

Enthusiasm by Jean Lumpkin

Sermon given at The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the
Susquehanna Valley (UUCSV), Northumberland, PA
August 19, 2007

I'd like to thank Dave Forgach for the inspiration for this sermon. Dave gave a sermon entitled "The Spirituality of Numbers" in May. Most of us probably didn't understand a lot of what he said, though we did get the idea that there are some interesting numbers in math—most specifically Pi, "e," and "i"—and that these numbers actually relate to phenomena that occur in the real world.

Actually, I could appreciate some of Dave's interest. I almost majored in Math. I loved algebra. I loved calculus. Math was appealing because it made sense, and if you applied the formula and went through the steps you got "the right" answer (so much less messy than real life where there often don't seem to be any "right" answers). But in the spring of my sophomore year, I took a course on Differential Equations. This was not the kind of math I'd known up until that point. I barely passed. That was the last math class I ever took.

So Dave got me to reminiscing about those college days, but that's not really what I want to talk about today. What I really loved about Dave's sermon was his **enthusiasm!** He really loved the numbers and concepts he was talking about. He seemed to be awed and excited by them. And he started me thinking about enthusiasm and how important I think enthusiasm is.

On the surface enthusiasm could be considered to be a rather superficial, maybe even hedonistic, state of mind. But I think it is far more than that.

My husband once told me that one of the things he loved about me was my enthusiasm. When he said that I was surprised and pleased, because I realized that my enthusiasm was something I really love about myself. What could be more central to who I am than what I am enthused about. It's when I'm enthused/excited about something that I feel most myself, most connected to the world, most in touch with what is good in life—and that can be a deeply spiritual experience.

[Examples] As often happens, when you start thinking about a particular thing, you begin to see examples of it everywhere. This summer as usual we went to 6 music festivals plus a few concerts. My favorite festival is called Grey Fox. It's a bluegrass festival held on the Rothvoss Farm in eastern NY state. Most of the festival is held high on a hill overlooking a beautiful green valley with frequent gorgeous sunsets. Such is the *enthusiasm* for this festival, that regular attendees come as much as a

month early, to camp in line in the lower fields to await the festival. When we arrived four days before, there were already several hundred tents or campers ahead of us.

While waiting in the lower field, people play music, they play softball games or travel to nearby parks for swimming. A chef from Key West makes gumbo for everyone the night before the festival gates open, and for those who like shots of vodka sent to their mouths through a channel cut in a block of ice, there's a tradition called the "luge."

Once we go up the hill to the actual festival site, the festival offers 40-some hours of music played by nationally known bands, and a variety of food vendors (Greek, Cajun, Italian, crepes, ice cream, etc. There are two coffee vendors—one with chocolate chip scones). Some people come for the music on stage, some come to jam with their friends. People form relationships that get renewed year to year. I've been to a wedding there and also observed some rituals honoring friends who had died during the previous year. It's a city in a field that springs up every year for a few days, then disappears like Brigadoon.

I love to people watch at Grey Fox, looking at some of the interesting or outrageous outfits and observing the people off to the side of the stage dancing. There are a few that we see every year. They are so caught up in the joy of moving to the music, so compelled to dance, that they don't seem to care if they are watched—or maybe they enjoy it. They are enthusiasm in motion. And I loved experiencing their enthusiasm.

Still thinking about enthusiasm in the days between that festival and the next one (Falcon Ridge Folk Festival) held a few days later up the road, we were shopping in the local hardware store for a flashlight, and they had a crate with 2 Irish Jack Russell terrier puppies. (They were the smooth-haired ones that sometimes have different colored fur around one eye that looks like an "eye-patch.") My husband is a great lover of animals and of course, he couldn't resist putting his hand in the cage to scratch a few ears. Well, those two puppies were the epitome of enthusiasm. I hope you can picture this—two young puppies, clamoring, crawling all over each other to get to my husband's hand. Pure unadulterated, unbridled enthusiasm. It still warms my heart to picture those two puppies and my husband leaning over to pet them.

