

Happiness and Flow
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Reading adapted from *My Quest for God* by John Trevor, London, 1897

One brilliant Sunday morning, my wife and boys went to the Unitarian Chapel an English village. I felt it impossible to accompany them— as though to leave the sunshine on the hills, and go down there to the chapel, would be for the time an act of spiritual suicide. And I felt such need for new inspiration and expansion in my life. So, very reluctantly and sadly, I left my wife and boys to go down into the town, while I went further up into the hills with my stick and my dog. In the loveliness of the morning, and the beauty of the hills and valleys, I soon lost my sense of sadness and regret. I walked the six miles along the road to the 'Cat and Fiddle,' Inn and then returned.

On the way back, suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven— an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light, as though the external condition had brought about the internal effect— a feeling of having passed beyond the body, though the scene around me stood out more clearly and as if nearer to me than before, by reason of the illumination in the midst of which I seemed to be placed. This deep emotion lasted, though with decreasing strength, until I reached home, and for some time after, only gradually passing away.

Sermon

When I was in my early 20s and a student at Arizona State University, friends of mine invited me to go with them to rock climb. One Saturday morning we drove out to a rock formation north of Phoenix. Today a web site describes Pinnacle Peak City Park as the crown jewel of Phoenix granite climbing. Back in the early 1970s, dust and cactus surrounded the pillar of rock as it rose out of the desert.

When I first looked at this pinnacle, it seems unlikely to me that I could climb to the top. I thought that perhaps I could sit at the bottom and watch. My friends patiently taught me the basics of rock climbing that day. They showed me how they used ropes for safety. They showed me handholds. My friends showed me where to place my feet and how to move up the side of the pinnacle. They taught me to move carefully, slowly, to plan my climb.

After a while, the calm, pleasurable feeling that comes with mastering a new skill replaced my fear of falling. I discovered I could do much more than I realized. In two hours, we reached the top of the pinnacle, with its spectacular view of the desert floor below us. We ate the food we brought with us. Then my friends taught me how to repel down the side of the pinnacle. I leaned backward against the rope. As I pulled it out and let it loose in my hand, the friction of the rope

around my back held me in place and let me down as I released the friction slightly. Perpendicular to the pinnacle, I walked down to the bottom in five minutes. It was an extremely enjoyable experience.

In the months that followed, I went out with my friends on several Saturdays, climbing mostly in the Granite rocks near Prescott, Arizona. Each time I felt the same mixture of feelings. I felt anxiety that I had taken on more than I could handle. Then as I mastered this new skill, I felt happy, being outside in the warm air, feeling the hard granite rock against my skin, I was happy.

This morning is my last sermon in a series of sermons about happiness. Four weeks ago, I talked about studies on happiness conducted in the 1990s. People were asked if they were happy, and the researchers concluded that we have some control over our happiness because our mood is to some degree determined by the comparisons we make. For example, after we have taken a walk in the Florida heat, walking into a cool, air-conditioned space can make us happy. I also said that studies of identical twins raised apart indicates that our happiness is partially determined by genetics. Some of us are born with a tendency to feel happy.

Three weeks ago, I explored the idea that the chemicals we put in our bodies can help us feel happy. For at least 55 percent of the people who try them, antidepressants are an effective treatment for the illness of depression. Antidepressants do not always work, but they do help some people feel happy.

Two weeks ago, I talked about a movement that has developed in the last few years called Positive Psychology. According to positive psychology, it is a mistake to try to do things that are not our strengths, and that we do not really care about. A key to happiness, according to Positive Psychology, is to discover our strengths and put our time and energy into doing activities that reflect our strengths. Obviously these strengths can change over time. Rock climbing was a strength for me in the early 1970s, but my body has aged, and it is not a strength for me today.

Last Sunday, I left the subject of happiness to reflect on the events in Charleston. Today, I want to return to the happiness theme and talk about flow.

Psychologist Dr. Csikszentmihalyi is a professor at Claremont Graduate University and spent most of his career on the faculty at the University of Chicago. As a young psychologist, he became an expert rock climber. He observed that on the days he was rock climbing, sometimes he wouldn't notice where the time went, whether he and his friends had lunch or not, or what climbs they had done. As a psychologist, he called this feeling FLOW. It's been described as being "in the zone" or being "one with the music."

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi believes that human beings are happy when we are in a state of flow. If you've ever lost an afternoon to a great conversation or gotten so involved in a project that all else is forgotten, then you have experienced flow. We feel happiness when we are completely involved in an activity for its own sake. In a state of flow we stop thinking about our appearance.

We stop worrying about other people's opinions of us. We lose track of time. Our whole being is involved and we are using our skills to the maximum.

Under Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's direction, about 45 years ago, a research team at the University of Chicago interviewed thousands of people around the world. They found that the flow experience is reported in essentially the same words by women in Korea, adults in Thailand and India, by teenagers in Tokyo, by Navajo shepherds, by farmers in the Italian Alps and by workers on the assembly line in Chicago. All of us sometimes enter a flow state when we are fully absorbed in activity during which we lose our sense of time and have feelings of great satisfaction. Researchers believe that flow sits at the heart of almost every athletic endeavor; it is part of progress in science; and it is part of artistic creation. When we watch a live concert, a sporting event or a play, we are essentially watching people in a flow state.

