

## WISDOM CIRCLES

June 2013

### What Does It Mean To Be A Joyful Person

The Transformational Theme for the summer of 2013 is Joy and Ecstasy. We can learn a lot by understanding the Greek roots of the word 'ecstasy'. That word is *ekstasis* and it means "to stand outside oneself". It is a deeply human yearning to have experiences of transcending our individual lives and circumstances and feel that one is joined to a larger reality. Religions and religious rituals have often presented a means of doing this. Think of the use of hallucinogenic substances or ritual drumming and chanting in religious ceremonies. The fastest growing religion in the world is Pentecostal Christianity, which features 'speaking in tongues', a trance experience where participants feel that they have been taken over by the Holy Ghost. Some meditation and chanting practices also lead to altered states of consciousness where the boundaries of personal identity are made transparent or disappear altogether and one feels part of a greater whole. All these experiences feel good. If people do not find positive ways toward ecstasy, there are ways readily at hand that are dangerous and harmful, such as drugs and alcohol, gambling and other addictions; and even war and political extremism.

The Puritans, who were the spiritual ancestors of both Unitarians and Universalists, had a profound distrust of the ritual elements of the Church of England liturgy which used all of the senses to help people transcend themselves during worship. They rejected vestments, religious art, processions, chants and incense in favor of a Spartan aesthetic of contemplating the Holy Scriptures. So UU worship has never been much for 'smells and bells' or 'holy roller' elements. So, if we mistrust ecstasy, what about joy? We certainly believe in joy. UUs join with most other religions to assert that one of the fruits of our spirituality ought to be a life of more joy and peace, not just for ourselves, but for everyone. We think that following a life of positive acceptance of others and their beliefs, compassionate service and personal integrity will lead to more joy.

The mystical traditions of humanity claim that joy is in some way our true nature, naturally experienced when fear, anger and self-centeredness fall away. The state of an awakened human, they claim, is that of experiencing a state of joy independent of conditions. This natural joy is a baseline sense of thriving and well-being. It has been described as feeling at home in the universe even in the face of loss, disappointment and even mortality.

The practices that lead to joy, say the ancient sages are gratitude, generosity, altruism, healthy habits of thought and living in the present.

## **Spiritual Exercise**

The practice of counting ones blessings is a simple one. Even very young children can understand it. Yet, there are few practices more profound and powerful for creating happiness. So, once again, our spiritual exercise for this month is counting your blessings.

This exercise will take about five to 10 minutes a day. Start by doing this every day for one week. You may find that you want to adopt this practice from now on when you see the results. Notice any shift in positive mood from the day you start the spiritual exercise to how you feel one week later.

Sit down with a paper and pen and list all the things for which you are grateful. You may want to organize this by looking at a hierarchy of needs. First list all the necessities of life that are yours—food, clothing, shelter, medical care, employment. Next, list the luxuries and comforts you enjoy. List the people who love and care about you, your family and friends. Then list the intangibles that enrich your life like your education, your church, and other groups that you are part of. Then, the beauty that surrounds you living in San Diego. Your level of health. Having gotten this far, you will be able to think of more things or situations for which you are grateful.

Do this every day for one week and be prepared to share your experience with your Wisdom Circle.

## **Questions for Reflection**

Have you ever experienced a sense of ecstasy in a worship setting? Was it in a UU worship setting?

Has your “baseline” level of happiness gone up or down in recent years? What factors have contributed to this?

Do you believe it is possible to experience a happiness beyond conditions?

## Words of Wisdom

...a wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy.

~ Abraham Maslow

Three passions have governed my life:  
The longings for love, the search for knowledge,  
And unbearable pity for the suffering of [humankind].

Love brings ecstasy and relieves loneliness.  
In the union of love I have seen  
In a mystic miniature the prefiguring vision  
Of the heavens that saints and poets have imagined.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge.  
I have wished to understand the hearts of [people].  
I have wished to know why the stars shine.

Love and knowledge led upwards to the heavens,  
But always pity brought me back to earth;  
Cries of pain reverberated in my heart  
Of children in famine, of victims tortured  
And of old people left helpless.  
I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot,  
And I too suffer.

This has been my life; I found it worth living.

~ Bertrand Russell (adapted)

Your ambition should be to get as much life out of living as you possibly can, as much enjoyment, as much interest, as much experience, as much understanding. Not simply be what is generally called a "success."

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things.

~ William Wordsworth

Gratitude is the state of mind of thankfulness. As it is cultivated, we experience an increase in our "sympathetic joy," our happiness at another's happiness. Just as in the cultivation of compassion, we may feel the pain of others, so we may begin to feel their joy as well. And it doesn't stop there.

~ Stephen Levine

Every morning, when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

I cannot believe that the inscrutable universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!

~ Louise Bogan

Healing comes from letting there be room for all of "this" to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.

~ Pema Chodron

Look, I really don't want to wax philosophical, but I will say that if you're alive, you got to flap your arms and legs, you got to jump around a lot, you got to make a lot of noise, because life is the very opposite of death. And therefore, as I see it, if you're quiet, you're not living. You've got to be noisy, or at least your thoughts should be noisy and colorful and lively.

~ Mel Brooks

Try to make at least one person happy every day, and then in ten years you may have made three thousand, six hundred and fifty persons happy, or brightened a small town by your contribution to the fund of general enjoyment.

~ Sydney Smith

Once we recognize what it is we are feeling, once we recognize we can feel deeply, love deeply, can feel joy, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy.

~ Audre Lorde

We need to attach a reason to our emotional states. At the high end of the emotional spectrum, we believe that true joy is an effect rather than a cause. Because of this deep-seated belief, we spend most of our lives chasing whatever we think causes the effect of joy -- it may be a perfect relationship, lots of money, fame, the perfect place to live, even our God. At the low end of the emotional spectrum, the game we play is blame. We blame anything from the food we have just eaten to our partners to the government for the reason that we feel bad.

~ Richard Rudd

The excursion is the same when you go looking for your sorrow as when you go looking for your joy.

~ Eudora Welty

Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.

~ Henri Nouwen

Joy is the best makeup.

~ Anne Lamott

### **Resources**

Here is a great TED talk by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt on self-transcendence

[http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan\\_haidt\\_humanity\\_s\\_stairway\\_to\\_self\\_transcendence.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_humanity_s_stairway_to_self_transcendence.html)

The best book I know about happiness by Matthieu Ricard Happiness: A Guide To Developing Life's Most Important Skill. And here is a TED talk

[http://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu\\_ricard\\_on\\_the\\_habits\\_of\\_happiness.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/matthieu_ricard_on_the_habits_of_happiness.html)

Harvard social psychologist Daniel Gilbert, author of Stumbling On Happiness has a great TED talk too [http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_gilbert\\_asks\\_why\\_are\\_we\\_happy.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy.html)