

More Flash Mobs, Less Fear January 9, 2011

I don't know if, like Kabir, I am a *slave* of the intensity of the longing for the Guest, but I do feel that maybe, with this new year's arrival, I have, in Kabir's words, jumped into experience while I'm alive. Or at least I have started this year on the right foot. I'm not sure why. It could be due to any number of factors, from my spending the *last days 2010* on retreat at U Bar U, to getting my dog on a good arthritis medication, to all of us experiencing our first Sunday of *2011* with a service as awesome as we all witnessed last Sunday with the stories that were shared about birth, love, and death. Altogether, it seems to me there has been something good, something hopeful in the air, something worth walking toward. Maybe it didn't magically begin on January 1, 2011. But I've been feeling it. And whatever it is, I want to nurture it. If church life is about bringing the good news, I want to see what I can do to be a bringer--just bring in goodness, hope, justice, healing, compassion, and joy. And then do it again, all through this good year.

That's what I want to do. But of course, I know it's not often as easily done as it is said. Life trips us up, and sometimes, momentum gets lost. And sometimes, with such violent incidents as yesterday's shooting in Tucson, some of us we get hit so hard by life, by the fear being generated,

we start thinking it would be best to completely forgo stepping outside where so much of life awaits us. Can any of you relate to Linda Pastan's words we heard Mark read earlier? "Though I cannot leave this house,/ I have memorized the view/ from every window--23 landscapes, containing/ each nuance of weather and light." I've had such days. And such days can begin to get kind of cozy if we're not careful. "I know the measure/ of every room/ not as a prisoner/pacing a cell," says Pastan, "but as the embryo knows/ the walls of the womb, free/ to swim as its body tells it." But whether we're prisoners or embryos, the fact is, life, with all its scariness and all its beauty, will await us, and await us, and await us for as long as we hesitate to be a part of it.

Not that the hesitation is our doing alone. As yesterday's shooting, still rippling in our hearts and minds, reminds us, and as I shared with the children during Time for Ages, situations and people around us often influence us in ways that practically drive us into retreat. It happens on personal levels, family levels, community levels, and national and international levels. I think, for instance, about how the yellow and black signs indicating that my school was a fallout shelter were a familiar sight for me in my childhood, and some of you may remember exercises of jumping under your desks in case the A-bomb was on its way. Nearly ten years ago, if you can believe it's been that long, our nation's leaders were telling us to stock up with duct tape. The cold war and September 11, 2001, and

yesterday in Tucson, were real situations, real threats, real tragedies. We had, and still have, good reason to feel the muscles in our necks and shoulders tighten, good reason to curl into ourselves every time we hear the frightening news of the world.

But if, as our sixth principle states, one of our goals as Unitarian Universalists is world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all, can we achieve such a goal if our bodies, as well as our hearts and minds, have been so tightened by fear? If I am not even courageous--that is, open-hearted enough--to say hello to the men raking the leaves at my apartment complex, how can I expect to bring good news to the entire world? With whatever trials or tribulations I have experienced in my life, can I really go on avoiding Kabir's eye-opening words: "If you don't break your ropes while you're alive, do you think ghosts will do it after?"

So, I am left to ask myself, if fear is not the answer, what is? What could possibly lighten the burden I carry? Enter, again, *Glee*. Yes, by *Glee* I mean my unabashedly beloved television show about a bunch of geeky, extremely talented teenagers living their lives in small town Ohio. But I also mean *glee* in its original sense, and as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: "exultant, high-spirited joy." I mean opening up my heart, opening up my arms, getting on my feet, and dancing. Kind of like this:

1. Safety Dance Glee-- PLAY IN ITS ENTIRETY

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG4WOUB3wB4>

Do you see what I'm talking about? Do you feel like you have gotten a glimpse into exultant, high-spirited joy--in other words, a glimpse into glee? Of course, as some of you know, that was a scene from an episode of *Glee*, and while of course the dance is rehearsed and staged, the public setting, the increasing number of dancers, and the surprised look on the faces of passers by all speak to the spirit of a phenomenon known as flash mobs.

Now, true, a flash mob isn't always a musical moment where people break into song and dance, as you saw in that scene. In broadest terms, it's a sudden gathering of a critical mass of people in a public setting to perform some kind of act. On March 22, 2008, in 25 cities around the world, there was, for instance, a spontaneous massive pillow fight. That same year, there was a five-minute freeze of motion in New York's Grand Central Station, involving over 200 people. At least one couple recently got married via a flash mob of singing, dancing, carpet rolling, flower carrying friends and family--oh, and a minister.

Specific format in a flash mob--pillow throwing, dancing, freezing, marrying--doesn't seem to matter, so much as intention: to bring unexpected joy and wonderment to those going about their daily lives. Take

for instance, this scene just last November, in a food court at a shopping mall in Ontario. If you didn't like the music in the last one, perhaps this will be a little more to your liking:

2. Hallelujah choir--PLAY UP TO 1:45 minutes

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE>

This Messianic flash mob goes on a few minutes longer, and I encourage you to watch it in its entirety if you haven't already seen it. Just go to Youtube and type in *Handel's Messiah flash mob*.

