

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday 4 April 2010

## Surprised by Joy

David Schwartz  
Victoria Safford

---

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115  
651/ 426-2369 vsafford@whitebearunitarian.org

**CALL TO WORSHIP**  
*from Barbara Pescan, adapted*

---

For the resilience of Earth and its creatures.  
Gloria

For these children who will go on to save what we cannot.  
Kyrie eleison

For the ordinary tenacity of plants and of people.  
Baruch ata Adonai

For the center of the universe, which is everywhere, not the least in the human heart.  
Om

For love that survives anger, and winter, and despair and sorrow and even death.  
Alleluia

For love that persists  
Shalom

For peace in the heart, and calm that is the seed in the dark.  
Nam myo-ho renge kyo

For endings that are beginnings, for beginnings that are endings.  
Amen

For the circle, the spiral, the web, the egg, the orbit, the center,  
Alleluia

For the seed, the flower, the fruit, the opening, the death, the release, the seed...  
Amen

We are going on.  
Alleluia

It is going on.  
Amen

Blessed be.  
Blessed be

## FIRST READING

Amiel's Leg    *Thomas Lux*

We were in a room that was once an attic,  
the tops of the trees filled the windows, a breeze  
crossed the table where we sat  
and Amiel, about age four, came to visit  
with her father, my friend,  
and it was spring, I think, and I remember  
being happy--her mother was there too,  
and my wife, and a few other friends.  
It was spring, late spring, because the trees  
were full but still that slightly lighter  
green; the windows were open,  
some of them, and I'll say it  
out loud: I was happy, sober, at the time childless  
myself, and it was one  
of those moments: just like that, Amiel  
climbed on my lap and put her head back against my chest.  
I put one hand on her knees  
and my other hand on top of that hand.  
That was all, that was it.  
Amiel's leg was cool, faintly rubbery.  
We were there--I wish I knew the exact  
date, time--and that  
was all, that was it.

## Second Reading

A Remnant of Resurrection *Joyce Rupp*

the time for daffodils has come  
bunches of six, ten, or twelve,  
with tightly wrapped buds,  
arrive from warmer lands.

like sentinels of invitation  
they keep my wintered heart  
leaning into Spring.

the directions say to cut  
at least a half inch off the stem,  
then place in water and  
wait for the surprise.

behold, in the early hour of dawn,  
I see resurrection on my kitchen table,  
every yellowed daffodil hurraing the morning,  
stretching outward in the etched-glass vase.

but what captures my attention  
is one small, thin remnant,  
voluntarily discarded,  
beneath the smiling daffodils.

this dry, transparent cover,  
a cast-off tube of protection  
once concealing a fragile bud,  
conveys the price of blooming.

I pick up this remnant of resurrection and hold it for a long, long, silent time,  
wondering what soul-shroud of mine needs to be unwrapped,  
before I, too, am blooming.

## **Surprised by Joy** *David Schwartz*

Scary movies, at least the few that I watch, have two way of surprising you. First, the impossible to predict. Jurassic Park. You're walking down the street and a pterodactyl swoops down and eats you. The second, much creepier kind of surprise is when what you thought you knew all along turns out to be wrong. Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Your friends and neighbors (or fellows at church) are aliens. That stuff scares the dickens out of me.

Maybe this isn't the appropriate morning for scary movie metaphors. Turn the idea around: to be surprised by joy happens in the same two ways.

First, the impossible to predict. It sweeps through in a flutter of wings upsets your life in awe and happiness. The joy where everything is suddenly vivid, colors more intense, the water sweeter, the person you love is more beautiful than ever. The second is when what you thought you knew all along turns out to be suffused with joyfulness. We travel through this life every day without noticing it – but it is the very substance of the everyday. A spring day. Good friends. A little girl.

It seems like these experiences come out of the blue, that they are moments of grace. And because I haven't triggered them myself exactly, I want these experiences to just happen, without having to take any action on my part. Or, maybe, because it's an accident, I think there's nothing I can do. And that's half-right, but only half. Spiritual experience is an accident. But practice is a way of making yourself accident-prone.

