

First Unitarian Church

October 16, 2022

When we first reopened the sanctuary a little over a year ago, we had maybe 100 or so people each week. It felt roomy in there/here. Lately, though, it has gotten cozier. Sometimes it's hard to find a seat! So, it feels like it's time at last to start having two services in the sanctuary again. So as many of you know, we are going to do that beginning on Sunday November 6th—just three weeks from now.

But what about zoom? We still have 80-90 people logging in each week, so we are going to keep doing that, too. We're just going to do it differently. Up until now, the zoom service has been a totally different experience than the sanctuary service. Zoom has had its own liturgy, its own team of volunteers, and has taken place in different spaces—our offices and homes instead of the sanctuary. That was by design: as the world began to act as though everything were returning to normal, we wanted the 9am service to specifically minister to those of us who weren't able or ready to assemble in large groups.

When we were planning to reopen the campus last year, vaccines had only been out for a few months. Some people were ready to gather in person, and many expressed a profound *need* to do so for mental health reasons. Others could not imagine doing so, though lockdowns had taken a toll on them, too. So on that first day we were open, the people on zoom and the people in the sanctuary were having pretty different experiences of daily life. Two different services allowed us to tend to the needs of each.

To a certain extent, those differences are still true today. But now we've had more time to adjust, and now, I believe, it's time to worship together again. It's time to take down the partition between the virtual congregation and the in-person congregation.

There's an exercise I share with new ministers, to help them get outside the limits of their own perspective as they write sermons and prayers. I ask them to do a brainstorm of every kind of person who could show up to church that day.

Atheists. Theists. Agnostics. Old people. Young people. Middle aged people. People with light or dark skin. A person trying to choose from several possible paths forward in life. A person who knows they won't live much longer. Someone who just got engaged. Someone going through a break up. Someone who just got out of jail. A person with chronic pain, a person who feels like dancing, a person questioning their gender or orientation, and a person from another culture who doesn't know the songs and stories we assume everyone knows. Someone giving life just one more chance.

And on and on. We are always a congregation of diverse experiences. Now, our experiences of COVID are among them. And it's time to get back together.

Our theological theme this month is courage, and we're calling this Project GUTS. GUTS stands for Get Us Together on Sundays.

If you attending virtually, you'll log into zoom church the same way and at the same time as you do now, only we'll be in the sanctuary and you'll be joined by an in-person crowd. There will still be a time to share your joys and concerns, and there will still be break out rooms after the service. You'll see close up camera shots of the ministers and musicians, and wide frame shots of your fellow UUs, kind of like you do in gallery view.

If you attend in person, you'll only get one viewpoint—the one from your seat. But you can pick your seat: with two services, the sanctuary will be less crowded.

Here's something I'm personally really looking forward to: designing one service to share at both 9 and 11, instead of a different service for each, frees up planning time and allows the ministers and musicians focus more on creativity and fun. We get to give each service our all. I am ready for more joy. How about you?

In fact, I think having a really great time together, sharing creativity, playfulness, and joy, is one of the most important things we can do as a congregation right now. In divinity school, aspiring ministers are taught about the pastoral and prophetic work of the church. Pastoral: care for the human spirit. Prophetic: care for the world.

We do both for each other here at First Unitarian. I say “for each other” because with two regular ministers (and when we are lucky, an intern) on staff for over 1000 people, we ministers are not the ones doing all the ministry. The whole congregation does it. It's shared. We tend our spirits in Sunday services, and in meaningful classes and conversations, and in the music program. We tend the world through advocacy and outreach. We march, we speak up, we share food and ESL classes and afterschool tutoring. We ask how to be good allies—and then do it. Pastoral and prophetic. We do both. But there's something else that links the two. And that's joy. Joy, pleasure, delight.

When things feel heavy, we might wonder if joy is a guilty pleasure. How can we laugh when [fill in the blank]. How can I laugh when I'm grieving? How can I laugh when we should all be grieving? But actually, how can we not? How will we face it all without pleasure to make the present bearable, and not just bearable, but desirable? If we do not desire this world, how can we love it? If there is no joy in it, what will restore our courage?

