

Every Little Thing Is Gonna Be Alright

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

“Bob Marley poet and a prophet. Bob Marley taught me how to off it. Bob Marley walkin’ like he talked it.” That is how Bob Marley was described ten years after his death by the singer Anthony Kiedis. He is a poet, a song writer, and a singer. His music made ska and reggae music mainstream in American musical culture in the 1970s. And yet his is so much more than a successful musician. According to Wikipedia, Australian aborigines burn a sacred flame in Bob Marley’s memory in Sydney’s Victoria Park, Hopi Native Americans believe he was a fulfillment of an ancient prophesy—literally making him a prophet. And my favorite: some people in Nepal believe that Bob Marley was an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. Bob Marley’s music clearly touches people at a very deep level; particularly among cultures who have been oppressed and need hope. But his music is for everyone. When Marley died at age 36 of cancer the Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga said, “His voice was an omnipresent cry in our electronic world. His sharp features, majestic looks, and prancing style a vivid etching on the landscape of our minds. Bob Marley was never

seen. He was an experience which left an indelible imprint with each encounter. Such a man cannot be erased from the mind. He is part of the collective consciousness of the nation.” Who better to celebrate during this our first “Small Music Sunday.”

Now I know many of you were enticed by promises of Rev. Josh wearing dreadlocks. Scott even offered to do so with me, since we are both follically challenged. I had someone ask me this week, “So what kind of communion do you do on Bob Marley Sunday?” Nothing like that. Today is all about the music and the message. For the message within the music is a very important one. My hope is that we can sit back, be open to music that you may not know much about, or you may be singing along with as the service goes on, and consider a new source for our liberal tradition.

Bob Marley was born in Jamaica in 1945. His mother was native Jamaican and his father was British. Thus he was half white and half black; a reality that made him marginal among both communities. His father was in the British Navy which meant he traveled a great deal. Sadly his father died when Marley was quite young. He married Rita Anderson in 1966, at the age of 21, and moved to America to live with his mother. This was the only time in Bob Marley’s life when he lived in the USA. Where did he move to? Wilmington Delaware. He was a lab assistant at DuPont, and worked on the assembly line of the Chrysler

plant. So think about 1966 at the DuPont Corporation. Some of you may have actually known Bob Marley and worked with him.

He did not live here long however. And interestingly it was shortly after he moved away from Wilmington and went back to Jamaica that he converted away from his mother's Catholicism and to the Rastafari religion. Rastafarians believe that Africa is a kind of Promised Land from which they are exiled. It was inspired in part by Marcus Garvey's back to Africa movement, and many of Garvey's ideas can be heard in Marley's songs. In the late sixties Marley formed his band the "Wailers" and started recording. He first became known when Eric Clapton covered "I Shot the Sheriff." Many of his biggest hits you will hear this morning "Stir It Up," "No Woman, No Cry," "Redemption Song," "One Love"—which is the song the Jamaican tourism industry uses in its commercials. And "Three Little Birds" which is the song from which the title of this sermon is taken. "Don't worry about a thing. Every little thing is gonna be alright."

Last week when Rev. Barbara told us that she was leaving our church at the end of the year to pursue interim ministry, I thought, "You know there is no better message to share with all of you this week than that. Every little thing is gonna be alright." I was telling her this week that it's a little strange that what has been the best kept secret at First Unitarian Church for the past couple of years, that she was searching for a new church, is now common knowledge. I know that many of you

join me in wishing nothing but the best for Rev. Barbara as she embarks on this next stage of her career. I am very supportive of her decision, and she has no bigger fan than me. To be seen as a solo minister, rather than the specialist we have asked her to be for these many years, it helps to have a wide range of experiences under her belt. Interim ministry work will go a long way to accomplishing that. So I am excited for you and wish you all the best on the next step on your journey.

As Rev. Barbara said so eloquently stated in her letter to the congregation and in last Sunday's sermon, our grief is real right now. It is important to say good bye to her well, and I know that we will. That said, a few of you came up to me last week and asked "So now what?" It is natural to have some anxiety about our congregation and what the next steps are for us on our journey together. To which I say, "Don't worry about a thing. Every little thing is gonna be alright." I have been talking to the Transitions office at the UUA for the past four or five months thinking through our various options. We will be looking for an interim Assistant Minister for next year. We will then conduct a nationwide search to hire a settled Assistant Minister next year. The Board and I are working on entering the pool for interim ministers next year, and hopefully by early to mid May we will have someone lined up to come here in the fall.

This is a scary and exciting moment for our congregation. I know it is for me. But what I said on Ingathering Sunday last fall is true today

as much as it was then: we will choose bold over mild. When we come to these crossroad moments in life you can either be overcome by fear and suffering or be inspired to act on a compelling vision for your future. That is what Bob Marley means when he says “Every little thing is gonna be alright.” It doesn’t mean that life is easy and we should expect a hall pass from fear and suffering. Quite the opposite. To Bob Marley, fear and suffering are a given. The question is what do you do with them? They can make you fold or they can inspire action. That is why his music is so appealing to oppressed people throughout the world: it takes suffering seriously but keeps the fire of hope burning in the midst of that pain.