We can train ourselves to see those moments of joy, to be ready to see them when they come. unbidden. Like you can train yourself to see the wild bird in the woods that your eye otherwise slips over. It's that hidden and that plain.

Gratitude is a way of training yourself into joy. Which is sort of odd. You'd think that being happy and telling lots of jokes would do it. And those help, I think it's thankfulness that's at the root. Appreciation that almost everything we have is not ours to possess, but a gift we can cannot bring into being, nor affect, nor control. The sun rises and it sets, the earth brings forth life, and we whirl along with all the rest of it. And our own lives: brief and little things. And in the midst of that immensity, this world is filled with abundance, our lives are filled with abundance.

I know people who make a list every day or every week. They sit down and write out longhand ten things they're grateful for large or small. I have heard people say: I am grateful to have known my grandparents, though they are long gone. I am grateful that haircut turned out well. I am grateful to have a home; I haven't always. I am grateful the choir is singing today. I am grateful I left an abusive relationship.

And I know people who tape a post-it note to the bathroom mirror that instructs them: name three things you're grateful for. And every time they brush their teeth, they list them. I have heard people tell me: I am grateful I am moving away from my parents, it wasn't safe for me there. I am grateful the sun is out, grateful its Spring. I am grateful to know where I am when I

wake up each morning. I am grateful the alarm went off this morning so I could get up at an ungodly early hour and go to the job I have.

Gratitude practice is simple. And it seems to make a difference. Helps you to catch what otherwise might pass by unnoticed.

I had a spiritual experience in the men's department of Macys once that I very nearly missed entirely.

It was a Friday morning, 8:10 am, in the downtown Macy's in the skyway in Minneapolis. I was commuting to work downtown. I am half time here at church as an intern and half time in HR at Target. So there I am, Friday morning. The day before I had met with a family who suffered a profound, unexpected loss. And that night, I'd thought for a long time on my gratitude at being able to hear their stories, to companion them. And then, Friday morning, walking through the Macy's skyway, it seemed as if every person was alien: pod people, that I carried a weight of sorrow and was set apart because of it. But in a moment of intuition it all reversed and I saw that every person in that dim skyway carried that same grief, they had or they would, someday, and it was that very thing which I had thought was a solitary burden that connected me with every other person, closer than brotherhood.

And in that moment, just for an instant, I was filled with an old and fierce and wild joy. Something vast and laughing, like music. Like seeing everything in focus all at once. Like an intuition of the vastness of this place, this world, and the dearness of each person in it. The world cracks open and tumbled tangled mystery permeates every living thing and every thing that does not move. And we are also whole of a single piece. All that in a moment, in the men's department of Macy's.

I think most of you have had that sort of experience. Or some variety of it, big or small.

Would I have missed this experience, or missed its significance, if the night before I hadn't spent time in gratitude. I don't know. The scientist Louis Pasteur said: "in the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind." When that fierce, wild, laughing joy descends upon us in the midst of suffering are we ready to embrace it? To experience it? Are we ready even to notice it? Are mind and heart prepared?

**Surprised by Joy**  
*Victoria Safford*

A poet writes about a vase of daffodils.

*Behold, in the early hours of dawn,  
I see resurrection on my kitchen table,*

Joyce Rupp, the poet, is a Catholic and her reference is not accidental. But there are many kinds of resurrections, as anyone knows who has suffered a great tragedy, suffered and survived; or anyone who's lost their way and found it again; anyone who's lived for a while on either side of forgiveness; as anyone knows who's lived any time at all in this world of life and death, brokenness and beauty, grace and desolation. There are all kinds of resurrections of the spirit, of the heart.

I believe that's what the women knew in the ancient story, when they came to the empty tomb in the early hours of the morning and saw the one they loved was gone. Who knows what happened there? *We will breathe his memory into life*, they said to one another. *We will make him bright in our remembering. Our love will keep his love alive* – and so it was, and so it is, and I have seen many of you do this, when a loved one dies, when a loss comes down to shroud your heart. I have seen so many of you practice this, that sometimes I forget to count it as a miracle.

