

LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

Morning Poem #536 (SLT)

~ *Mary Oliver*

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches –
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead –
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging –

there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted –

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Good News Bad News* ~ Jeff Mack

A rabbit and a mouse with very different worldviews try to convince each other of their perspective.

READING *Desert Spring* ~ Victoria Safford

They had no idea where they were going, when they left that night, in the dark, without lights, without shoes, without bread, their children smothered against them so they would make no noise.

They had no idea what they were getting into, following this Moses, this wild-eyed one who claimed visions and made promises but who after all could guarantee them nothing, except death if they were caught.

They had no idea, these slaves, what it could mean, this promise of land (their own country) and life abundant. Of freedom they knew nothing, except what they could taste by living in its opposite, slavery, and that taste became a hunger, and that hunger became insatiable till they were ravenous for freedom, and they went out then – but no one knows to this day whether they were led by Moses or by the outstretched arm and mighty hand of something else, of something eternal (as they would afterwards and always claim), or whether their own human, hungry will made them flee that night from Pharaoh.

They went into the wilderness. There they wandered forty years, which in those days was a lifetime. Forty was a good, old age, so many of them died before getting anywhere, and many were born in the desert and grew to adulthood knowing nothing but the journey – not slavery, not freedom, just the going. They whined and complained and muttered, and some mutinied, for they were a stiff-necked and rebellious people (you can read it for yourself); ungrateful people, even when manna rained down from heaven and quails were sent to feed them; unhappy people, longing, out loud even, for the familiar security of Egypt, of all places, where at least they knew what to expect, as awful as it was; impatient people, making cheap little idols and gods of metal to bargain with in secret when the traveling got hard or merely dull, and the days and years became monotonous.

In the springtime we remember: the promised land is not a destination – it is a way of going. The land beyond the Jordan, that country of freedom and dignity and laughter – you carry it inside you all the while. It is planted in your mind and heart already, before you ever start out, before it even occurs to you that in order to leave that life in Egypt, the intolerable bondage of that life, what you need to do is stand up and walk forward.

MESSAGE

We've all experienced this, I expect. Those moments, times in life, when we are facing something almost unthinkable, something painful and difficult. Along comes a good intentioned friend who offers a perspective from the bright side....

It's raining? Oh, but it's so good for the plants.

You've gotten a diagnosis of cancer? Oh, isn't it great that so much cancer is treatable these days.

Your mother has just died? Oh, what a blessing that now she is at rest.

You've lost your job? Oh, I'm sure there are better things in store for you.

You've been wandering for forty years in the desert? Oh, but can't you just feel the promised land awaiting?

Sometimes the sunny side, the bright side, propagated by those eternal optimists, can be downright annoying!

In the early 80's, my friend Tom Olson, then resident playwright at the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, wrote a play called "The Troubles: Children of Belfast" which was a "newsmagazine" theatre piece dealing with The Troubles in Northern Ireland.¹ You can imagine how 'troubling' and difficult it was...dealing with a very dark subject...the daily reality of violence and death, along with a complete loss of hope, for a whole generation of Irish children. In order to make it somehow palatable, or simply as an absurd counterpoint to the absurdity of the violence, The Tater Tots were interjected into the most difficult scenes. The Tater Tots were a trio of young girls...sporting ringlets, toothy smiles, tap shoes with big bows and crinoline party dresses printed with shamrocks and potatoes.

In a scene near the end, when the two young protagonists realize that in their efforts to build bridges toward peace, they had been targeted for death by both sides, The Tater Tots come dancing onto stage, singing Gracie Field's "Looking on the Bright Side," the song that inspired the title for this service.

I'm lookin' on the bright side
Tho' I'm walkin' in the shade
Stickin' out my chest, hopin' for the best,
Lookin' on the bright side of life!
Today I'm in the shadow, tomorrow maybe
The clouds will lift and let the sun drift over to me!
I'm lookin' on the bright side
Tho' today's all care and strife
I can wear a grin, stickin' up my chin
Lookin' on the bright side of life!

You can't deny that such a song lifts your spirits and makes you smile. But, in the face of The Troubles, is that a good thing? A smart thing? A reasonable thing? Or is it some kind of denial...stupidity...sticking one's head in the sand...living in a fantasy...

