

# Wholehearted Living

SERMON UUFO 12/2/18

[Prefaced by The congregation singing the Advent Carol for the first Sunday in Advent: “O Come O Come Emmanuel” #225]

Good morning! Here we are Together, fully **immersed in an early winter and embarking on** the darkest season of the year, ... together! How rich and good!

I want to explore with you today some thoughts about loving ourselves and our fellow human beings, being full of light, embracing the times of darkness, and living wholeheartedly — plus tips for how to do just that! As part of those tips I plan to specify two different opportunities to reflect, maybe record, your thoughts as you respond to this service, to these words and ideas I share.

Let’s start our look at “wholehearted living” with a reading that comes from the Unitarian Universalist writer Edward Searl’s meditation titled “the flame and the mystery“. (I quoted this excerpt in my own book, *The Heron Spirals* )

*There is a mystery that animates every living thing,  
A mystery that sustains what we call life....*

*Some call this mystery, the source of life, the Ground of Being,  
the creative force, the spirit of life, or God.*

*Some do not know what to call this mystery  
and leave it nameless....*

And now let's go back to our opening hymn:

[I sing quietly] *“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel...”*

[speak] The name “Emmanuel” comes from the Hebrew, meaning, “God with us” — and if you need a broader word for God, try one of Searl’s, such as “The Ground of Being.” This very old Carol’s origins are found in a Benedictine Gregorian chant from the late 8th and 9th century, and it reveals us not only praying that Emmanuel (who or which is the ground of all being), will **be** with us, but also that Emmanuel **can** dwell with us.

A Victorian Anglican priest translated the original Latin to create the more widely known version of the hymn we’ve just sung, but I savour the way this UU hymnal’s compilers have broadened the text, so that The qualities of Emmanuel (love, truth, light and hope) dwell **within** us. For me, in a vast far-bigger-than-individual-or-personal Way, this Emmanuel holds us. This Unitarian version of the Carol invites us to take responsibility to manifest those qualities... while we simply, without ego, make our small quotidian contributions.

[Ising quietly again] *“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Love to dwell!”*

[speak Directly to the congregation and invite them to]

Could you all sing that much with me again, please?

[all sing] *“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Love to dwell!”*

and then again, Singing “as light to dwell”:

[all sing] *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Light, to dwell!*

Whether or not you are a Christian or a dis-believer in Jesus Christ, I think it's worth pausing over Christ's insistence that "you are the light", the "light of the world" (in Matthew chapter 5 and other places in the Bible)... let us consider that We are the Light...

I believe that when we gather together in purposeful community to support one another in our multi-faceted search for truth, as we are doing today, when we gather as caring members of the interconnected web of life, when we share our joys and sorrows, and sing and rejoice together — then we *\*are\** facets of the Great Light! ...We can live wholeheartedly in all these ways and many more...

In my own life, in which I have experienced significant personal losses on the micro scale, and on the bigger, macro scale have been frustrated as I have confronted and tried to improve huge, often tragic social inequities, I have found that observing my losses and frustrations in communities that sing, dance and celebrate our human being-ness, has meant that I am enlarged and enriched, my burdens of grief or struggle have been almost literally lightened....

This is my truth,

[sing quietly again] *“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Truth to dwell!”*

and yet,

in the interests of the value of vulnerability, I want to tell a brief story on myself NOT rejoicing. In the wee hours of Wednesday morning last week, I was wrestling with this very sermon — it felt as if I could not pull all the pieces together of what I wanted to say and do with you all, and that I was bound to sink into a

slough of not simply despair but Total “not good enough“-ness. I even thought for at least 10 minutes that I had lost a document with all the delicious quotes that I wanted to use today in it, and I tried to call Apple — but alas they wouldn’t open for another hour!

Finally I used some of the body energy process formally called emotional freedom technique, or EFT, and often referred to as “tapping,” which soothes that old devil the amygdala. I affirmed my ability to think and speak (to myself), said a prayer, calmed down, found the document and eventually went back to sleep.

It was also the day I regularly volunteer at Centre 510, for homeless Indigenous and Inuit people in Ottawa, and after helping with lunch and wiping tables, I found my both tender and tired self talking with Padlo, an Inuit man whom I knew was on parole and very low spirited. As I listened with an open heart, I learned he had not only been drinking heavily to numb his feelings of shame and worthlessness, but also had tried to kill himself not once but twice in the previous week.

Responding slowly, seeking inwardly for guidance, I asked him who he most wanted to see or be able to talk to. It turned out his 86-year-old grandmother is dying, too far north in Pond inlet. Reflecting his words back to him I recorded what he would like to tell her and gently probed whether he might find a phone number to contact her, even if he couldn’t afford to fly all that way. Gradually I assured him he has always done the best he could, said I would believe in him even if he couldn’t have faith in himself, and asked if I could tell the centre staff about his

needs. He agreed in his sad faced way, & the staff said they would work with him.