These are examples of moments of enthusiasm that connect us to what is good in life. These are moments of pleasure—the deep pleasure that can renew our faith that there is good in life.

Shortly after I heard Dave's sermon, my friend Karen came to visit. Now Karen and I met at Dickinson College--she was a year behind me, but we took identical paths into

young adulthood—we joined the same sorority, both majored in religion, both graduated and went to NYC to Katharine Gibbs Secretarial School for some job skills, both worked in NYC after Gibbs. Our paths diverged a few years later but we stayed in touch.

Karen and her husband are Lutheran ministers. After doing inner city work and campus ministry work, Karen is now working for Hospice and has a practice in Spiritual Direction--working with clients who want to grow spiritually.

When we get a chance to visit briefly every year or two, it's always amazing to me that there is always something she says that relates to and adds to something I was thinking about. During this visit Karen was talking to me about her work, and she told me that one of the best ways she has found to help her clients is to help them find out **what makes their energy flow**. Wow, I thought! That's really another way of talking about enthusiasm. Things that we are enthusiastic about make our energy flow.

Continuing to think about the subject of enthusiasm, I did a search of the Internet. I found the Internet has all sorts of quotes about it. I found that I am not alone in thinking that enthusiasm is very important.

Here are some of my favorite quotes:

The author, Charlotte Bronte said: True enthusiasm is a fine feeling whose flash I admire where-ever I see it.

Tennessee Williams said:
Enthusiasm is the most important thing in life.

Henry Ford said:
Enthusiasm is the yeast that makes your hopes shine to the stars. Enthusiasm is the sparkle in your eyes, the swing in your gait. The grip of your hand, the irresistible surge of will and energy to execute your ideas.

I found a quote from Arthur Balfour that I liked.
(I assume that is the Arthur Balfour who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1902-1905.) He said very simply:
Enthusiasm moves the world.

I also found on the Internet an interesting blog by someone named Scott Young.
He wrote:

Enthusiasm is an incredibly powerful tool to create momentum. ... Being enthusiastic ... creates an overall feeling of happiness and well-being ...

He goes on to say: “Genuine enthusiasm can only be sustained about something you are truly passionate about. Don’t spend your time pursuing things that you aren’t passionate about. If you aren’t passionate about something, try to minimize or remove the time it is taking from your life... If you look at really successful people, all of them [have] something they are very passionate about.”

That last comment brings up another point about enthusiasm. It’s important in accomplishing something. Here are some more quotes:

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

Enthusiasm is the mother of effort, and without it nothing great was ever achieved.

Dale Carnegie said:

Flaming enthusiasm, backed up by horse sense and persistence, is the quality that most frequently makes for success.

Conrad Hilton of the Hilton Hotels said:

Enthusiasm is a vital element toward the individual success of every man or woman.

And Norman Vincent Peale, known for his book, The Power of Positive Thinking, said:

There is a real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment.

It’s probably my stage of life, being retired, but I’m not much interested in accomplishments these days. When I pick up a magazine or book that talks about goal setting, I’m so aware that I have no interest in it. But for those of you who are trying to accomplish something, your enthusiasm can lead you to the right goals and can help you accomplish more than you expected. And it won’t seem so much like work if you find something that you enjoy doing.

Personally, I'm more interested right now in enthusiasm for its own sake. I'm more interested in being swept away by things that I'm enthusiastic about, things that make me feel alive... [I'm more interested in peak experiences—we'll come back to that concept later.]

Alan Cohen is the **author of over a dozen popular inspirational books and is** best known for the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. I have a book of his I bought years ago called *Joy is My Compass: Taking the Risk to Follow Your Bliss*. I love his sense of humor.