Now, it could be that some of those folks we see at the beginning of that video, laying into their meals, were thinking, Hey, I just want to eat my burger in peace. But aside from throwing them off a bit from their routine, what other effects might such a surprising display of beauty, joy, and talent have on these people? I remember once, as a seminary student driving out to California for my internship, I stopped in Denver to see a friend, who was just wrapping up her internship. In shorts and a t-shirt, and travel-bedraggled, I was waiting for her in some quiet room at her church, when suddenly this most amazing singing came through the doorway. It was the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network, and they were working in the sanctuary. No, it wasn't a flash mob. But still, I

remember sitting on that floor, grubby and a little tired, just feeling so incredibly lucky to stumble upon such beautiful singing. These five and half years later, I still feel a sense of awe at the memory of that moment.

And it makes me wonder, why don't we make our lives more musical, more poetic, more gleeful? Why don't we surprise one another more often with such creativity and beauty and spontaneity? OK, it's not really a spontaneous act. It takes planning. It takes timing and organizing. But still, why don't we do such things? Wouldn't a flash mob of singers or dancers be just as great a gift to someone as a new toy or gadget or money or what have you? It's not like we have to have *perfect* voices or *perfect* dance moves to share such a gift. Take this next scene, for example. This took place in Denmark, on a city bus. The driver's name is Muktahr. The title of the video is Muktahrs Fodselsdag. Muktahr's birthday.

3. Happy birthday to a bus driver PLAY IN ITS ENTIRETY
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgOyTNtsWyY>

Now, do you think that Muktahr will ever forget that birthday? That's real. That's people planning and organizing and going the extra creative mile to express love and appreciation for this man. And we are such a people, such extra mile walkers. We plan, we organize, we give of our time, money, and energy. I have cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, half a water buffalo and three goats to prove it. I'd say a total of over 22,000 pounds of food being

sent to local food pantries in the past four years is pretty good proof, too-- plus, several buildings in New Orleans, Galveston, and even in Ecuador, that have had our help in being rebuilt. Not bad for a congregation of 179 members.

And. I'm thinking of what the nation's president said yesterday in response to the shootings in Tucson. He said, "What Americans do in times of tragedy is come together to support each other." Similarly, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Peter Morales, remarked of the shooting, "Our first response must be one of reaching out in love to the victims, their families and friends. This is a time for embracing one another and helping each other find strength and solace." Yes. I think back to the thousands of vigils held across the country the night after the attacks on 9/11. I think of the terrible shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, in the summer of 2008, and how their neighboring Presbyterian church quickly took the survivors under their wing. I think of so many of my colleagues last night, hustling to rewrite their sermons, in order to send a compassionate, caring voice to their own congregations and also to the people of Tucson, in response to the shootings. And I too, scrambled to alter the words I'm sharing with you this morning.

But I confess, I did not want to abandon this sermon entirely. I didn't want to, because I did not want to give up the possibility of exultant, high spirited joy in response to fear. I did not, and do not, want fear to win. For,

as Kabir says, “The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic/ just because the body is rotten/ that is all fantasy./ What is found now is found then.” Like Kabir, I believe that what we “call ‘salvation’ belongs to the time before death.” And I believe that part of our salvation, along with love and compassion, is the affirmation of joy. We say in our mission statement, after all, that, “we *joyfully* nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys.”

So when Paul Robeson says, “I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope or courage,” and when Agnes de Mille says, as is on the cover of your order of service, that “dance...is power. It is glory on earth and it is yours for the taking,” I want to take my voice and whatever crazy dance I have out into the world and share it.

Yes, as I said earlier, sometimes we have to get through a lot of fear to find that voice, to find the dance. Sometimes, we don’t even know the notes to sing, so we cannot sing anything. But, if we’re lucky, maybe while we’re walking along somewhere, say, at the Antwerp train station in Belgium, we might just stumble upon someone willing to teach us it is as simple as do, re, mi.

4. Do Re Mi Antwerp--PLAY IN ITS ENTIRETY

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EYAUazLI9k&feature=related>

So, beloved people. Having shared with you moments of glee such as I believe the world could use more of, here is one more prayer. May the hearts that are big enough to sing and dance also be big enough to send peace, prayers, and compassion to the people of Tucson. May the hearts that are big enough to send peace, prayers and compassion, be courageous enough make a joyful noise and dance a joyful dance. May we be a people who teach our children that to dance is power, that it is glory on earth and it is theirs for the taking. May we be a people who invite others beyond the path of their own sheltering homes onto the path of creation and inspiration. May we stop believing anger, violence, bigotry, and hatred are paths to power, and may we shine our light upon the world.

Amen. #118 This Little Light of Mine