



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Season of Festivals"

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Who among us doesn't love a festival?

No, really...who? It's okay if you don't want to raise your hand. I bet there are plenty of us who struggle, sometimes, with these times that feel like mandated celebration. I'm remembering a college friend who hated to celebrate the New Year, who thought of New Year's Eve parties as absurd glorifications of binge drinking based on an essentially arbitrary date. While this friend wasn't wrong, they were also not always the most fun to have at your New Year's Eve party.

But this is one of those complicated, both/and truths: As humans we need festivals and times of celebration, and for some people and at some times, they have the opposite effect. At a time when we are supposed to connect, we may feel increasing separation. At a time when we are supposed to be happy, we may feel sad.

Today is the third day of Diwali, the Indian cultural holiday that has significance in Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and even among Buddhists in India and Nepal. Meaning "row of lights" and referring to clay oil lamps set out around homes during this celebration, Diwali joins many other cultural celebrations of light during the darkening days of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. The third day is *Lakshmi Puja* in Hindu celebrations, sacred to Lakshmi, the goddess of wisdom. The lamps of Diwali celebrate the growth of inner wisdom, the light which guides us from within, the truth kindled within the soul.

Now everything I know about Diwali has basically been learned from books and the internet. But when I went to do research on Diwali, a Google search turned up not just fact sheets and Wikipedia articles, but also opinion pieces - in *The Indian Express* we see a plea to make Diwali this year about family, tradition, and cultivating relationships and exhorting us to put down our smartphones to be present with our families and loved ones. *Harper's Bazaar India* has a helpful column for people who are faced with the challenge of spending Diwali alone, away from friends and loved ones. *The Times of India* brings us a lament that some families are losing some of the cultural traditions surrounding food. In other words, the articles about humans celebrating Diwali are very similar to articles we might read about humans celebrating Thanksgiving or Hanukkah or Christmas or Kwanzaa...or New Year's. We want to gather. We want to share in the parts of the celebration that live in our memories, and we also struggle with the parts that aren't joyous for us.

And yet we need times of celebration. We need festivals. We need to light our lamps, we need to sing songs, we need to eat traditional foods, we do all these things to celebrate the continuation of the cycle that is you and me and all of us, all who went before and all who will come after.

Let's go back to our [reading](#) for a moment:

"But it strikes me as a particularly dangerous fantasy - by which I mean it is sad, so goddamn sad - that because we often think of joy as meaning 'without pain,' or 'without sorrow' - which, to reiterate, our consumer culture has us believing is a state of being that we could buy - not only is it sometimes considered "unserious" or frivolous to talk about joy (i.e. But there's so much pain in the world!), but this definition also suggests that someone might be able to live without - or maybe a more accurate phrase is free of - heartbreak or sorrow. Which I'm pretty sure you only get to do if you have no relationships, love nothing, are a sociopath, and maybe, if you're enlightened. I don't know about you, but I check none of these boxes."

Don't you know it, I don't check those boxes either. And to pull back the curtain a bit, we first sat down to sketch the outline of this worship year back in June. "Diwali, the season of festivals! This will be a lovely time to gather and begin our own time of festivals, by learning about one that is outside many of our own personal and cultural experiences!" I was not thinking of the images of war that are breaking our hearts daily, was not thinking of all the things that could happen between then and now to make talk of joy feel unserious or frivolous or - could it be? - unnecessary or unwelcome.

But it weighs on us. There is the pain of the world, ever-present. There is the pain of those closest to us, that which we would erase if we could but we know we cannot. There is the pain within each of us, named and unnamed, that we honor with our own ritual of light each week.

And there is the pressure. In our society, joy - as Gay notes - is something "our consumer culture has us believing is a state of being that we could buy." There's the pressure to spend. To consume. To compete. The pressure for everything to be beautiful all the time, the pressure for everyone to get along all the time, the pressure we too-often feel to pretend that sorrow does not exist hand-in-hand with joy. That they are, in fact, interdependent.

But that interdependence is in fact an invitation! An invitation to change our script, our very relationship with joy and with sorrow and with celebration. Back to our reading, again - "But what happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other through those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks? Which is to say, what if joy needs sorrow [...] for its existence?"

What if joy is what emerges when we care for each other through those things? What if, instead of feeling pressured to ignore all of life's complications during this season of festivals, what if we invited the joy that arises from

sharing deeply with one another? What if we lit our lamps and also blessed the darkness, the place that holds us and comforts us as we weep, that invites us into a rest that feels radical in the face of the messages we receive this time of year?

This is the heart of one of our most beloved poems - many Unitarian Universalists joke that Mary Oliver poems are our scripture, but to me it's no joke. When we take texts and make them sacred, treat them as the gifts they are, and sit again and again with the meaning they allow us to make - that is the role of scripture, is it not? Just as Ross Gay's words invite us to consider joy and sorrow as interdependent, let's think about Oliver's "Wild Geese" together now.

"You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things."

Your place in the family of things. “What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks? Which is to say, what if joy needs sorrow [...] for its existence?”

It is not wrong to speak of sorrow at times of celebration. For the festivals to free us, for the laughter of our hearts to ring out strong and clear, we must not be made to feel ashamed of our sorrow. For the festivals to connect us, for the celebrations to honor what went before and evolve to honor what we need now, we must be able to bring the truth of our full selves. It is what we enact each week when we share those matters most deep within our hearts. It is what we embody when we allow our fellow beings to cry with us as well as to laugh. You don't have to be good. You don't have to love a holiday the same way each year. Your place in the family of things is there for you always. The lamp of wisdom kindled in the comforting balm of darkness is a reminder that we do not have light without darkness, nor darkness without light. We do not have joy without sorrow nor sorrow without joy.

May you find a way of being this festival season that allows you to bring your full self, that allows you to be present for the full selves of others. When all of this is going on, why would we write about - speak about - sing about joy? Because it is the truth of our hearts.

Let us kindle our truth this festival season.
Let us celebrate.

So may it be.