

The Struggle and the Joy
Sunday June 14, 2020

I invite you to clench your hands into fists. Not the kind of fist you make when you're thinking about punching someone or expressing anger, but the fist you make when you're holding onto something precious. Maybe a handful of lupin seeds or lettuce, or maybe M&M's or legos. Just imagine you're holding something where you don't want to drop even one. The Shona people of Zimbabwe long ago noticed that babies come into the world holding their hands in these fists. Once a young girl asked her grandmother why her newborn cousin held his fists clenched tight. And her grandmother told her that they believed that children are born holding the gifts they have to offer to the world. And that as we are fed and cuddled, as we grow more into ourselves, our hands relax and open and our gifts flow out into the world. You can relax and open your hands now and think about the gifts that you have brought into the world – and however old you are – 4 or 40 or 84 you have brought us gifts.

Everyone has these gifts to offer. The tragedy of our society and of our world is that many people don't get what they need to offer the fullness of their gifts. We are recognizing that tragedy now in marches and speeches and protests and vigils, trying to change our structures to allow everyone what they need to offer their gifts. But I worry a bit that in our emphasis on the way people are deprived of offering their gifts that we can overlook all the gifts these same people do and have given our world. The poet Ross Gay reminds us of this in his poem about Eric Garner, *A Small Needful Fact*:

A Small Needful Fact

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier

for us to breathe.

Ross Gay reminds us in his poem that though most of us know Eric Garner from his death and his final words, “I can’t breathe,” that we lose something if we don’t remember that his life was more than that, that he contributed to our lives, making it easier for us to breathe. And we lose something if we don’t see that about everyone, that no matter what their circumstances, everyone contributes gifts to the world though we may not know what they are. That’s what made George Floyd’s memorial service on Tuesday so moving – he was remembered not for how he died, but for how he lived, as a football star, “gentle giant” with a “[q]uiet personality but a beautiful spirit,” a friend who made people laugh with silly dances and goofy jokes, a father who tried to be there for his children, a man who was turning his life around after serving 5 years in prison for robbery. We mourn the violence which killed him, but we also mourn the loss of this beautiful spirit from our world.

So as we think about how we want to learn and worship and care for one another and our community in the coming year, I’m going to ask you to hold onto this vision of gifts. Last week when we broke into small groups to brainstorm ideas, you all came up with powerful ones. Study of racism, and self-examination for our personal histories and the history of First Parish which means the history of Scituate, protests and vigils and partnerships with others in this community and outside it. This is important work, but it is hard work, and it can be painful. The only way we can stick with it and use the study and the pain and the protest for transformation is if we do it from a place of joy. We need to enter this work with the goal of uncovering our own gifts. And we need to enter it with the goal of enjoying and celebrating the gifts of the very people we want to help. Otherwise our good work only perpetuates the imbalance of power, just in a different way. Lady Bountiful is better than Lord Oppressor but not much. We will only transform the world when we realize that we all have gifts to contribute and we all have gifts to receive. My suffering connects me to your suffering; your joy enlarges my joy.

Ross Gay is a poet and a professor of English at Indiana University in Bloomington where he’s also helped to create a community garden where any passerby can enjoy the harvest. On his 42nd birthday he decided to write an essay every day for the coming year about delight. Though he missed a few days, the essays became *The Book of Delights*. Now not every essay is happy – delight and joy are different from happiness. Happiness depends on our circumstances. Joy depends on our recognizing the deep connections which are present even in suffering. So though he may write about the racism he experiences as an African American man in a coffee shop or the airport, he is able to find some point of connection which creates community. *The Book of Delights*, he said, "is about how do we attend to the ways that we make each other possible."

How do we attend to the ways that make each other possible? Maybe that’s the question for us for the coming year? How do we make our own full selves more possible? How do we make our First Parish siblings more possible? How do we make others in Scituate and in the world more possible? And – AND – how do they

all make us more possible? That's where the joy comes in – the joy is in our receiving as well as our giving.