Pleasure and joy are empowering. In *Pleasure Activism*, adrienne maree brown puts it in a way that bears repeating. She says:

Pleasure—embodied, connected pleasure—is one of the ways we know when we are free. That we are always free. That we always have the power to co-create the world. Pleasure helps us move through the times that are unfair, through grief and loneliness, through the terror of genocide, or days when the demands are just overwhelming. Pleasure heals the places where our hearts and spirit get wounded. Pleasure reminds us that even in the dark, we are alive. Pleasure is a medicine for the suffering that is

absolutely promised in life... Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom.¹

She also addresses the fact that, “oppression makes us believe that pleasure is not something that we all have equal access to.” Oppression’s structures, the way it shows up systematically, makes life more difficult for some than others. In fact, just as I was writing this part of the sermon, I got a phone call that illustrated this fact. The call was from someone I care about, who is nonbinary. They were calling to process the fact that they had just been escorted out of a grocery store for trying to walk in with a bag that was too large. They were escorted out like this. [wide arms, body blocking] This is the bag: a single, empty, reusable grocery bag from Trader Joes. (The incident took place at another store, not Trader Joes).

That kind of thing, and worse, happening repeatedly, over years and years, makes life harder for a lot of people. Makes it seem like pleasure is not for you. It takes a lot of forms. If you’re poor, you are also shamed for spending money or time on leisure. If you have a larger body, same thing, but now the simple act of enjoying food can also prompt others to “concern troll” you. Anybody here familiar with “concern trolling?” That’s when someone pretends that they want to be an ally, but they just have some concerns that need addressed first. In reality, their concerns serve other interests or reinforce oppressive norms.

Sometimes it’s intentional but other times people don’t even realize they are doing this. One example of it happens to trans kids. Adults in a transgender kid’s life may try to talk them out of expressing their gender identity by saying they are worried for the child’s safety and reputation, but studies have shown that the biggest predictor of wellness in trans youth is the support of family. The second biggest predictor is community acknowledgement—like at school—of the young person’s gender identity, for example by using the person’s preferred name and pronouns, and not forcing them into the wrong locker room or bathroom, which in fact creates a dangerous situation.

Many of us in this room have personal experience of these kinds of barriers to pleasure and joy. All of us will face unfairness, grief, loneliness, and/or overwhelm in life. Adrienne maree brown reminds us that pleasure is a healing medicine. It is healing medicine for humans. And pleasure helps us to be in the present. It makes this world, now, desirable. And what we desire, we will have the courage and strength to attend to and transform. In fact, our joy and pleasure help to transform it. Not only because joy is good for the world, but because it is contagious. Do you want people to join you in working for justice? Then have as much fun as possible. Bring joy into it, and it will become irresistible.

¹ from Pleasure Activism, pp. 437-8, 441; also at <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/pleasure-point>

While I was on vacation last month, I read the book *The Sabbath*, by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In Judaism, Shabbat, the sabbath, is a cornerstone of faith. It is, in essence, a day of rest. I think it's relevant here because rest, pleasure, and joy all go together. They reinforce each other, and they are related.

Heschel points out that in the book of Genesis, it is written that God created the world in six days and called it good, and then God set apart the seventh day for rest and called it *holy*. It's the first time the scriptures use that word, *holy*, *qadosh*, and it isn't for any object or place. It's for time that was set apart for rest, and that certainly, inherently, must also mean pleasure and joy.

Heschel says in a world of things, the architecture of the holy takes form in time, not space, and the sabbath is a palace in time.

What do you think, shall we make these Sunday services a palace in time? Heschel wrote as a rabbi, and Judaism has its own cultural and theological approaches to the sabbath, both ancient and new. What might such a thing mean to us?

It is singing together, and receiving gifts of music, it is poetry, presence, and laughing—*hard* even—because life is ridiculous sometimes. It is embracing playfulness, and making room for diversity. It is you showing up as you are: atheist, theist, agnostic, old, young, or in between. Whatever you look like, however you identify, and wherever you are in life, ready for courageous, contagious joy.