

Woven Fine
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading – “All Souls” by May Sarton
(as adapted in the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook “Singing the Living Tradition”)

Did someone say that there would be an end,
An end Oh, an end to love and mourning?
What has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled, or the gift ungiven.
Now the dead move through all of us still glowing.
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
are wound and bound together and enflowing.
What has once been plaited cannot be unplaited –
only the strands grow richer with each loss
And memory makes kings and queens of us.
Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,
We who find shelter in the warmth within,
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new forgiven,
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend our complex love
our morning without end.

Sermon

The words to hymn number 17 in our hymnbook come from a poem by William Blake:

Every night and every morn
some to misery are born;
every morn and every night
some are born to sweet delight.

Joy and woe are woven fine,
clothing for the soul divine:
under every grief and pine
runs a joy with silken twine.

It is right it should be so:
we were made for joy and woe;
and when this we rightly know,
safely through the world we go.

But... really? Part of us wants to say, really?! Some to misery are born and some to delight – and that’s that? Just the way it is? And right that we are “made for joy and woe?”

Our rebellion is understandable.

But the realities of our lives are undeniable, and Blake names them. Whether it is “right it should be so” may be arguable, but whether it *is* so is not.

And though I’m not sure I would say that acknowledging this truth enables us “*safely* through the world” to go, this might just be a quibble with word choice. For surely we are able to live, are we not, with a measure more contentment if we *realize* rather than *rebel* against the reality of joy and woe woven fine.

After all, we do see this “joy and woe woven fine” all the time.

Think of graduations. Joyful occasions to be sure, celebrations of accomplishment and hope and possibility. Yet also sometimes tinged with at least a small measure if not more of poignant sadness as we say farewell to a phase of our or a loved one’s lives. I remember well the joyous celebration at my college commencement; and I remember too a sort of deflation verging on depression in the weeks that followed. The “what now?” question did not at that moment breed enthusiasm and joy.

When our own children graduated from high school – great joy, but also some sorrow on the horizon for us, as they began preparations to leave home and as we prepared for their leaving.

When they graduated from college I saw their happiness as well as a measure of sadness as they said good-bye to friends and to their mostly happy college years.

Then there are weddings.

How many tears are shed at weddings; and they are often, aren’t they, tears of joy and sorrow intertwined, woven fine. If you are a parent of one of the newlyweds, you feel their joy and you also may feel some sorrow at “losing” your child, in a manner of speaking, to this other person, and to this next phase of their lives.

Memorial services and funerals.

We often and rightly call them “celebrations of life” – but the grief cannot (and ought not) be avoided. As I say at the outset of most such services, we have gathered together to mourn a death as well as to celebrate a life.

Both. At the same time. Woven fine.

And indeed most services are inextricably and inevitably woven fine with joy and sorrow, strands you cannot – nor would you want to – untangle.

I can, for example, picture in my mind’s eye many a graveside service, often and naturally enough the saddest part of our rituals of farewell. The sadness is palpable, the tears many.

Yet there is often a joy, too, in the midst of the sadness of this ritual, there is the joy of being together as family and dear friends, and often as well the joy of a beautiful day in a beautiful place. We may not name that joy at that moment – it might feel unseemly; but it is often, maybe almost always, present, present with the love, present with the beauty of the day. All woven fine.

So, yes, joy and “woe” to use the poet’s word, woven fine at all these and so many other times of our lives. And we do ourselves a disservice if we deny either. For if we block out the sorrow, the sadness, the wide range of feelings that come with grief of any kind – whether in the wake of a dear one’s dying or any sort of loss or transition or change – if we block out the sorrow, we are blocking out the joy too.

Our hearts *can* hold both, but if we close our hearts to one, we are closing our hearts to the other... because we are closing our hearts.

Kahlil Gibran wrote, in words some of which I often quote or allude to:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes
filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can
contain...

