

The Key to This Kingdom

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The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 25 October 2009

Recently, I heard a story of a church that has decided to focus only on the positive. The rules are very clear. Only those things that attract positive energy will be given attention. All negative language has been banished, from the sanctuary to the meeting rooms to the church's kitchen. Newcomers are told, "If you want to be critical, don't come here." It's a program that literally draws its principles from corporate business practices: Positive marketing will bring in positive people who will create the best church in the world. A positive, happy attitude is the key to this kingdom, they say. Sounds perfect. Well, maybe...

Barbara Ehrenreich writes in her new book *Bright Sided*, that when she was diagnosed with cancer, all she heard were positive affirmations. Think positively. Embrace your illness as a gift. Inundated with positive advice, she began to wonder why it was not okay to be negative. The more she thought about it, the more she came to believe that something was seriously wrong with modern culture.

Take a look at the overriding corporate culture of the recent past, particularly in the US, where Ehrenreich writes (she was, however, born in British Columbia). If you didn't buy into the upbeat hype, you would surely be out of a job. Whistle blowing was discouraged, and thoughtful critics were dismissed: "Oh, so you think there's something fishy about these financial schemes? Well, then you're not a team player. You don't belong here." A whole system was built on promoting a positive spin, which did generate a lot of consumer spending, and a lot of wealth out of thin air, and then boom! Hello reality. Hello world financial crisis.

Ehrenreich's quest for answers led her to dig into history. American history, that is, and we could say this is a purely American phenomenon. Which may be true, but then where did the Earl Joneses of Canada come from? How is it that so many people were gullible enough to ride that wave of "everything is so good and you can get rich too"? Was it a disease that permeated the borders and shipped itself overseas, or was the world ripe to buy into the promise of eternal happiness? I've got my theories. I'm sure you have yours.

Where did Ehrenreich find the source of American optimism? She says it began when radical religious thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson came to reject the bleakness of Calvinism in the nineteenth century. Perhaps you know Ralph Waldo Emerson? Trained as a Unitarian minister, he left his post at a church in Boston in 1832 to become the most influential voice of the Transcendentalists. It was a movement that revitalized our Unitarian movement, and still resonates with many of us today. Listen to these words from Emerson:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.

That's us, folks: the great optimists who spoke out on behalf of the goodness of humanity; who saw love and faith as one; who believed that we could each grow beautiful souls if we had the right elements of sunlight, pure flowing water and good earth. Emerson and others broke the mold that saw humanity as deeply depraved. They opened the door to a positive faith. But from my perspective, Emerson was also a realist. He had a reverence for life, and an obsession with death. He had lived through great sorrow, having lost his first wife and his first son. His optimism always stood in that context.

Ehrenreich says the real problem came later when "positive thinking" became harnessed by the consumer capitalism of the twentieth century. "Buy, buy, buy" was the message. "You deserve it. Consume and you will be happy. You'll feel better about yourself."

Americans are greater optimists than Canadians, I am told. Yet Americans rank lower on happiness scales. A study released this past summer ranked Canada as the 9th happiest nation in the world, while the US was 16th. (Denmark is first, in case you are considering where to move in the world to find ultimate bliss.) But, as response to the poll came in, not all Canadians would agree that life is so good. One respondent to CTV writes:

Three cheers for Canadians, on the heels of our country's birthday!

HOWEVER...

I'm beginning to think that most people these days are actually miserable, though they put on a good face to colleagues, friends, relatives, and neighbours...because they want the "competition" to believe that they've got the world by the tail.

Jealousy seems to pervade much of peoples' attitudes. We're all trying to keep up with those we see as "winners." Unfortunately, the "winners" are also miserable, because they're killing themselves to keep up with those who are more successful. It's an unhappy circle.

Rudeness, unfriendliness, road rage...it's all symptomatic of this condition. It's a quiet, inner stress...

Well, there's always something to complain about. Besides, as Ehrenreich warns, all happiness tests are suspect. So, if you're planning to move to Denmark, be forewarned.

