

Joy at the Top (and Joy at the Very Bottom of the Hill)

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Hi. I'd like to begin with a poem by John O'Donohue. I would like to share his poem entitled For Citizenship. In these days when it's possible for governors to traffic asylum seekers around the country and still retain their offices, it is important to reflect on the political idea and the spiritual idea of belonging. Whose are we? To whom, or more deeply, to what do we belong? When we know this, there is great peace. When we forget, we lose our joy...and there is no joy in secret, human transportation.

You may have heard the news by now. Governors in Florida and in Texas have bussed women and men and young families who are fleeing oppressive circumstances and seeking better lives to so-called "sanctuary cities" across the country—in New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts...more than 13,000 people have been bussed out from the state of Texas alone. So, now, it is important for us to remember how to lead from the place of love...or we'll continue to do the things that break our collective heart. O'Donohue writes,

In these times when anger  
Is turned into anxiety  
And someone has stolen  
The horizons and the mountains,  
Our small emperors on parade  
Never expect our indifference  
To disturb their nakedness  
They keep their heads down  
And their eyes gleam with reflection  
From Aluminum economic ground,  
The media wraps everything  
In a cellophane of sound,  
And the ghost surface of the virtual  
Overlays the breathing earth.  
The industry of distraction  
Makes us forget  
That we live in a universe  
We have become converts  
To the religion of stress  
And its deity of progress  
That we may have courage  
To turn aside from it all  
And come to kneel down before the poor,  
To discover what we must do,  
How to turn anxiety  
Back into anger,  
How to find our way home.

It Emma Lazarus, a Jewish-American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote about the poor who were then pounding on the gates of freedom. She wrote,

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

She knelt down before the poor but she doesn't seem to have been angry...as she placed these words at the base of the Statue of Liberty. She wasn't angry. She had learned to lead in love...and love led home.

I don't want to be angry but I do want to find the way home...joyfully. I don't want to practice a religion of stress but I can't turn away from injustice. I want to practice a religion of joy. I want deep joy to be my faith...and I can make this real and true when I'm not rushing around as much as I do. I can make this real and true when I slow down...when I find a safe and healthy place to place anxiety.

I have great news. Wonderful news. I could not possibly have been more blessed, more deeply honored, more satisfied than I was to have been present at Ginny Christie's birthday party yesterday. Ginny is the oldest member of our North Chapel congregation and yesterday at Kendall (at her residence just north of Hanover, New Hampshire), Ginny celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> year on the planet. I'm stunned by that. Touched.

I took a moment to expressed how honored I was to see her, how beautiful she looked and how much I appreciated the lovely sound of her voice. I was more than a little emotional...which surprised me. She and I don't share a lot of personal history. And yet, I poured what love I truly feel into her soft and gentle eyes, having been invited to do so by her daughter, Delaney.

Ginny smiled at me knowingly and said, "What?" Even with her hearing aids, she could not catch my meaning. "I can't really hear you?" she said, with the sweetest and most understanding look on her face. So, I repeated myself, much louder. It was a little bit excruciating for me. I am—by nature, habit and preference—decidedly shy, especially around people who I do not know very well.

I loved that awkward and beautiful and funny moment we shared together. It was great. I loved even more being able to deliver a stack of birthday cards that were made by the children in the Spiritual Exploration program, here at North Chapel. Last week, with the guidance of Chloe Powell, our kids created birthday cards to help Ginny Christie celebrate. There was joy at the top and joy at the very bottom of the hill of life. Ginny and the SE kids. That's a good name for a rock-n-roll band! Ginny and the SE kids.

The cards were plain, white-paper cards with colorful flowers drawn on them in crayon. They were beautiful and Ginny LOVED them so. A great smile came across her face as she took the time to open each one with care and read them carefully...one by one. I could tell that she delighted in the fact the there were several of these cards. There were many messages from little people who were

more than 90 years younger than she is. I could not possibly have been more blessed, more deeply honored, more satisfied than I was to have been present for that 100-year-old birthday joy unfolding, to have been first-witness to a century-smile that delivers to us all such grace and happiness...grace and happiness that we take with us, keep with us and enjoy for all our days.