So, here's the question for today. Is there anything to be said for looking on the bright side? Can it serve us? And if so, to what end?

This month's theme is Lightness of Being. At our Journeys group a few weeks ago, someone commented that the theme packet seemed to contain a lot of references to laughter, and she wondered if laughter and Lightness of Being are the same thing. I don't know, but not

¹ <http://playsforallages.blogspot.ca/2011/03/troubles-children-of-belfast.html>

entirely, surely. What I can say is that the idea of Lightness of Being is appealing to me...to imagine going through life in a rather 'floaty' sort of way...being part of the flow... letting what comes come....accepting what is...walking lightly on the earth...and that for me, laughter, levity, is a similar feeling.

It seems to me that we're a bit afraid of too much laughter, too much levity, too much lightness of being. Perhaps we think that this is for the simple minded...for those who don't see the gravity of the situation...for those who are unable to face reality. Those who can laugh or feel lightness of any kind must simply not be paying attention. And, WE are the ones who must face reality, grim though it is.

So now, already, we've named two reasons NOT to look on the bright side. One, in interpersonal relationships, it disrespects or seems to deny any dark or unhappy feelings. Two, it can put blinders on to seeing the reality of what is. Both really good points. It's important to embrace and recognize our grief, our pain, our depression, our anxiety. They are a real part of us and offer useful feedback. It also matters that we pay attention to what's happening around us in the world and to see it clearly. So, perhaps we should join the naysayers who think positive thinking is hogwash...the stuff of those insipid little Tater Tots.

Still, there's seemingly unlimited advice to be found about thinking positively... advice that suggests such things as:

- Believe in yourself; and reinforce positivity in yourself
- Break the worry habit; let go, and let God
- Believe that happiness is a choice
- Don't let negativity or feelings of defeat rule
- Look for the positive in life and also share it with others

And, those who purport the power of positive thinking, the researchers who look at its effects, claim that positive thinking is good for your health, that it can improve your immunity and your resiliency, and reduce stress.

The iconic book about positive thinking was written by Norman Vincent Peale. Peale was the minister at Marble Collegiate in NYC in the 1950's and wrote that book with the 'sole objective of helping the reader achieve a happy, satisfying, and worthwhile life.' He made a direct association between positive thinking and faith in action, saying that positive thinking was part of a 'system of creative living based on spiritual techniques.'

So, what does our faith, this tradition, have to say about looking on the bright side?

Take a moment and open a grey hymnal...the beginning pages aren't numbered, so it's easiest to tell you to turn to the first hymn, hymn #1, and then to turn back one page. There'll you'll find our principles listed. See how they begin? We, the member congregations [of The Canadian Unitarian Council] affirm and promote...

Affirm and promote. What greater statement of positivity might one find? Affirm. We affirm these basic principles...that each person has inherent worth...that compassion and equality are central to healthy relationships...that we are each entitled to a search for truth and meaning...that support and encouragement of one another is critical...that democracy is our chosen process...that the world can be a place of peace and justice....and that all, including us,

is an interconnected web of existence. We affirm that these principles will guide us and help us.

Further, we promote these principles...another example of positive thinking. We promote them because we believe they can make a difference in the world. We promote them because we believe that our actions...such as their promotion...can actually have an effect.

This is a very positive attitude, don't you think?

But positive thinking is not a denial of the dark places...rather it arises out of those dark places...it is a measured response to those dark places.

Yesterday, there was a rally here in Peterborough to draw attention to climate change, and to send a message to the premiers attending meetings in Quebec City this coming week in preparation for the UN Global Climate Summit. I went to the web in order to confirm the time, which led me to the Peterborough Examiner site.

Following the Examiner's article about the rally I found a long series of comments that made my heart sick. Several posts called the protesters losers and the protests a waste of time, and worse, called climate change a scam that has been created to increase taxes and take our money. Climate change is a HUGE downer, but reading those comments was almost more dis-consoling. Reading those comments brought me into a funk for a few hours. And then I went to the rally.

