

In Need of Jubilee

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The story of Melena's Jubilee is almost opposite to one called "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day". In it, Alexander has a start-to-finish day that doesn't go as he hoped. He wakes up with gum in his hair, doesn't have a toy in his breakfast cereal when his brother does, doesn't get a window seat and feels carsick in his carpool, his teacher is cross with him, he fights with his friends and his brother, has a cavity at the dentist, and has to eat lima beans for dinner, among other things. His day is so terrible that he wants to move to Australia. But his mother assures him that there are days like this, even in Australia.

We adults might not get as upset about a lack of toys in our breakfast cereal or lima beans for dinner, but we do know the feelings of frustration, upset, conflict, disappointment, worry, and wanting a way out. And perhaps our perspective isn't much better at all, just different triggers: we received an upsetting email, someone cut us off in line, we tried to return something to a store and found out we're one day too late, we stub our toe, our work colleague annoys us, etc. In the midst of everyday life, and especially in times of turmoil and transition, there'll be days like this. Right now in this congregation we're facing some larger than usual challenges, including some change in board leadership, my imminent departure from the congregation, and differences in thought on how best to respond to the proposed 8th principle and covid policies. In the midst of everything going on, it's important to remember there'll be days like this. Even in Australia. Even among good, caring, and competent people with good intentions, there will be days like this.

Having witnessed and heard about conflicts in other congregations, I have largely experienced UUCD to be one of the most easy going and least conflictual congregations. I've often joked in collegial circles that a hard day at UUCD is about a 3/10 on a stress scale. Compared to many congregations, we still are.

In the midst of current challenges and transitions, I have utmost confidence that the congregation, leadership, and current UUCD board is up to the task of charting. Lucy, Birgitta, Camron, Jen, and Drummond are all thoughtful, capable people of skill and integrity. UUCD is in good hands.

But there are still and will always be days like this. They can feel like terrible, horrible, no good very bad days. They can feel overwhelming, disheartening, exhausting. And

people can burnout in exhaustion or frustration, especially those most involved in the work and leadership of the congregation and those most directly affected by decisions.

We heard about Melena's Jubilee day. It sounded like her day before Jubilee was decidedly less harmonious. Perhaps it felt more like Alexander's terrible one.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jubilee refers to a year of emancipation and restoration every 50 years, enshrined in law, with the emancipation of all enslaved Hebrews, restoration of alienated lands to their former owners, forgiveness of all debts, and refraining from all cultivation of the land. A year of rest, renewal and restoration. A year without work, focusing instead on relationship, blessings, and forgiveness. Can you imagine what the difference in our history of relationship with Indigenous and Black people if we practiced Jubilee? Of course it would be highly preferable to avoid all slavery and oppression in the first place, it would still make for a radically different relationship. A year of jubilee is an explicit acknowledgement of imbalance and injustice, as well as the need for change and rest. While 50 years would be a long time to wait for emancipation, it must also have been joyous when it came round.

Melena's meaning of new beginnings, an intentional approach to relationship, and a joyful song is a lovely expression and interpretation of Jubilee. In modern times, Jubilee can also refer to a special anniversary, or to a season of celebration and joy; or an African American religious song referring to a time of future happiness.

After a year and a half of a global pandemic and gigantic shifts in our life rhythms and ways we connect with one another, let alone any other challenges of ongoing life along the way, we could all use a little bit of jubilee about now. A little bit of grace. A little bit of rest. A little bit of joy. A little bit of hope.

We are in the process of voting on the proposed 8th principle, and the Canadian Unitarian Council vote is next Saturday. The 8th principle discussions have been intense for many people with diverse perspective on racism, the work of anti-racism, and the principle itself. Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that people of good will and good values and good intent will come to the same conclusions about ethics as we do and agree on a process of the best way forward. We know better; throughout our lifetimes, throughout history, there has rarely been agreement about important ethical issues. We all have agreement that racism is not good, but how to go about addressing racism is more complex. We need not think alike to love alike, Unitarian preacher

Francis David said in the 1500s; but it sure makes it simpler and more comfortable when we do.

It is always easier to navigate challenges when we are rested, content, and relaxed – when our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wells are full. After the last 20 months, for many of us, our wells are depleted and our stress is high. We haven't had the same opportunities to share a meal, offer our hospitality in person, play euchre and sing together – things that help set a foundation of connection. Our capacity to have perspective, to forgive, to relax in the midst of conflict and find ways forward is compromised when our nervous systems are on guard and our bodies and minds are tense. There are numerous studies on the role of our nervous systems in response to change and conflict, as well as how our nervous systems are impacted and activated in conflict, and how they can be calmed.

In this context, I would absolutely expect congregational conversations about change and important decisions to be more intense. It is not surprising that things are harder right now. In fact, we might have done well to plan for it – it's kind of like asking children to do a task, like tidying their room, at the moment they are most tired and hungry. We all know that would not be the best plan! When we're not at our best in our own minds, hearts, and bodies, we simply aren't at our best with one another.

I don't often give advice, or try not to, but I'm going to today. And that is to put any tension, concern, conflict or anxiety happening in your lives and in this congregation in a broader context, and give yourselves and one another a little bit of extra grace. Cultivate your own wellbeing with whatever things bring you peace and connection and joy. Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others, and before entering any contentious conversations or decisions.

The stories we make in our minds about what's happening, the framing of events we share with others, are more than just stories – they shape how we feel, think, and experience not just the past and present but also the future. There's a whole mode of psychotherapy, called narrative therapy, that focuses on reinterpreting stories and understandings of oneself from self-limiting or problematic stories to ones that affirm and empower and offer new perspectives. It's amazing how many different stories can be made about the exact same events, with radically different implications.

Just as a wise parent would assure Alexander that his challenges with his teacher, with his breakfast cereal, and the dentist will not last forever, so can we say that this moment, too, shall pass. Let's not miss the many good things happening now and ever-present possibilities for the future by focusing only on the hardest aspects of the present. Allow ourselves our doom and gloom moments, absolutely – it's not helpful to push them away, either, but then return to cultivating hope, commitment, connection, and joy.

In the midst of challenges, hardships, and heartache, do something to reconnect and restore and reenergize. Even something tiny. Get up and walk around the room. Stretch. Dance. Watch a Monty Python sketch. Meditate or do yoga. Go for a walk – maybe a barefoot one. Listen to a favourite song or hymn, perhaps on repeat. Pick up the phone and call a friend, family member, or someone in the congregation who you care about. Post a picture or quote or meme in the UUCD pebbles group. Send a snail mail card of thanks or appreciation. Open the doorways to connection with one another, and with the Spirit of Life or God of your understanding, and allow for the possibility of good things ahead. For in the midst of our hurting world, and tender times in our community, it is still an incredibly beautiful world.

There will be days like this.

Terrible days and beautiful ones.

Despairing days and hopeful ones.

Conflictual days and reconciling ones.

Joyful days and sorrowful ones.

And everything in between.

For all of our days, may we cultivate peace, joy, connection, and jubilee.

Blessed be.

Amen