A large group of friends and family came together to celebrate but even still, there was too much birthday cake (which was an issue but not a problem). Delaney, Ginny's daughter, volunteered the Woodstock folks and Ann Wynia and I took up the charge. Her cake is here for us so we can take part in the magic. North Chapel touches a milestone. Thank God for that.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. We send love, blessings and deep embrace to those elders who have come before us in the nurture and the care of this good place. We are, all of us, gentle and temporary stewards of a great big dream called North Chapel. Thank you so much, beloved elders who came before us. And thank you, too, to those who will follow...in this living world, ever-turning. We are, all of us today, so very luckily, here. For whatever time we are allowed to cherish, may we be as joyful as we can possibly be...joyful in our bones and in our beauty until joy bursts like love and laughter. We share so much in common. Despite our differences, we are so much alike. As Emma's Revolution reminds us,

We are living beneath the great Big Dipper  
We are washed by the very same rain  
We are swimming in the stream together  
Some in power and some in pain  
We can worship this ground we walk on  
Cherishing the beings that we live beside  
Loving spirits will live forever  
We're all swimming to the other side

Emma's Revolution is a musical group. You may have heard of them? They are two women, formerly a couple—Pat Humphries and Sandy Opatow. I met them years and years ago, at an ordination in San Diego. Years later, when I moved to Maryland, we all became neighbors in the Silver Spring area. We used to meet up at a local restaurant named Franklin's. They stayed open late...and I still stayed up late back then. I'd grab a guitar, order some French fries and sit at the corner table and practice my instrument while watching whatever sports was on TV. There was plenty of chatter and background music. I wasn't bothering anyone.

It took some getting used to—practicing guitar in public. It was weird at first but I did it anyway. It was good for me. Practicing at Franklin's helped me to slow down after my busy days. I needed that...because there was so much going on. Life was very intense. The news was always breaking. There were endless protest and political rallies. It wasn't New York but it was intense in its own crazy ways.

Unwinding at Franklin's was a very important part of my life. It is important to make time for ourselves. Do you know what I mean? It is important to slow down and make real time.

Sometimes, I would call up Pat and Sandy. I would invite them to come and join me at Franklin's. And sometimes, they would come and we'd sing Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan songs for ourselves and Pat's heart would fill up with joy. Then, me and Sandy would sing some cheesy Barry Manilow song and Pat would want to kill us both...but she restrained herself...for the most part. Sometimes, she killed us but most of the time, she didn't.

They were in their last days as a couple back then. Their marriage was unraveling...and I knew it—they didn't hide it—but I pretended not to know. I wanted a fairytale ending for them both. I wanted everything to be ok, to turn out fine. And in my rush to figure out what I thought should happen in their lives according to my needs and my anxiety and my fear and trepidation and my urgencies, I failed to see that what needed to happen for them was already happening. It wasn't what I thought I wanted for them and it wasn't what I thought I wanted for me but it has led us all to a place of joy simply because it was true. They sing,

I am alone and I am searching,  
hungering for answers in my time  
I am balanced at the brink of wisdom  
I'm impatient to receive a sign  
I move forward with my senses open  
Imperfection, be my guide  
In humility, I will listen  
We're all swimming to the other side

But I wasn't swimming. I was flailing. I felt lost and pretty alone. And when I wasn't feeling stagnant and absolutely stuck, I was over-functioning. I figured, if I couldn't be joyful, I could be busy. I thought it was the least that I could do.

I really loved Pat and Sandy back then and I really love them today but we aren't day-to-day friends...and they're both in California now...and I'm up here in Vermont. So, we don't meet up at Franklin's any more, needless to say. We no longer find the casual joy that used to be so readily available.

COVID has done this to all of us. For two years, it brought our world to a grinding halt...and the same things happened. We stagnated. We got stuck. We over-functioned. And despite the fact that the world had stopped spinning, we were still spinning just fine. We were spinning like tops...unable to slow the wheels that keep turning round-and-round within our lives, unable to quiet the soul or slow down enough to work our way through our anxieties...or even to become fully aware of them. And so much gets lost and so much is missed and so much never happens at all.

Over-functioning doesn't make life better. Most of the time, it's just a way of compensating for the things that have stopped functioning entirely. Over-functioning is often joyless and speeding up doesn't make the hard times go away. I keep telling myself that speeding up is not the answer. It's much wiser to do the opposite and to keep an open heart...because speeding up is not the answer. It's not the answer at all.

