

A Happy Church
Sunday, January 29, 2017

Do any of you remember “cocooning”? It was supposed to be the big trend after the attacks of September 11th. We were all going to stay in our homes, insulating ourselves from any future dangers. Pundits proclaimed the end of restaurants and movie theatres. Department stores stocked up on large-screen TV’s, decorative pillows, and scented candles; supermarkets on gourmet frozen dinners. Now post-Donald Trump, we have a new trend, or perhaps a new name for the same trend: “Hygge” (HOO-gah). It’s not a football cheer. “Hygge” is the Danish word for “cozy.” And though you may not have heard of it, a British dictionary proclaimed it #2 in their list of top 10 words of 2016. (#1 was “Brexit”) An article in the *New York Times* in December was headlined “Make Room for the Hygge Hordes” and explained to those of us not already aware of the trend what incorporating *hygge* into your life involves: For the Danes, this article said, “It is ... a national manifesto, nay, an obsession expressed in the constant pursuit of homespun pleasures involving candlelight, fires, fuzzy knitted socks, porridge, coffee, cake and other people. But no strangers, as the Danes, apparently, are rather shy.”

If you want to learn more about it, there are a host of new books arriving to inform and inspire: “The Little Book of Hygge,” “How to Hygge: The Nordic Secrets to a Happy Life,” “The Book of Hygge: The Danish Art of Contentment, Comfort and Connection,” “Hygge Habits: 42 Habits for a Happy Life through Danish Hygge that take Five Minutes or Less,” and “Keep Calm & Hygge: A Guide to the Danish Art of Simple & Cosy Living.” I could go on: Amazon lists 34 books under “hygge.” most of them published in the last year. Once inspired to hygge – it’s a verb as well as a noun – you can purchase Danish furniture from hygge.com; reindeer skin throws, sheepskin baby booties, and alabaster candleholders from hyggelife.com; and when you’re in New York City, try *hyggelig* (HOO-gah-lee) food (*smorrebrod*,

porridges and craft beers) at The Great Northern Food Hall in Grand Central Station.

The concept of hygge took off in Britain earlier than it has in the US, following the Brexit vote, as it now in our country follows Trumpism (another top 10 word of 2016). And who among us doesn't need some coziness, some warmth, some cheer right now? I am not criticizing the concept of Hygge, - if you've come to "Tea with the Minister" you've seen that I like to light candles - though I am poking fun perhaps at the commercialization, which is not part of the Danish original. But Hygge works in Denmark in a way it can't work in our society – their cozy happiness isn't a retreat from the bleakness of the world; it isn't done in fear of what tomorrow will bring. Their hyggelig lifestyle is supported by government guarantees of health care, a mandated 37-hour work-week, and a guaranteed minimum income. The trending of Hygge among us seems not a cozying down in the darkness of winter but a turning away from all that is scary. And scary or sinister is the opposite of hygge.

I learned about hygge this week as I thought about being happy, about what makes a happy church as we prepare to do some visioning, and what makes happy individuals. How can we recognize and work against all that is sinister and scary right now yet still hold onto happiness? How can we be happy even as we are the mourning, the poor-in-spirit, and among those hungering and thirsting for righteousness? How can we move away from the fear, from the feeling of being overwhelmed and powerless? How can we be happy while striving to see truth and work for justice?

First what does it mean to be happy? As Forrest Church's re-doing of the beatitudes reminds us, true happiness isn't circumstantial. There is the happiness that comes when everything is going well, but there is also a happiness that can abide in us even at the hardest times. We cannot control the first happiness but we can cultivate the second one. This is the goal of all faith traditions and practices, to nurture in us the ability to live out of peace, joy, and contentment rather than out

of fear. Different traditions come at that goal through different teachings and practices, but all would bring us to a sense of oneness with the flow of life and with one another. As it is written in the Upanishads, “Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.” And from that sense of unity comes the happiness of Forrest Church’s Beatitudes.

Happiness comes when our sights are on larger goals and we live beyond our own needs and wants. Happiness comes when we understand our good is tied with and to the good of others, when we understand ourselves as part of a larger whole. Happiness is based in the faith that the power of love and life, what I call God, flows within and among us and our world even when sometimes we can’t see it. Happiness is based in the faith that, as the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker proclaimed in the shadow of the Civil War, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Happiness comes when we have faith that we are part of that bend even when our eyes cannot perceive the bend.

Isn’t this is why we are all here on a chilly January morning instead of cocooning in our homes? However you may have phrased your reasons for getting up and out this morning to come to church, isn’t it to be renewed in that faith, to be reminded that you are not alone, that others share your hopes and dreams and are committed to working toward them with you? If you bring children with you, isn’t part of the reason to help them stand in the values of compassion and equity and to know that they are part of a community also rooted in those values? We are all frogs together in one bucket, some of us swimming strong, some of us floating tired, now offering encouragement, at other times needing to be encouraged, but always trusting that a larger view would show us the milk slowly being changed to butter. We are pilgrims climbing the “coming crests” to the peace that lies somewhere beyond, but also walking now in the way of peace, “stay[ing] together[,] learn[ing] the flowers[,] go[ing] light.” This is the way of happiness.

As we think about vision and mission at First Parish, we start with this base – that we are a religious community bound by covenant and rooted in faith. The questions of vision and mission invite us think about how we live out that faith at this particular time and in this particular place. How are we called to help bend the moral arc today on the south shore of Massachusetts? What spiritual resources do we need from First Parish to help us do that? How can each of us be supported here to live to the fullness of our divine potential? How can each of us support one another in living to that fullness?

Over the years our church bells have sounded to call us to worship and renewal every Sunday morning. They have tolled the alarm in times of danger and pealed the joy of celebrations. Today we ring our bells to stand with refugees, to place ourselves publicly as upholding the values of justice, kindness, and hospitality. What else will ring out from these walls and from our lives?

Let us light our candles and create our safe, cozy spaces in our homes and even in our church – we all need respite and sanctuary - but let us remember that our call is not to stay safe and cozy but to open ourselves to the love which transforms all things. May that love which has flowed through this church since our beginnings flow through us now and on into that future which we cannot see but which we trust does bend toward justice and toward peace. May we be happy.

- Pamela M. Barz

Readings

For the Children by Gary Snyder

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us,
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all

go down.

In the next century
 or the one beyond that,
 they say,
 are valleys, pastures,
 we can meet there in peace
 if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
 one word to you, to
 you and your children:

stay together
 learn the flowers
 go light

Forrest Church's Beatitudes

[Happy] are the poor in spirit, for they know the unutterable beauty of simple things.

[Happy] are those who mourn,
 for they have dared to risk their hearts by giving of their love.

[Happy] are the meek,
 for the gentle earth shall embrace them and hallow them as its own.

[Happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 for they shall know the taste of noble deeds.

[Happy] are the merciful,

for in return theirs is the gift of giving.

[Happy] are the pure in heart,
for they shall be at one with themselves and the universe.

[Happy] are the peacemakers,
for theirs is a kinship with everything that is holy.

[Happy] are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for the truth shall set them free.

*Forrest Church's Beatitudes are taken from A Chosen Faith: An
Introduction to Unitarian Universalism, by John A. Buehrens and
Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).*