

Seeing a Shadow

Rev. Lisa Doege

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

My mom says some days are like that. Even in Australia.

Some days are like that in my life. Just ask my mom or my sister about the e-mails they receive from me, outlining all my petty tribulations and annoyances for a day or week, usually ending with the line, "it isn't easy being me." I can tell you without asking that their response is a snort of laughter or a roll of their eyes. I lead a fairly charmed life and Mom and Kathy know I know it.

But there have been days, weeks, months even that I could legitimately label *terrible, horrible, no good, very bad* days, weeks or months. Times when romance went awry. Friendships ended. Loved ones died. Life changing decision loomed with no clear path. Dreams faded. Health concerns arose. And once, for a period of time beyond *terrible, horrible, no good, very bad*, a period of time now well past, depression washed all color from my days and nights.

Some days are like that in life. Even in Australia. Even in Hanska. Even in New Ulm. Bankruptcy. Pregnancy loss. Addiction. Domestic violence. Job loss. Flood. Fire. Tornado. Betrayal. Cancer. Schizophrenia. Loneliness. Alienation. Some day are like that.

Acknowledging such, someone recently suggested to me that we stop calling Joys and Sorrows *Joys and Sorrows*. This member pointed out that joys and sorrows are what comprise a life, so perhaps we might just call that particular part of the service *Life Happenings* or something similar. It's an idea worth consideration. After all, the words I choose to introduce that ritual are meant to convey just that sentiment:

Joy and Woe are fine...and when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go.
(William Blake)

Sorrow is everywhere yet Joy abounds. (Wallace Robbins)

Besides, it sounds kind of Zen to let go of labels and simply let life be what is. But a discussion of the ritual must rightly start not with the name but with the purpose. Why do we "pause each week to speak aloud our joys and sorrows in the presence of this beloved community"?

The late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church taught that religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. One way of understanding Joys and Sorrows is that the ritual is itself an exercise in accepting that reality, over and over again in the ebb and flow of daily life. Alive in the joys; suffering small deaths in the sorrows.

Looked at from another angle, the ritual of Joys and Sorrows is our Unitarian Universalist twist on some pretty widespread religious practices. The candle-lighting aspect calls to mind Catholicism and some New Age rituals. The spoken words are reminiscent of the prayers of the people in a protestant worship service--spoken not through the intermediary of the minister but in the voice and the words of the people themselves.

We acknowledge publicly our joys and sorrows to be reminded of the truth of Blake's words--we are least emotionally vulnerable when we rightly acknowledge life's fine weave of joy and sorrow. And we speak aloud our sorrow and our joy because of the truth inherent in Wallace Robbins' words--sorrow is everywhere; joy does abound. And while life is holy in its detail, it is also large, too large sometimes for us to contain within ourselves. The vast sorrow, the abundant joy must be offered up in the presence of the community lest we become overwhelmed by it. In the act of Joys and Sorrows we give a bit of it away--the joy and the sorrow. And the joy blesses the entire community in miniscule and hidden ways. And the sorrow blesses us too.

A parable from India tells of a parent of a dying child who begs the Buddha for a miracle. The Buddha replies he will cure the child as soon as the parent brings him a mustard seed from a household that has never known the death of a child or a parent or brother or sister or any family member. Of course the task is impossible. The child does not live. The parent's grief does not disappear or turn to resignation. But the grief does become bearable with the understanding that it is universal, shared by neighbors and friends and strangers in every house on every street in every town. So too is our sorrow subtly transformed when we speak of it in worship and hear others speak of theirs.

One of the most popular sermons I preached in all my years in Indiana was called *When the Future Changes*. It was early in my preaching career and I was still getting the hang of it. It certainly wasn't a masterpiece. But I got lots of requests for the manuscript and as recently as a year ago someone asked for permission to post part of that sermon on his blog.

I suppose *When the Future Changes* was my earliest attempt to articulate some basic beliefs I later summed up this way when a colleague asked me what truths I live by:

life is hard; hope exists; love matters. I think that's why it resonated with so many listeners. Unitarian Universalism is neither a Pollyanna religion dismissing the hard realities of life on the one hand nor an doom-laden religion on the other hand seeing this world only as a pale and tainted precursor of the one to come. Instead we embrace the joy and wonder and beauty of life, and rail at the pain and suffering, evil and destruction, knowing that it is all life, knowing it is all holy, knowing that creation and our own lives are still full of possibility, even when it is not the possibility we had been banking on or dreaming of.

As a literature major in college I was taught to recognize foreshadowing--the appearance of small, seemingly insignificant details of description or action that later take on huge significance as the plot unfolds. A champagne flute shattered in a wedding toast might presage a marriage destined for violence and spousal abuse. In movies foreshadowing translates into a musical theme that hints at the plot turns to come--romance or tragedy or violence. A discordant violin strain barely audible as a teen accepts a beer at an under-age party becomes louder and more persistent, more discordant as a series of scenes portray her alcoholism: one beer after another at every party, sneaking liquor at home, stealing money from her father's wallet to buy more, passing out at play practice. Even those of us who weren't English majors and might let the shattered champagne flute slip by unnoticed have been well trained by movies and television. We all know what that violin means: we're seeing the start of something bad.

Life as we live it, however, seldom gives us even symbolic notice of upcoming twists or turns. No groundhog casting a shadow or not. no musical score changing key or tempo. It is just as well, I suppose. Who among us would have the discipline to stick with mundane but important tasks when the music started hinting joy or fun or excitement was to be found just around the corner?

Who among us would get out of bed in the morning if we had that musical warning of impending doom?

No, the music doesn't play. If details of daily life *do* foreshadow events to come the writer of life paints them so finely into the plot that we fail to recognize them. And the world does not turn all eyes to us each morning to observe the moment when we do or do not see our shadow. But the shadows are there. In every one of our lives. Just like Stevenson's shadow. They go in and out with us, sometimes shooting up tall like an India-rubber ball and sometimes going so small that there's almost none of them at all.

And church, even with all the modern alternatives like bare-all talk shows and Twitter and Facebook and tell-all memoirs, church is still the proper place to bring our shadows - at their tallest and deepest and when they seem to disappear. Sure, all those other venues are also means of knowing we're not alone, that shadows even bigger than our own follow everyone. But in church we bless the shadows. And we invite them into a dance with joy. And we say, yes, life is hard. Hope exists. Love matters.

I think, for the time being at least, Joys and Sorrows will remain *Joys and Sorrows*. Yes, so it goes. Yes, they are both a natural part of the rhythm of life. But they are undeniably the peaks and valleys of life. And somehow our souls are made whole again by acknowledging the heights and the depths of our love and our living. May it ever be so. Amen.