

## **Yes We Can!**

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered 3/1/15 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Have you ever had buyer's remorse? You know, that thing that happens when you want something so much for so long and when you finally get it you suddenly feel like it was a mistake? It seems like the higher the price, the more likely this is to happen. You expect a purchase to bring you joy but end up feeling bad about it.

I know it happens to me sometimes. Claudia and I recently bought a home here in Bethlehem. It was on the high end of our price range, but we both fell in love with it at first sight. It's a remarkably inviting combination of mid-century modern austerity and coziness. We're going to have an open house sometime this spring so you can come and see it and share in our joy.

But the joy collapsed for me as soon as we moved in. I plunged from joy to regret. Suddenly all I could see were problems and projects that were going to cost money I didn't have. This didn't close right, that was drafty, and oh my goodness, this oil heat is costing a fortune.

But, fortunately, I know I have a tendency to experience this issue. I'm a little bit bipolar that way. And so, over the years, I've learned to anticipate my remorse and to allow for a period of regret. I can do this because I know it will pass if I don't dwell on it too much. It's a little like knowing that a row boat will rock when you get into it, but also that it will steady itself if you don't panic.

Don't panic. Nice words to live by – Douglas Adams said that they were printed on the cover of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

But these reversals can sometimes be even more extreme and long lasting. My experience with cancer can serve as an example.

When I was diagnosed in March of 1971, metastatic testicular cancer was considered a death sentence. The treatments seemed to be helpful, but there was no pronouncement that I was cured, or even in remission. They just did the best they could and left me to deal with it. You see, back then there weren't any emotional or psychological support systems for patients like me. They just put down the tools,

closed the hood and sent me out on the road to see how long it was before the inevitable end.

So this is how I began my life as a soon-to-be dead person. I sort of did the best I could, but settled into a persistent state of reality-based depression. Every physical symptom was the harbinger of the end. Every flush, fever, ache or pain brought with it the suspicion that the cancer had returned. I managed a kind of steady state depression that allowed for some ups and downs, but remained mostly way, way down.

And then, after about seven years, it started to seem like I just might live, and I began to move on. But the depression by then was so ingrained that it continued after its immediate cause went away. After seven years of survival the depression was all that was left. As I began to live, the structure of my life began to fall apart.

Accepting that I was going to live forced me to face the mess I had made of my life by living it as a soon-to-be-dead person. My marriage was ending, and I was losing my daughter to divorce instead of death. I got fired from my job. Then things really began to go downhill. I felt like a complete failure. I'd failed as an artist, father, husband and provider; I'd even failed to die! The only thing I was good at!

I relocated and started my own business in an attempt to restore my sense of hope and self-esteem. Success felt good, but since it didn't address the root causes, my depression continued to grow beneath the surface. And when the business eventually did fail, I decided it was time to find a new way forward. One vitally important step I took at that time was joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I experienced what the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed called "A time set outside ordinary time, into which community members bring their spiritual yearnings. There, stirred by the sacred, they find comfort, hear the unexpected, and are lifted by inspiration. It is a time to meet what is at other times pushed away, to find hope, express gratitude, and be reminded that we are in this together."

The love, the support, the open minded search, and being part of a group engaged in an ongoing spiritual quest made all the difference for me, a difference that eventually led me into the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

By studying comparative religions, I've since discovered that Christianity, rightly understood, could have helped with my problems. We all struggle with anxiety about the future and regret about the past. My version, though intense, wasn't really all that unique.

But Christianity has a formula that can work, and has worked for millions of people over the millennia. When you accept Christ as your savior and know that you will spend eternity in paradise, it gets a lot easier to be optimistic about the future – what could be better than heaven? And when you know the creator of the universe has forgiven you for all your sins and mistakes, you can let go of all that baggage, too!

Being saved means you put down all the burdens you've been carrying, like guilt, remorse, regret, and depression. Christianity, at its best, creates a rationale for a peaceful, safe, joyful and loving life. Of course, it's rarely interpreted or applied this way. But it can and does work.

But this version of Christianity usually doesn't work all that well for people who become Unitarian Universalists. With our rejection of the doctrines of original sin, salvation, and a heaven run by a patriarchal authoritarian God, we've pretty much taken ourselves out of that game. But the other thing that I've learned by studying the world's religions is that, despite the diversity of beliefs and doctrines, they're all working to achieve the same end: a peaceful, safe, joyful and loving life.

The challenge for us, then, is to find the tools that help each person realize that goal. Unitarian Universalist churches can be places of growth and discovery where each person finds the way to their peaceful center while helping and encouraging each other to do the same.

The Jewish boy from Long Island who went to India and came back with the name, Lama Surya Das, wrote in his book, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, "The path, as always, begins beneath your feet with the first step you take. Where do you stand now? This is where we begin. Breathe. Breathe again. Smile. Relax. Arrive where you are. Be natural. Open to effortlessness, to being rather than doing. Drop everything. Let go. Enjoy for a moment this marvelous joy."

We can each find a way to find and open ourselves to the place of calm and stillness at our center, and when we do, we discover that it can deepen and grow. It can become the source of a joy without limits.