Researchers studying flow asked people to carry an electronic pager for a week and write down how they were feeling and what they were doing when the pager signaled. The pager went off about eight times a day at random intervals. Over a hundred thousand such reports were collected from different parts of the world. It was the largest global happiness study ever conducted.

From this study researchers developed a simple diagram to show what every flow activity had in common. Imagine that the diagram on the cover of the order of service represents a specific activity — for example, singing a hymn during a worship service. Each of us has some skill in singing and this is represented by the vertical line of the diagram. At the same time different hymns represent different degrees of difficulty depending on how unfamiliar or how complex the hymn might be. When the difficulty is too great for us we feel anxiety, represented by the lower triangle. When our skill is high and the difficulty is low we feel boredom, represented by the upper triangle. Happiness is found in the flow channel, where our skills and our challenges are in balance.

I should note that flow experiences do not provide a guide to ethical or moral behavior. The researchers suggested, for example, an accomplished bank robber could have a "flow experience" while robbing a bank. Dr. Csikszentmihalyi says that we need religion to guide our ethics.

Still, finding flow in moral and ethical ways is encouraged by the great religious leaders. Flow is like the mystical experience in religion. Rev. Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs most is people who have come alive."

Describing flow, one rock climber said:

you are so involved in what you are doing that you aren't thinking of yourself as separate from the immediate activity. . . . you don't see yourself as separate from what you are doing. . . . the mystique of rock climbing is climbing; you get to the

top of a rock glad it's over but really wishing it would go on forever. The justification of climbing is climbing . . . you don't conquer anything except things in yourself. Climbing is . . . recognizing that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not a moving up but a continuous flowing, you move up to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for climbing except the climbing itself; it is a self-communication.

It has been forty-five years since I did any the rock climbing. Still I do remember the intense feelings I had climbing up granite formations. It was very exciting and scary. It was physically and intellectually challenging to try to discover where I could place my feet and where I could put my hands to pull myself up the cliff. And there was the happiness of being with good friends, who held my life in their hands as they held onto the rope to which I was attached.

Researchers say that several chemical systems are involved in flow. The process includes dopamine, norepinephrine, and endorphin. The flow I felt was the flow of such chemicals. After the excitement of the rock climbing had passed, I sat on the summit and looked out over the splendor of nature and a serotonin calmness flowed over me.

A dancer describes how flow feels when a performance is going well. The dancer says,

Your concentration is very complete. Your mind isn't wondering, you are not thinking of something else; you are totally involved in what you are doing....your energy is going very smoothly. You feel relaxed, comfortable, and energetic.

A parent feels flow spending time with her small daughter. The parent writes,

Her reading is the one thing that she's really into, and we read together. She reads to me, and I read to her, and that's a time when I sort of lose touch with the rest of the world, I'm totally absorbed in what I'm doing.

A chess player says:

... the concentration is like breathing – you never think of it. The roof could fall in and, if it missed you, you would be unaware of it.

A surfer said,

There is no beginning and no end. There is no time, there is no thought. It is just pure.

I wonder how we can encourage the experience of flow while we pursue the values that are central to Unitarian Universalism. The researchers say we are more likely to feel in the channel

of flow when we are active participants.

I want to try an experiment in flow this morning. I want to see if we can create more of a flow experience here in our worship service. I am going to make a few short positive statements. After each of them, I invite all of you to shout an affirmative thought back to me. Flow is the experience of enjoying yourself without worrying about what others are thinking about you. Do not think about how you may look to other people. Let's practice. Let's try the Jewish word that means "Praise." The word is hallelujah. Can we all shout HALLELUJAH!

Great! Let's practice another one. An American phrase of affirmation and support. Can everyone shout PREACH IT BROTHER!

Great. Now I am going to make a few declarative statements and I want you to all respond by picking one of the examples of affirmation or choosing your own.

- We Affirm the Worth and Dignity of Every Person!
- We promote Justice, equity and compassion in human relations!
- We affirm the Acceptance of one another!
- We encourage spiritual growth!
- We promote a free and responsible search for truth!
- We encourage the use of democratic process!
- We affirm the goal of peace, liberty, and justice for all!
- We encourage respect for the interdependent web of all existence!

Can we all shout AMEN!

Thank you sisters and brothers! I hope you feel the flow.

Personally, although I have moved beyond rock climbing, I still seek out flow experiences. This summer, I hope to do some walking. Like the reading by John Trevor, I want to spend Sunday morning on a six-mile walk through the countryside to and from a pub with a name like Cat and Fiddle. Perhaps while walking I will experience, in Trevor's words, "an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light." Either the beer at the pub was especially good, or John Trevor was in a state of mystical flow.

I am fond of quoting from this pulpit the words of the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. He says:

I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on the earth. Every day we are engaged in miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is miracle.

Optimal happiness lies in that space between boredom and anxiety, in the channel of flow where our skills and our challengers meet. We can make that channel of flow wider by learning to enjoy the miracles of life. This summer may each of you feel the coolness of a breeze on a hot summer day. May you feel the joy of seeing a cloud against a blue sky. May you find happiness listening to the sound of children playing. May you feel part of the earth as you smell a flower. May you feel the miracle of drinking a cool glass of water on a hot day. May each of you find happiness in feeling you are part of the flow of life.

Sources:

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