

Service by Rev David Hutchinson September 16, 2007

Opening Words

Messenger
Mary Oliver from *"Thirst"*
(adapted)

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird -
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.

Are my boots old and my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.

Which is mostly rejoicing,
since all the ingredients are here,
which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

Quotations:

Keep knocking, and the joy inside will eventually open a window and look out to see who's there.

- Rumi

Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world. We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to love in joy.

- Joseph Campbell

Children's story by D. Hutchinson inspired by the Bela Fleck album, "Flight of the Cosmic Hippo."

Props: Album art and box of malted milk duds.

The Flight of the Cosmic Hippo

There was once a large cosmic hippo that could propel himself through space just by humming a happy song to himself. He was reddish pink, almost the same color as the inside of a watermelon in the middle of summer. His name was Bob. Bob lived on a planet that was full of hippos just like himself, but one thing that was different about Bob, besides his cool sunglasses, was his sense of adventure. Hence, his decision to go to flight school and become a cosmic flying hippo. Once he got his license Bob went on many adventures back and forth across the galaxy.

Something you need to know about Bob is that one of his favorite things to eat are chocolate covered malted milk balls. (Do you know what I'm talking about?!)

In fact I have a little box of some right here in case anyone would like to try one?

In his tour guide of the universe it mentioned that a small blue planet next to Venus and Mars had some of the best chocolate covered malted milk balls anywhere in the galaxy. So Bob took off and started humming his way across space. Now Bob isn't real fast, but eventually he hummed his way along until he saw a little blue planet and it had a big sign sticking out of it that said F A N. Bob was curious what the sign meant, so he looked it up in his information guide and it said, FAN - F is for fun, A for and, and N for not.

Fun and Not.

On this planet you had to figure out the difference between what was fun and what was not. Now maybe you can help me out with this, since you do live on this little blue planet, let's name some fun things and some not so fun things. Here we go.

How about some fun things:

How about some not so fun things:

Up and down.

Hot and cold.

Happy and sad.

Fun and not.

These are all things that we make choices about.

Not too much of one, not too much of the other.

And you can do that right now no matter how old you are - and it never stops. Make good choices. Remember the sign FAN.

So with that Bob went to the corner store, bought a carton of malted milk balls, smiled a big hippo smile, leaped into the air and started humming one of his favorite songs as he floated back into space and headed to his next great cosmic adventure.

And that is just one of the many flights of the cosmic hippo...

The end. (For now)

Hippo Eats Scott Alexander: What is the Meaning of Life?

I know this is a rather strange title, so let me explain:

For those of you who may not recognize the name, Rev. Scott Alexander is the former minister at the Houlton Unitarian Church back in the 1970s. Houlton was Scott's first placement out of Starr King Seminary and he also doubled as the chaplain at Ricker College which was adjacent to the church property. Scott fit in nicely with his seventies-look long hair and beard so that it was probably hard to tell who was the student and who was the chaplain?! One of Scott's claim to fame when he was in Houlton was his blessing of our local McDonald's restaurant at their groundbreaking ceremony. Colleagues to this day still take pleasure in reminding Scott of this liturgical incident on his resume!!

Today Scott is the senior minister at the River Road UU Church in Bethesda, Maryland. He has written several books, bicycled across the United States and is an exercise and coffee enthusiast. These days Scott features a shaved head and no facial hair whatsoever. Scott and I were also room mates at this years GA convention in Portland, Oregon. We went out for breakfast one morning at a close by pancake house, and this is where the hippos come in...

As you may surmise, ministers are always on the lookout for good material, so in-between mouthfuls of breakfast Scott and I were talking about successful sermon ideas. Most ministers keep two files for their sermons; one file for "Do not try this one again" and a second file marked "re-runs." Scott mentioned a sermon he had delivered a couple of years ago titled, "Don't Let the Hippos Get You" based on an old Egyptian myth that he had seen another colleague use in a sermon. See how this thing starts to work?! Scott said it was on-line in his sermon archive at the church website and suggested I check it out. So earlier this summer when I got back to Houlton I decided to google "Hippo Eats Scott Alexander" and see what came up. I figured this would be a quick and easy way to track down the material. Well, sure enough, Scott's sermon archive came up # 4 in the search and I was well on my way in writing this sermon. In case you're wondering what came in in the top spots of the google search, they are as follow:

- #1 Hippo Eats Dwarf: A Field Guide to Hoaxes and other B.S. By Alexander Boese.
- #2 Is a travel dairy of British writer Alexander McCall Smith who writes a best-selling Lady Detective Agency book series. This particular entry is from his African Safari in Botswana, summer 2007. Apparently his tent, the best in the camp, overlooks a herd of hippos sunning themselves on the far side of the river. The term tent is used rather loosely since the accommodations include a king-size bed and an outdoor brass tub overlooking the hippos. I'm not exactly sure what was eating what in this entry. You can google it and find out for yourself if you like.
- #3 is the newspaper Baltimore Out Loud; Independent Voice for the LGBT Community. Alexander St John writes a column for the paper and his most recent article is about the 35th anniversary of the Hippo, a gay dance club in Baltimore.

Just for fun I googled "Hippo Eats Scott Alexander" again two weeks ago and to my surprise it came up #1 this time around. Hmm, that's odd... So I clicked on it and it appears that Scott Alexander re-delivered his hippo sermon as a summer re-run after our little conversation at the pancake house. (Well, it is a good sermon...)

Coming in at #2 this time was the UU Fellowship of Fredericton promoting today's service which you are currently in attendance. So I guess we should get started...