Have any of you read "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" by Mary Ann Shaffer? It's a novel set in the Channel Islands about a 'subversive' book club created in response to German occupation. Here are the words of one of the society members:

"Do you know what sentence of his (Wordsworth) I admire the most? It is "The bright day is done, and we are for the dark." I wish I'd known those words on the day I watched those German troops land, plane-load after plane-load of them--and come off ships down in the harbor! All I could think of was damn them, damn them, over and over. If I could have thought the words "the bright day is done and we are for the dark," I'd have been consoled somehow and ready to go out and contend with circumstance—instead of my heart sinking to my shoes."

The bright day is done and we are for the dark. In some moments, in many realities, we are for the dark, and we can do nothing else, at least at first, than feel that darkness. We are for the dark. Climate change is a dark reality, a circumstance with which we must contend, and seeing it for what it is, not a scam or a waste of time, is necessary in order for us to move ahead.

Ignoring reality is not the same thing as looking on the bright side. Ignoring reality is simply ignoring reality. As Subodh Gupta wrote in *Stress Management: A Holistic Approach*, "A positive attitude may not solve all our problems but that is the only option we have if we want to get out of problems." Given what is, we can choose to take the next step, to seek out joy, and to do what we can.

A good friend, who knows me well, bought me a plaque to hang in my new bathroom. It says, "Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to sing in the rain." Now, I object. True, I routinely look ahead in search of traps and speed bumps. But, I am not one to

wait for the storm to pass. I just want to be sure I have the proper gear. (Capsized canoe story.)

I asked one of you within the last couple of days what would make it possible to look on the bright side. Her response....having inner resources. Having the resources to keep going, having the resources to get up in the morning, having the resources to get up when we fall. The paradox is that having a positive attitude is actually what builds those inner resources of immunity and resilience. Having the inner resources to even imagine a Sweet Potato Pie Society in the face of enemy occupation. Having the resources to sing in the rain.

No matter what comes, it helps to sing. Think about the many songs written in, and perhaps as an antidote for, dark times...*The Sound of Music* on the eve of a Nazi invasion....*The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow* by an orphan in desperate conditions...*The Bluebird of Happiness, Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries, Keep on the Sunny Side, Smile, Singing in the Rain*...all during wartime or the Great Depression...*Don't Worry, Be Happy*...for our modern day anxieties and neuroses.

Facing reality is important, but it needn't shut us down and limit our options. It needn't take away our ability to sing. Looking on the bright side, focusing on positive messaging, you see, opens up possibilities. Positive emotions create in us an enhanced ability to build skills and resources and do the next possible thing.

And that's another place where faith, or spirituality, can help. Researcher Barbara Fredrickson² has shown that we can increase positive thinking in our lives through (at least) these three methods:

One. Meditate. You can do that here on Tuesday afternoons if you like.

Two. Write. Journal. And write about positive experiences. How about posting pictures of UFPers at the Climate rally?

Three. Play. Have fun with others. Laugh.

All things that this community supports and inspires. Let's do more of them together.

Bad things will, and do, happen. Sometimes we'll be disappointed or hurt by the actions of others. But this does not mean that the world is out to get you or that all people will let you down, or that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Instead, positive thinkers look life realistically, search for ways that they can improve the situation, and try to learn from their experiences.³ Positive thinkers sing.

You know how much I love the poetry of Mary Oliver. She is a guru who reminds us to see the beautiful, wonderful, and mysterious in life. We began the service with one such poem. Now, at the end of this morning's meandering message, I can do no better than to leave you with the last lines from her poem, *Mysteries, Yes!*

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-clear/positive-thinking_b_3512202.html

³ <http://psychology.about.com/od/PositivePsychology/a/benefits-of-positive-thinking.htm>

So be it. Always. Amen.

READING ~ *Author*

Text

CLOSING WORDS *Be the Blessing You Already Are* ~*John & Sarah Gibb Millspaugh*

As we have been blessed, so we [give that blessing to one another through the touch of our hands.]

Breathe in, breathe out, this breath we share with all that breathes.

Feel the love of the universe flowing through this community, into you, and out into the universe again.

Let the love of all the universe – your love – flow outward, to its height, its depth, its broad extent.

You are more than you know, and more beloved than you know.

Take up what power is yours to create safe haven, to make of earth a heaven.

Give hope to those you encounter, that they may know safety from inner and outer harm, be happy and at peace, healthy and strong, caring and joyful.

Be the blessing you already are. That is enough. Amen.