Here's the entry for October 2 from *The Book of Delights*:

“Among the most beautiful things I've ever heard anyone say came from my student Bethany, talking about her pedagogical aspirations or ethos, how she wanted to be as a teacher, and what she wanted her classrooms to be. She said, ‘What if we joined our wildernesses together?’ Sit with that for a minute. That the body, the life, might carry a wilderness, an unexplored territory, and that yours and mine might somewhere, somehow, meet. Might, even, join.

And what if the wilderness — perhaps the densest wild in there — thickets, bogs, swamps, uncrossable ravines and rivers (have I made the metaphor clear?) — is our sorrow? ... It astonishes me sometimes — no, often — how every person I get to know — everyone, regardless of everything, by which I mean everything — lives with some profound personal sorrow. Brother addicted. Mother murdered. Dad died in surgery. Rejected by their family. Cancer came back. Evicted. [Child] not okay. Everyone, regardless, always, of everything. Not to mention the existential sorrow we all might be afflicted with, which is that we, and what we love, will soon be annihilated. Which sounds more dramatic than it might. Let me just say dead. Is this, sorrow, of which our impending being no more might be the foundation, the great wilderness?

Is sorrow the true wild?

And if it is — and if we join them — your wild to mine — what's that?

For joining, too, is a kind of annihilation.

What if we joined our sorrows, I'm saying.

I'm saying: What if that is joy?” (p. 49)

So as you break into small groups now to begin to plan for next year, focus on the joy. What can we do to connect in our sorrows and in our joys? How can we invite others into connecting their wilderness places with ours? How can we encourage one another to find and feel the wildernesses – to stay with them until we find the joy there? For if there isn't joy, why do it?

Last week we broke into random groups. This week we're inviting you to choose the area you'd like to focus on – worship, education, care for one other or care for the larger world, aka social justice. I know this isn't ideal for those of you on shared computers – you're going to have to agree for today on one group – or if there are two of you, you could join in one topic for the first 10 minutes and then switch to

the other group for the next 10. If there are more than 2 of you, you'll just have to work it out. But this isn't your only chance. This is just the beginning.

We're going to go into the groups by renaming ourselves. Up in the corner of your picture you'll see three dots. Click on that and then go to Rename. If you'd like to be part of the Worship conversation put a "1" and a dash in front of your name. The worship group will be talking about themes and topics to explore next year – how can we express joy? How can we hold up the sins of racism and other exclusions? How can we share our learnings? How can our worship embody our study, our turnings, and our desires? And how can we do this possibly on-line? Lin Haire-Sargeant will be facilitating that group.

If you'd like to be part of the Education planning put a "2" and a dash in front of your name. The Education group will be talking about groups to educate ourselves about racism using podcasts or books or movies; about our own history in Scituate; about learning about ourselves. We're not separating the education of children from the education of youth and adults for this conversation because our learning is lifelong. But something to be aware of is that next year in our cycle of education for children and youth is the year we learn about world religions. How might that be part of all our learnings? Brian Sutton will be facilitating that group.

If you'd like to be part of the Care for our Community group, put a "3" and a dash in front of your name. That group will be talking about how we deepen the connections among us, whether through small groups, all church events or parties, in-person or on-line. They'll also be talking about how we welcome newcomers and how we reach out to invite others into our community. Carey Borkoski will be facilitating that conversation.

And if you'd like to be part of the Care for the Larger World conversation, put a "4" and a dash in front of your name. That's the group for protests and vigils, for the UU Urban Ministry, for our care of the environment, for the Food Pantry and for work around issues of poverty and justice. Jean Shildneck will facilitate that conversation.

Our goal is for you to come out of these conversations with one or two things that you want to keep working on to have happen in the coming year.

So again, "1" for worship; "2" for education; "3" for care within; "4" for care without.

At the end of our hymn, Michael will put us into the groups. If you'd like to switch groups mid-way, you'll need to leave the group you're in and come back to the main room where Michael can put you into a second one. After our discussions, we'll come back together for the end of the service and then at coffee hour we can share what we talked about. For those of you who are watching this service at another

time, the recording will end after this hymn. We wish you peace in the coming week and invite you to work with us on releasing all our gifts for the joy of the world.

- Pamela M. Barz