I myself had to leave (blessedly, to go see my therapist, which I told him honestly!). I deeply hope Padlo has found further support in the intervening days, —dear God, dear ground of my being, BE WITH him!

What a shift of perspective the whole incident has meant for me!

In order to give this precious human my whole hearted attention, I had to put aside my own struggle and deeply feel his pain, the pain of our broken colonial system and our slow Canadian government, and my sorrow, yea RAGE, at the traumas Padlo (and uncountable others...) have been living with. I had a weep at the therapist's Office, wound my way home feeling lighter, and the next day was able to wrangle the pieces of this sermon into place!

The next piece is about an inspiring Jesuit priest named Father Gregory Boyle. For the last six months or so I have been soaking up his heart-stirring stories, wisdom, pithy quotes, bible references and and humble, persistent faith. I have listened again and again to audio versions of his two books, partly because my eyesight until my recent surgery was too limiting to read (It's getting better now!). But I have also re-listened to these books because they're so compelling!

Father Gregory — or “G” as his literally hundreds of parishioners and clients in the barrios, prisons and youth detention camps of Los Angeles affectionately call him — has worked for over 30 years with the folks he salutes as “the

marginalized.” They are the abandoned, the orphans and the widows, the hungry and the homeless, the deeply wounded survivors of violence and poverty, the mentally ill, former addicts and gang members.

Father G reminds us that Jesus charged his followers to stand with the marginalized, and he gives dozens of speeches each year to fund raise for the projects he and his team oversee, telling heartbreaking — yet funny, loving and deeply moving — stories about how he and his coworkers stand with so many of America’s profoundly underprivileged and unseen humans. I wholeheartedly recommend his two Books, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, and *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*.

Father G also strongly believes our challenge is “to witness our lives with playfulness, flexibility, and an open heart.” This, from a priest who has buried over 250 of his clients in his more than 30 years of service! Despite the unending horror of that world, he still declares, “I believe that God protects me from nothing, but sustains me through everything...tenderly holding us through it all.”

Here I think I need to make some further disclosure and tell you that, although I was raised in a Christian Quaker context, I consider myself now a Universalist Quaker, open to the world’s religions, sometimes calling myself a “Quakertarian,” and I often dislike the way Christians use “God language.”

Nonetheless, I find Father G so absorbing that I am quite comfortable with the way he speaks of God, although sometimes

it helps to translate, to “listen in tongues.” I am delighted to hear him declare that “... God simply delights in us”....AND that “God was and is in the heartbreak, and in the insight born of sadness and in the arms that wrap around our grief...” Father G encourages us to enjoy “...our lives, [as] fully expressive of God’s pleasure, delight and loving kindness.” And he goes on to declare that “God is too busy loving me to have a plan for me...” Indeed he claims, “I don’t need God to be in charge of my life I only need God to be at the centre of it”. Here I wonder how you receive these affirmations? What if you substitute the phrase “the ground of All Being” for the word God?... try it: *I only need the ground of all being to be at the centre of my life...*  
[PAUSE]

Able to weep at the fates and foibles of many of his beloved people, Father G repeatedly regains his perspective as he explains:

“God is too busy loving you to have any time left over to be disappointed.” In fact he wisely comments that “when we are disappointed in each other we least resemble God.”

“...Disappointment is not the foot God puts forward, there is instead only a redoubling of God’s loving us into kinship with each other.”

Yes, Father G uses Christian, God language, but there is nothing of judgement, punishment, shame or blame (aspects of what is often referred to as the Old Testament God) in his approach.

And this Jesuit also delights in the Persian Muslim poet from the 1300s, Hafiz, who writes:

“Ever since happiness heard your name it’s been running down the street trying to find you”

Not only does this big hearted priest want us to be playful and flexible in our lives but he goes on to suggest dancing will underscore our ability to live wholeheartedly— we’ll get to that shortly!!

The catch to being open or whole hearted (as I felt anew with Padlo) is that we may also - in the very process- become brokenhearted. To be aware of and to work to heal the world’s deep wounds, means we cannot avoid feeling it’s agony. Engaging with those “... captive children, it’s exiles, and the broken souls” which the advent carol we just sang so eloquently enumerates, whether they’re In our own family or in the news, whether they are at the personal or political, the micro or macro level...Engaging with them will unavoidably also bring us grief, fear, fury and/or despair, will also open us to pain.

But I believe that

In order to live wholeheartedly we must honour the challenges and mistakes or regrets, even the broken hearted moments, of our lives.