Joyce Rupp says what captures her attention is a dry, transparent casing, discarded on the table, that once held a bursting bud. *It conveys the price of blooming*, which is sometimes very high. She picks it up and holds it “for a long, long silent time,”

*wondering what soul-shroud of mine needs to be unwrapped,  
before I, too, am blooming.*

What soul-shroud is keeping you from blooming? That's a scary and inviting question. What binds your heart like winter ice?

*I who have died am alive again today-*

writes another poet, Unitarian Universalist e.e. cummings, and surely we have known that mystery, in varying degrees, of waking from the darkness of some sorrow, glimpsing some shred of gladness again, some light or life, some sign of love, amazed that we're not dead, or dead in spirit, still grieving, still shaky, but alive on wobbly legs. David tells us this is more likely to happen, this miracle of the resurrected heart, if you practice, if you try to remember all the time, to practice gratitude, astonishment, amazement, simple thankfulness. Practice noticing that you're awake. I believe that's right. *We practice resurrection*, as yet another poet, Wendell Berry, puts it, and what ensues is love, like David loving all the people in the Macy's Men's Department. What ensues is tenderness and mercy. What ensues, when we practice noticing that we're alive, not dead, when we practice being thankful despite every sorrow, every cruelty, every

desperation, is love where no love was before, the kind of love that leads not only to contentment, but to justice, freedom, peace.

I'm thinking now of one more poet, William Wordsworth, another noticer of daffodils, who wrote a sonnet about a real incident: He was riding in his carriage on a beautiful spring day, perhaps a day like this one, and the sun was on his face, the wind warm and gentle, everything right with the world. In his reverie he turned to speak - and then remembered, for the thousandth time, that the person he would share it with was gone. For just a second he'd forgotten that his beloved daughter Catherine, a little child, had died not long before. And he is snapped back to terrible reality.

*Surprised by joy – impatient as the wind  
I turned to share the transport – Oh! with whom  
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb...*

He can't believe that for a moment he'd allowed himself to forget. That little glimpse of happiness feels like a betrayal of his daughter and his grief, a denial of his love, a derangement of his new life as a ruined man, wracked with sorrow. How could he have let himself be surprised by joy, how could he allow a smile, how could he have slipped back into his old habit, to love the world or love this life? He is snapped back to reality and yet – the reality is that this happens all the time. He thinks he has devoted the remainder of his days to mourning, to sadness and despair, and in a sense, he has; how could it be otherwise, in the face of such a loss, the death of a beloved child? And yet, the sun on his skin is warm, the land is greening, the daffodils just opening, the red-winged blackbirds (or whatever they have in England) are on the marsh (or the heather or the heath) and the gentle wind keeps nudging, like a little child itself, insistent, playful, delightful and dead serious. The memory of his daughter is inescapable, so painful most of the time, and then, every once in a while, so joyful and sweet and sustaining that for a moment, all is well again. These are not just distractions. The beauty also is reality, and his days are utterly devoted to it, the remainder of his days. He lives, we live, in two worlds at once: the real reality of loss sorrow, death and disappointment, which could consume your life, and the real reality of beauty, love and gladness, the real reality of gratitude, of joy -- which could consume your life. Every so often, in spite of ourselves, we are surprised by joy, by happiness, by kindness, by something beautiful or comical, often something pretty simple, pretty small, and we forget to be despondent, forget to be cynical, forget that we are numb, forget that we've forgotten how to notice, how to pay attention, how to be grateful and amazed. Over and over, in spite of ourselves, we find ourselves whispering to the resurrected daffodils, to the beauty of the morning, the loveliness of loved ones gone and loved ones by our side, to the source of life itself,

*gloria  
kyrie eleison  
baruch atah adonai  
alleluia  
shalom  
blessed be  
amen.*