Slow down, you crazy child  
You're so ambitious for a juvenile  
But then if you're so smart, tell me, why are you still so afraid?  
Where's the fire, what's the hurry about?  
You better cool it off before you burn it out  
You got so much to do and only so many hours in a day

But you know that when the truth is told  
That you can get what you want or you can just get old  
You're gonna kick off before you even get halfway through  
When will you realize Vienna waits for you?

Slow down, you're doing fine  
You can't be everything you want to be before your time  
Although it's so romantic on the borderline tonight  
Too bad, but it's the life you lead  
You're so ahead of yourself that you forgot what you need  
Though you can see when you're wrong,  
    you know, you can't always see when you're right

You got your passion, you got your pride  
But don't you know that only fools are satisfied?  
Dream on, but don't imagine they'll all come true  
When will you realize Vienna waits for you?

Slow down, you crazy child  
Take the phone off the hook and disappear for a while  
It's alright, you can afford to lose a day or two  
When will you realize Vienna waits for you?  
When will you realize  
    Vienna waits for you?

Vienna sounds like Nirvana to me. It sounds like that transcendent state that is free of desire and suffering. Who would want to go to Vienna? It sounds like the perfect vacation. Before I hit my 100<sup>th</sup>, God willing, I want to get myself to Vienna. Maybe it's not quite Nirvana but its right there waiting for us...where ambition and rush lay quiet for a while, where we make good use of our time.

How shall we make good use of our time?

I've had a series of conversations recently that have had me wondering. I wonder if I could get your help on this, your thoughts, your insight, your wisdom. Because, in many ways, these last two years have drawn us away from one another...have isolated us. As we struggle with COVID mandates and the masking debates and our crazy politics, it's become so much harder to create community. And we need community. We need a cause to strive for...in order to make good use of our time, in order to bring power to our days.

Before COVID struck, I was encouraged by the Board, on behalf of the Congregation at North Chapel, to think about how to champion the cause of racial justice as a part of my ministry. Names like George Floyd and Nina Pop and Tony McDade and Breonna Taylor were in the news. Names like Duante Wright and Ahmaud Aubrey, Jacob Blake and Joseph Rosenbaum, Anthony Huber and Charles Kinsey were in the news in ways that made us want to respond. So, a rally was organized and the town of Woodstock responded on the Green in the center of town. Hundreds of good-hearted people—300, more than that, perhaps—expressed their grief, laying prostrate on the ground or taking a knee in solidarity, publicly saying “No!” to the hate-crime-tempered violence that we were seeing.

I’ve been really thinking about this. I’ve been reflecting very deeply, trying to figure out how our voice could best be heard in this environment, in this cultural milieu. What can an older, liberal and largely white, northern New England liberal congregation truly add to the contemporary discourse on racial violence and racial justice? Are we limited by who we are...with respect to what we can say and what we can contribute to the world? What does it mean for North Chapel to speak out of racial justice?

I want you to answer these questions but I don’t want you to do so quickly. I want you to slow, to ground yourselves, to take a good-deep breath and consider the possibilities. I want us to be led by our insight and our wisdom. Together, we can do something that no one else can do? What is that thing, that thing that is ours and ours alone? Where does our deep gladness meet the world’s most urgent needs? How is it that joy exists at the top and at the very bottom of the hill?

I can’t do justice work anymore...not joylessly. I just can’t do it. I have sharpened my eye sufficiently. I see quite clearly now. And it’s paradoxical but it’s true. The hills of justice work that I see before us are SO much higher than I thought they were. They’re more like mountains and yet, I am so wide open for the joy of the climb. And when I look around at us, I could not be more certain of our successes, not just sometime in the future but right here and right now. We are all like hidden heroes, wearing secret emblems on our chests...our invisible capes, stuffed under our coats and beneath our sweaters...powered up by beauty and joyful belonging. What can we do that’s unique? I have a thought about that and if you have time to stay after church today, I’ll be glad to talk about it. The first of many conversations, if we choose to go in that direction. So, if you can’t come today, don’t worry about it. We’ll do it again. Joy is in the act of recreation.

I’d like to close this morning by returning to the poem by John O’Donohue who reminds us that,

In these times when anger  
Is turned into anxiety  
And someone has stolen  
The horizons and the mountains...

It is so important to remember the light of joy. He reminds us that sometimes we need...

To turn aside from it all

And come to kneel down before the poor,  
To discover what we must do...

And to find our way home to joy.

So, where exactly does our deep gladness, our joy, meet the world's urgent needs? I pray that we discover this together, in conversation that is honest, fierce and joyful.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.