If we had the time and the materials right now for each of you to write down the story of what has most recently broken your heart, perhaps something akin to my story of Padlo, I would love to have you do that now, but I’m only going to encourage you to pause in silence briefly — perhaps you can promise yourself how you might later find a journal or diary to honour that challenge, or write a short



note to yourself on one of those little paper hearts that you found on your chair when you sat down this morning ....  
Now let us “enter the generosity of silence” ...

*[30 secs silence]*

And now I want to move on to another very wise contemporary leader and speaker, Brené Brown. I have found that Father G’s concepts are remarkably parallel to the dozens of books and TED talks by this very popular and prolific social sciences researcher and storyteller, who declares to huge secular audiences that “Our capacity for wholeheartedness can never be greater than our willingness to be brokenhearted.” Those are the words I have had pasted on the inside of my mugs & tea cupboard in my kitchen for the last few years — in fact, they were a springboard to my saying “yes, I’d like to attempt this sermon today.”

Just this past week I discovered a new-to-me talk that Brené Brown gave recently, now published as the book titled *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice*, and I was thrilled to find that she defines spirituality “...as recognizing and celebrating that we are inextricably connected to one another by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and belonging.”

To me her words echo the quotation I shared initially from Edward Searl, and take us back to “the Ground of all Being.” She wonderfully continues by saying, “The thing that is greater than us, some people call it God; my father calls it Fishing...” Not only do Brené Brown’s words thrill me with what I feel is their inclusive truth, but I am tremendously excited by her

conclusion that “Spirituality has emerged consistently throughout my research as an irreducible element of wholeheartedness....” and so I congratulate all of us for being here together on the spiritual journey.

In the last chapter of an earlier book *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown confirms that “It’s hard to keep the front soft,” (which I would say means continuing to be open hearted) “...It’s hard to keep the front soft when there’s so much hurt....vulnerability is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage, everything that brings meaning to our life. An armoured front sounds good when we’re hurting, but causes so much more pain in the end.... The armour [prevents] us from growing into our gifts, and ourself....”

“Stay open,” says Brené Brown, “rather than attack and defend. This means getting comfortable with vulnerability...” which contains “...uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness, it’s our most accurate measure of courage...” and she queries, “Are we willing to show up and be seen when we can’t control the outcome?”

I see that this week I was willing to show up for Padlo, tho I don’t know what the outcome will be....

[PAUSE]

Big hearted Father G declares (and I’m with him!) that “there is no evil, only mental illness.” Bold University researcher Brené Brown would say that evil boils down to fear and shame and their consequences....

[PAUSE]

Apparently, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a sign on his desk that proclaimed: “let unconquerable gladness dwell” — I learned of this from those very books by Father G that have been making me so glad, despite the tragedies he speaks of! And perhaps you can tuck some of those little paper hearts on your chairs into a pocket or wallet, or use one as a bookmark to remind you of your own gladness in the coming weeks....

I’ve been so glad to be able to be here sharing these thoughts about wholehearted (sometimes agonized) living with you all, even in the face of our daily personal challenges and negotiations, in the face of the re-ordering of our social order that I/we all long for. Being “grounded in love and belonging” means that we can and will include our indigenous brothers and sisters, people of colour, those of diverse gender and sexual identities... we can come to see difference as richness, not as “the other“...

[sing quietly again] *“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come within as Hope to dwell!”*

“Hope is a function of struggle” declares a Brene Brown poster, [PAUSE]

and

In his second book, Father G recites this wonderful poem by Hafiz, with which I want to close:

Every child has known God,  
Not the God of names,  
Not the God of don'ts,

Not the God who ever does  
Anything weird,  
But the God who knows only four words  
And keeps repeating them, saying:  
"Come Dance with Me."  
Come Dance.

-- Hafiz (1320-1389)

Let us settle once again into brief silence to reflect on all this  
wisdom; out of the silence I will rise and invite Joe to play for us  
while we sing hymn # 311 "let it be a dance"

[closing reading/words, my own poem -next page]

### Great Blue Heron

Tall solemn bird  
wades in the water,  
wary and wise; slow to startle  
or to rise . . .  
Now great wings open wide,  
pushing off, pulsing high--  
long legs lifting, head leading  
above the calm lake surface.  
Then -- sudden, surprising! --  
rising to greet the real heron I see  
the clear reflection of itself:  
shimmering wings respond to wings widespread;

watery body below grey, feathered breast  
in moving, mirrored, harmony.  
Oh Great Spirit, so buoy me  
that I, too, will spread my wings and try  
to fly this fearlessly,  
knowing that my silent cries  
and surge of soul -- like heron rise --  
shall answered be.

Mud Lake, Ottawa