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in
truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay,
sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

At our nephew's service a week ago, we most certainly had the experience named
by Gibran. Our many, many tears of sorrow absolutely were shed for that which had
been our delight, our joy – and... which was and is still our joy in memory and in
realization of all the happiness and kindness and example of perseverance and spirit that
this boy had bequeathed to us and to so many others in his brief sixteen years.

Do we want our loved ones back in the flesh? Of course! But can we? Of course
not. So we find ways – and we know how to do this, we human beings – of continuing to
weave their lives into our own lives, find ways to keep them in our hearts though no
longer by our sides – sorrow and joy intertwined always.

Further and beautifully, as a poem from an anonymous source puts it (in the voice
of the departed): remember me and honor me by loving others, passing the love around.

In this way, it seems to me, the sorrow becomes even more deeply entwined with
joy.

Some of this is hard to be sure: for part of us very much would like to refuse the
grief, be shielded from sorrow. (Not only that, but our relationships are often complex,
not all joyful and often quite a bit less than joyful in the living, which can make the dying
and the grieving much more difficult.) But just as Blake invited us to take the world as it
is in all its mysterious complexity, and just as Gibran invited us to see how joy and
sorrow cannot be unraveled one from the other, so we all sometimes – maybe often and
certainly understandably – *struggle* to come to terms with what *is* rather than what
wishful thinking would have it be.

Perhaps this thought from the Buddhist monk and teacher Matthieu Ricard can
help us a bit in this regard:

To begin with, Ricard uses the word happiness to describe something deeper than
pleasure or pain. He notes that over outward circumstances we don't always have much
control, at least not as much as we may think we want. Things happen around us, from
minor irritations to major and tragic losses, from daily pleasures of weather or a good
meal to major wonderful events of one sort or another. Joy and woe woven fine around
us, much of which out of our control.

But Ricard affirms, and he is hardly the only one to say it or something like it,
that what we do have much more control over is what we can call our inward
circumstances or conditions. This would include through reflection or meditation

learning to accept (because we see it is so) that joy and woe *are* woven fine, thereby learning more “safely” or contentedly through the world to go: maybe more compassionate too, more filled with kindness. Why? Because we would know more deeply that we really are all of us together in this woven fabric of joy and sorrow... and, in the language of Buddhism, impermanence – realizations that bring a deeper, more enduring thread of joy (Ricard’s happiness) and maybe a gentler and ultimately more affirmative way of living our lives, including living with one another.

In the reading (which by the way can be found at the back of our hymnbook) we heard May Sarton end her “All Souls” poem with the phrase “our mourning without end.” Given all she had written to lead to this final phrase, I hear these words not as sad, but as an affirmation of life. Because, as she wrote, “memory makes kings and queens of us” and “We who find shelter in the warmth within, / Listen and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven, / As the lost human voices speak through us and blend our complex love / our mourning without end.”

My colleague Kathleen McTigue also concludes a memorial reading found in the back of our hymnbook affirmatively:

We, the living, carry them with us: we are their voices, their hands and their hearts. We take them with us and with them choose the deeper path of living.

The deeper path of living... living life as it is, including all that cannot be changed, woven fine

I have over my desk as I type a photograph of my parents on the patio outside their home in Charlottesville, where they had retired. Also pictured is their neighbor and good friend Bill – his wife Joan must have taken the picture.

The trees are bare, so it was a winter’s day, but warm enough (Charlottesville, Virginia after all) to be outside with an extra layer or two. There is a picnic basket on the small wrought iron table in front of them; I see some sliced apple, and, knowing something of our parents’ habits and customs, I’m pretty sure there had to have been a loaf of bread and some cheese in the basket. They are lifting a glass. Smiling.

Bill and Joan are still living nearby in that same neighborhood; my parents are gone – Dad for twenty-nine years, Mom for four. But like figures on Keats’ Grecian urn, still they smile, still they lift a glass, still they enjoy this moment of fresh air and friendship, still they communicate their pleasure, their happiness, even their joy to me all these years later, even as still I mourn, mourn without end.

And it *is* right it should be so I suppose.

It is how it is in any case. I choose to embrace it all, woven fine.

So may it ever be.