Here's a relevant section of his book:

A great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to near-death experiences. ... I have been inspired to set up my own research institute: I am studying people who have come very close to *living*. Rumor has it that there are a number of people now walking the earth who have crossed the threshold and seen what it would actually be like to be *alive*. I want to meet these people, find out who they are, learn how they think and feel, and discover what it is that would actually cause someone to be happy while in a body.

The Institute will boldly put aside the age-old question, "Is there life after death?" and seek an answer to the even more pressing need to know, "Is there life *before* death?"

I am happy to report that one study in that field of inquiry has already been completed. When a group of 37 adults were unable to answer the question under laboratory conditions, a field study team journeyed to a local neighborhood playground. There they asked a group of three children if they believed in life before death. The first child replied, "What's death?" The second child laughed, and the third took the researcher by the hand and invited him onto the ballfield. The field study team truly did end up in the field. [end of quote]

Is there "life before death"? Good question! If so, I'm sure enthusiasm plays a big part.

Abraham Maslow was a well known psychologist. He became famous for his theory of a hierarchy of needs.

He illustrated his hierarchy with a drawing of a triangle. The triangle is divided into 5 horizontal sections. The bottom section represents our most **basic survival needs**,

such as: oxygen, water, and food. The next level of needs is our **security and safety needs**—next is the need for **love and belonging**, then the need for **self-esteem**. The fifth level is the level of **self-actualization**-- the continuous desire to fulfill potentials, to “be all that you can be.” In an article about Maslow’s personality theory, **Dr. C. George Boeree** writes:

“In terms of overall development, we move through these levels a bit like stages. As newborns, our focus (if not our entire set of needs) is on the physiological [the basic survival needs]. Soon, we begin to recognize that we need to be safe. Soon after that, we crave attention and affection. A bit later, we look for self-esteem.”

And so on...Each level only becomes important when the levels beneath it are taken care of. Under stressful conditions, or when survival is threatened, we can “regress” to a lower need level.”

Although most studies done in Maslow’s time were studies of sick people, Maslow was interested in studying healthy people, the people who he saw as “self-actualizers.” (those at the top of his triangle). He found a number of characteristics that self-actualizing people had more often than other people. One difference was that they had more **peak experiences** than the average person.

“Peak experiences are moments or periods when people feel exhilarated by life, in love with someone or something; enthusiastic about their ideas or their creative expressions; and moments or periods when they saw purpose and value in being here on earth. Most of these people also felt a strong connection with a spiritual reality—a god.

Note that enthusiasm is a part of peak experiences...

As people who know me well, already know. I’m extremely enthusiastic about the music of Josh Groban which never ceases to touch me deeply. My stepson has been known to shake his head and say “this can’t be healthy” when he sees the 6-ft tall cardboard Josh in my office (among other memorabilia from concerts), but I what can I say.... He just doesn’t understand. I’m also as enthusiastic about color as Dave is about numbers. Beautiful bold colors are just amazing to me. And when it’s a breathtakingly beautiful day, commenting on its beauty once, just isn’t enough. You’ll find me repeating myself. Then there is photography—and playing my banjo.

And sharing music with AI and with friends. My life is rich with things that I am enthusiastic about.

So what about you—what are you enthusiastic about? What draws you and makes your energy flow-what makes you feel the most alive? How much of that do you include in your life?

When I started thinking about enthusiasm, it seemed clear to me that it has a connection to spirituality, though I wasn't sure if others would agree. Lo and behold, the original meaning of the word was religious.

The American Heritage Dictionary says it comes from a Greek word meaning “to be inspired by a god (having a god within).” The term has lost its religious significance as far as its definition goes these days. But historically and experientially there is a connection.

If you want to have peak experiences, if you want to have “life before death” – I urge you to seek out those things that you are truly enthusiastic about. I'd like to end with 2 more quotes about Enthusiasm.

American poet and author, **Bryant H. McGill** said:

Enthusiasm is the energy and force that builds literal momentum of the human soul and mind.

And my favorite by **Douglas MacArthur**:

Years wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.