogs is my business. Radical self-care is my business...Asking myself if I want to be right or kind is my business...

[There is] Just today. I have you, you have me. The friends, the changing leaves, the unread books. The dogs. The cat, who is perhaps the tiniest bit bitter about the dogs. ... Our hearts. Cool water. Wow.

Wow. I have today. I have you and you have me. What could we possibly be missing!?

Amen.

¹³ <https://markmanson.net/fear-of-missing-out>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/750713115058334>

¹⁵ <https://www.bakadesuyo.com/2015/09/make-you-happy-2/>

READING*The Pulse Of Life*

~ Jennifer Johnson

These are anxious days. Hair-pulling, hand-wringing days. We are bombarded from all sides with new and unprecedented developments. Grave threats to our national values and institutions on one hand, and countless calls to action on the other... and then the flood of critique and analysis. Whose strategy is winning? How do we outmaneuver the other side? These are indeed uncertain times.

And yet, there are some things we do know for certain. We know that our blue boat home continues to rotate on its axis, continues its familiar sojourn around the sun. The sun sets and rises, and if we remember to pause we may lose ourselves, but for a moment, in the glorious play of light and color on the horizon.

Beneath the crust of cold earth, the crocuses and the daffodils are stirring in their winter hibernation. The energy of life and living is pulsing in them and in the latent blades of grass and the unseen maple buds. And it's pulsing in us, too.

The pulse of life calls us to nourish our bodies with good food and movement, to nourish our spirits with art and song, friendship and tenderness, and quiet.

When we heed the pulse of life, we know what we need to do:

- To rise in the morning and rest into darkness.
- To put our hands, hearts, and minds to work.
- To meet those in our midst with compassion.
- To join with the vulnerable and speak truth to power.
- To play with our youngest and hear the wisdom of our elders.
- To heal the sick and wounded.
- To grieve the dying and remember the dead.
- To be of use, and sometimes, to be still.

The pulse of life is beating in each and every one of us. Amidst the clamor of these times, let us heed its sure and steady rhythm.

CLOSING WORDS*The Pulse Of Life (redux)*

~ Jennifer Johnson

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We have right now. I have you, and you have me.

Go in peace, without any fear of missing out.

Amen.