In the west, we have a wide assortment of jokes about what happens when you die and stand before St. Peter at the pearly gates. The Egyptians have their own take on this. According to an old Egyptian myth, when a person dies they are **"confronted by the god Osiris with a quiz that has to be answered honestly. (Don't try to cheat on Osiris!!) After forty-two routine questions concerning how the deceased has lived and conducted themselves, Osiris asks a crucial two-part question: First did you find joy? And second, did you bring joy. If they answer these questions affirmatively, they are returned a measure of continued existence, in say Cairo or Cleveland. If not, they are taken away and forthwith eaten by a hippopotamus." (End of existence) The purpose of our earthly journey according to Egyptian religion is simply this: Did you find joy and did you bring joy during your earthly sojourn."**

This is one of the best summations I've come across as to "What's this all about anyways?!" What constitutes a life well-lived?

American essayist E. B. White once said **"Every morning I rise with the twin desires to savor the world...and save it. This makes it hard for me to plan the day."**

One of the featured speakers in Portland at GA was Robert Fulghum who is a Unitarian minister and author of the best selling book, "All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

He talked about his days as a seminary student at Starr King in San Francisco. I might also add that Fulghum does not refrain from the occasional use of colorful language when he tells a good story...The Dean at Starr King was a man named Josiah Bartley who turned out to be a worthy adversary for any typically over-confident seminarian. Fulghum, as it turns out, made several visits to the dean's office during his seminary career. To pay his way through school Fulghum decided to take a job as a bartender at a local bar. When the school found out, he was called into Dean Bartley's office. When he walked in Dean said, "I hear you're working in a bar. This is wonderful news. Sit down." He went on to say, "We can give you a strong book education here at Starr King, but we can't teach you about life. To do that you have to be out there in the world. Remember this. Be involved in the world - try to make yourself useful." Not bad advice for a first year seminarian.

The next year, for the first time in his life, Fulghum was flat broke, needed help and didn't know what to do so again he decided to go see the Dean. He walked in, told his story and Dean said, "This is wonderful!! Sit down." "We never thought you'd ask for help. How do you ever expect to help someone if you don't know what it's like to be helped yourself?! We will help you because we think you're worth helping. Write us a budget and turn it in." So he comes back the next day with a reasonable budget and gives it to the secretary. She smiles at him and says to come back tomorrow and pick up the check. He comes

back and no check. Your budget is unacceptable to Starr King. Dean said to try again. A bit miffed, Fulghum goes home and redoes the budget, a stripped down, bare bottom version. He goes back the next day with the same result. Dean told me to tell you that Starr King still finds your budget unacceptable. Fulghum is quite angry at this point and storms into the dean's office. "What the hell is going on?"

Dean replies, "Wonderful!! Sit down." "Would you like to know why we find your budget unacceptable?"

"God damn right."

"There are two things that your budget doesn't have. There is nothing in it for joy. And there is nothing in it to give away. We don't help people around here who don't have better values than you do." In the budget of your life make sure there is something in it for joy and something in it to give away. Not a bad education as graduate school's go.

(You can find the entire, unedited version of this lecture on the UUA website, GA streaming video.)

A couple of weeks ago we had the pasture mowed by our house. We hire the same guy to do the job each year. Big Steve. We only see Steve once a year, when it's time to mow the field. This year it was a hot, sunny day and Steve had already been at it for a couple of hours. I was splitting wood at the time when I had this spontaneous idea come into my head, from I don't know where, but I instantly knew it was one of those "must do" ideas. I went into the house, cut a fresh piece of Linda's dark chocolate layer cake with fudge frosting, added a big scoop of Breyers vanilla ice cream alongside and headed out the back door. I waited until I saw Steve make his return approach and then stepped out of the woods into the field. The closer he got the bigger his smile got. Big Steve looked like he was ready for a coffee break! I talked to him later in the day and Steve said, "I'm going to remember the image of you stepping out of the woods into the open field with cake and ice cream for a very long time..."`

Life is a constant give and take.

A little of this and a little of that.

Give a little joy, find a little joy.

With a balanced life we find ourselves on both ends of the exchange. But it takes a constant monitoring and effort, cultivating an awareness that evaluates value in life based on these terms; joy of life, joy in life, regardless of circumstance, a stability that carries over from day to day until a lifetime is lived.

Poet Anne Sexton talks about the acquired ability to find joy in the most mundane of daily activities:

Welcome Morning

There is joy in all:
In the hair I brush each morning,
In the chapel of eggs I cook each morning,
In the outcry from the kettle that heats my coffee each morning,
In the spoon and the chair that cry "hello there Anne" each morning,
In the godhead of the table that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.
All this is god,
Right here in my pea-green house
Each morning
And I mean, though often forget,
To give thanks,
To faint down by the kitchen table
In a prayer of rejoicing
As the holy birds at the kitchen window
Peck into their marriage of seeds
So while I think of it,
Let me paint a thank-you on my palm
For this God, this laughter of the morning,
Lest it go unspoken
The joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
Dies young.

Share joy this morning.
Be joy.
Live joy each moment.
Don't let the hippos eat you alive just yet...

Like a cosmic hippo humming his way across the galaxy,
Like a young minister blessing a McDonalds,
Like someone being surprised by a free dessert,
May each of us find ways to surprise life
And may life surprise us
An endless exchange
Time without end.

Blessed are we all on this day.
AMEN.

Closing Words:

And now peace abide on each of us today
And may joy be an expression of all we do.
Live well. Don't miss a moment.