We can then begin to understand the wisdom at the heart of all the great religions: our emotional states are not the product of our circumstances. It's a hard sell. I invite you to consider it. Our emotional states are not the product of our circumstances. We learn that we don't have to wait for good things to happen in order to feel good. There are ways to cultivate peace, joy, and happiness – these are called spiritual practices. They don't have to be far out or woo-woo – they're simply tools we can use to help us grow into the kind of people we want to be, to develop the capacity to have the kind of relationships we want to have, and to become the kind of beloved community that we know, deep in our hearts, is the salvation of the world.

Most of Christianity dodges this step by making the either cynical or realistic assumption that people will never let go of the belief that their emotions are the outcome of events. So the Christian formula creates a meta-narrative that supersedes life experience: You are saved! You're going to heaven! Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Then there's the American secular version: I've just won the Super Bowl. I'm going to Disneyland!

And one thing that the spiritual quest of the ages has demonstrated over and over again is that a supportive community is of invaluable help in finding our way to a peaceful, safe, joyful and loving life – that the best way, perhaps the only way, to live this kind of life is to share it with others.

Becoming a member of a church community like this is a commitment to mutual support on the path of emotional maturity. By sharing our core values of compassion, growth, and justice together, we naturally treat one another with gentle kindness and good humor in a way that helps each of us toward realizing the ideals we hold in common. We stop seeking our happiness and contentment from arranging circumstances to our liking and we start taking responsibility for our emotions and our responses to each other.

This idea is well described by an image of membership that I heard from the Rev. Mike Piazza at last month's Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association Institute for Excellence in Ministry. (Yes, folks. I had to suffer through a week in Monterrey, California.) He explained that everyone is welcome to participate in his church, but becoming a member meant something more than that. Becoming a member means that you take off your bib and put on your apron. Membership means that your involvement with the church is about serving rather than being served. Membership means that you stop complaining when you don't get what you want; you roll up your sleeves and take the responsibility of being a host. It's not that you stop receiving, but your focus shifts from what you get to what you give: that's the meaning of membership.

The Rev. Renee Ruchotzke described her response to Piazza's presentation. She said, "I remember the moment when I really felt I had become a 'real' member of my own congregation. It wasn't when I started dropping a weekly check into the offering basket. It wasn't when I took my first religious education class. It wasn't when I signed the membership book. It wasn't even when I become [president] of the congregation. I felt I became a 'real' member when I spent a full Saturday as part of a work party doing a deep cleaning of the church building before ingathering Sunday."

She continued, "I'm not saying that membership only comes with a scrub brush and mop. But I do believe that when we become a member of a congregation, we should be asked to change our posture from guest to host, from visitor to steward.

"As hosts, we make sure the guests find a welcoming and nurturing spiritual community. As lifelong seekers, we grow our own souls through our own continuous faith development. As stewards, we offer our time and money to help sustain and grow that community. As members we agree to serve in these roles and more, in covenant with one another and with our highest ideals."

Our congregation here has many opportunities to participate, to give, as well as to receive. I invite you to reflect on your church experience and ask yourself whether your focus is on what you get or on what you give, because it's giving that

makes membership alive and lively, the kind of participation and responsibility that can lead to developing the peaceful, safe, joyful and loving lives we long for.

We have many, many ways to get involved in our church. There's hospitality and greeters, there are committees, the Board of Trustees and teaching our children's classes. We have a mindfulness practice group, a men's group and singing in the choir and more. Many of us give of our time, effort and substance to our Wednesday night winter Homeless Shelter. When you're ready to take off your bib and put on the apron, we're ready for you.

I recently learned that when the Obama campaign was getting started, there was one member of his entourage who couldn't stand the proposed catch phrase, "Yes we can!" It seemed too simplistic and emotional, and didn't really say anything thoughtful or considered or even specific. Fortunately for our history, that person was amenable to persuasion and one of the most memorable and energizing campaign slogans was born.

I learned that the person who hated it at first was no other than Barak Obama himself. Once he withdrew his opposition to the slogan, he really leaned into it, as we all can remember. And there's a lesson here. Sometimes something simple is best, especially if it's positive.

Unitarian Universalists have a tendency to get stuck in our heads, thinking deep thoughts about weighty matters. We're a little bit like Obama in this way. We tend to opt for complexity rather than simplicity. Obama eventually recognized the limitations of this approach. So I ask you, can we join him this morning?

So I ask you, can we say one simple, positive thing?

"Yes we can!"

Can we be a congregation that embraces our diversity of opinion while still working together for the peace, safety, joy, and love we long for?

"Yes we can!"

Can we build the kind of beloved community where everyone feels safe, feels appreciated, and feels supported on their journey?

"Yes we can!"

Can we take responsibility for our own emotions and stop blaming others for how we feel?

“Yes we can!”

Can we take off our bibs and put on our aprons?

“Yes we can!”

Can we be good stewards of congregational life instead of just good consumers?

“Yes we can!”

Can we pledge our support for this church through its annual Stewardship Campaign?

“Yes we can!”

Can we show our enthusiastic appreciation for our leaders who have already pledged over \$92,000 in support of our church and its missions?

“Yes we can!”

Can we appreciate the kind of abundant generosity that never leaves us with buyer’s remorse?

“Yes we can!”

Can we make the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley a vital, growing, enthusiastic, safe and happy place to be?

“Yes we can!” [x3]

May it be so.