It may surprise you when I say that happiness is not something that has come naturally to me. About five years ago I injured both my shoulders. For the first six months, I lived with excruciating pain that made even the simplest tasks an ordeal. I couldn't put on my own coat or reach the plates in the kitchen cabinet. The experience was very physical, yet there was a strong mind-body connection to its severity. The injury had happened during a time

of tremendous grief and loss. It seemed to open a space for the grief to seep in. Sadness became frozen in my shoulders.

It took me a total of two years to recover. Perhaps that's how long it took me to grieve or to heal the torn ligaments. I don't know. What I experienced could never compare with the pain and illnesses of so many others I have known. It could never compare to the illnesses and chronic pain I know some of you face so bravely each day. But living through my own pain made me more deeply empathetic to the pain of others than I had ever been before. I knew what it meant to lose control of the smallest things.

When I arrived in Montreal, I had just begun to regain my range of motion. That's when I discovered yoga. Yoga has become my spiritual discipline. It keeps me sane and healthy. I've learned to breathe and I've learned to stretch. I tell my teachers that they have saved my life.

There is a bliss that can come with practicing yoga. You breathe deeply and you lose touch with all the work and worries of life. Sometimes I feel as though I have stepped out of all time. I feel as though I am in touch with the ground of being. Or as Charles put it two weeks ago when he spoke about Paul Tillich, it is what Tillich called Being itself. *"It is beyond existence. It is that which is truly holy."*

So I feel it. I am in touch with Being and then I am thrown back into the reality of life, into the tasks and the details, the annoyances and the disagreements. I am reminded just how human I am and how hard it is to find the key that unlocks the kingdom of the grounded self. It is then that I realize that life can't always be happiness. That I can't always operate in a state of bliss.

Which brings me to this final story I want to share. Consider the picture painted in the comic novel *Happiness™* by Albertan author Will Ferguson. This is the story of the publishing of the fictitious book *What I Learned on the Mountain*, the ultimate self-help book that just about destroys the United States (where the story takes place) and nearly destroys the world.

What I Learned on the Mountain promises to help people "lose weight, stop smoking, cure gambling addiction, alcoholism, drug dependency, achieve inner balance, release right-brain intuitive creative energy, find empowerment, improve their sex lives, be more confident, improve their posture and their spelling, and give their lives meaning and purpose." The mysterious reclusive author, Tupak Soiree (a made-up name), promises to bring the world happiness – and he delivers.

Everyone who reads Tupak Soiree's 1,650-page self-help book is mysteriously struck with utter contentment. People stop smoking, drinking and eating fast food. Women stop wearing make-up, people stop caring about what they wear. Whole industries shut down. Even amusement parks are closed. People abandon their families and their jobs in droves, leaving behind signs that say "Gone fishin'." Happiness, now exclusively trademarked as a Tupak Soiree brand, seeps into the American national psyche, like a virus that spreads from

the most educated centres of the cities outward and on to the rest of the world, moving as quickly as Soiree's book can be translated. Everyone is content, so content that Western civilization comes perilously close to the brink of self-destruction.

Everyone is happy, everyone except Edwin Vincent de Valu, the poor hapless editor who had brought the book to market. He realizes that he must save the world from the evils of Tupak Soiree. He writes a letter to his true love May Weatherhill whom he has lost to the happiness epidemic (May has happily given up on the turmoils of romance):

I know now what is wrong. This isn't about smoking too many cigarettes or using too much makeup or eating too much junk food. It goes deeper than that. The central flaw in the entire Tupak Soiree philosophy is this: he doesn't understand the true nature of joy.

Joy is not a state of being... It's an activity. Joy is a verb; it's not a noun. It doesn't exist independently of our actions. Joy is supposed to be fleeting and transitory, because it was never meant to be permanent... 'The sadness of all things.' The sadness that informs everything, even joy itself. Without that, joy cannot exist.

Joy is what we do. Joy is a naked dance in the rain. Joy is pagan and absurd and tinged with lust and sadness. Bliss is not. Bliss is where we go when we die.

Perhaps joy is the key to this kingdom. We have to know the sad and the joyful together. I'm not interested in creating a space where only the positive is welcome. I want to be part of a real, living breathing community where we can vent when we need to vent, grieve when we need to grieve, and where we can live through the hard transitions together. How else can we learn but in the fleeting moments of joy that bring us back to the ground of being.