The philosopher Cornel West calls this “tragic-comic hope.” Cornel West may be the greatest philosopher alive today. He is sort of the designated philosopher of the African American experience these days. He is one of my favorites because he combines highly rigorous philosophy with pop culture in interesting and compelling ways. One thing that West points out is the perspective of African American, and in a wider sense Jamaican, music. West writes this about blues music, “That is the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.” That is the essence of Bob Marley as well. So this morning we have heard and will hear music that is happy and optimistic; encouraging us to not worry. And there are songs that are angry about the state of the world, and names that reality

with uncomfortable clarity—just as the Hebrew prophets used to. Bob Marley poet and a prophet.

This perspective takes seriously our suffering in the present while at the same time inspires hope for a better tomorrow. That is what Cornel West means by “tragic-comic hope.” It starts with the spirituals and their message that “there is more love somewhere. I am going to keep on until I find it.” That is why the civil rights movement picked up so many of those songs and reapplied them in a new context. They were originally meant to keep spirits and hope alive during slavery and perhaps while escaping from slave owners. But in the 1960s “We Shall Overcome someday” is a cry of tragic-comic hope—we aren’t there yet, but we know we will get there. This is a very sophisticated theodicy—the theology of understanding God in the midst of suffering. From this point of view, God is on the side of the oppressed not the powerful. That shift in perspective was liberating, and it forms the basis of liberation theology. A tragic-comic hope inspires people who should be feeling hopeless by the standards most of us would have. But music, music that moves the soul by speaking directly to that experience of being held down and then tells you that every little thing is gonna be alright because there is freedom coming, well that hope is very powerful.

How powerful? We have seen no better demonstration of it than the past few weeks around the world. The struggle for freedom in Egypt and in Libya has captured the world’s attention. But there have also

been freedom movements in Tunisia, Yemen, and recently in the Ivory Coast. I have to think that Bob Marley is smiling somewhere to see a lot of this happening in his beloved Africa. People who had been oppressed and kept down by dictators and despots, even if that dictator was among their own people and not a colonial ruler, are standing up for their rights. It is amazing to see. These are not just empty words some Jamaican guy is singing, he is expressing the pain and hope of nations and the world is acting on it.

And it isn't just nameless people on the other side of the world who have this tragic-comic hope; it is right here in Delaware. I was on the steps of Legislative Hall two weeks ago when I heard Governor Markel promise to sign into law a bill giving same sex couples in Delaware the ability to form civil unions. These bills have come and sadly gone in the past. On this occasion, with a new legislature in office, new legislation was being introduced. Many of these bills have died in the Senate committee. But last Wednesday it came out of that committee and will be voted on by the full Senate. That is a huge hurdle to overcome. Polls show that Delawareans support civil unions by two to one. Now most of you have lived in Delaware longer than I have and you know that it isn't a done deal yet. But despite falling short in the past, civil unions in Delaware have a real change to pass this time. And if they don't we will try again and again and again. For that is the

essence of tragic-comic hope: “to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.”

Karl Marx famously wrote that religion is the opiate of the masses. By that he meant that religion, either his own Judaism or Christianity, was simply a shot of warm feelings to help the oppressed proletariat make it through another week. Religion, he believed, just kept people in their place and prevented the boat from being rocked. It kept the status quo intact. But Marx was always assuming that his immediate historical circumstances were somehow indicative of universal principles. You certainly see that with his economic theories, but we won't go there this morning. No his was more a caricature of religion or as some generous critics have said he point to a pathology of religion rather than to its essence. If your culture says that religion is an experience of grace and numinous connection to God and only that experience will save you not the works you do, then it does start to sound like religion is just another way to get high. That was the initial case with Zen in 1960s America—it was another experience to be had. But that is not what religion truly is. Religion gives us that tragic-comic hope that even though today is hard, tomorrow has new possibilities that we cannot imagine. That is an important message to have in anxious times. Instead of anaesthetizing people into inaction, it actually stirs them up, to quote Mr. Marley, to work for their freedom. That is very clearly the message in our reading this morning—religion isn't about God up in the sky but about what it

will inspire you to do here on earth. Just ask Mubarak how much an opiate religion is of the oppressed masses. Christian protesters in Egypt would form a ring around their Muslim compatriots while they prayed in the square to protect them from the government forces. Then the Muslims would return the favor by protecting the Christians while they prayed. Religion in this instance is not telling people to go home and stay in their sociological place. It is sustaining and inspiring them to keep working for justice. Even Rastafari religion, in which opiates are literally a part of their rituals, has a strong message of liberation and freedom that gives us hope.

And so it is that Bob Marley's tragic-comic hope can speak to us; to this very congregation in his former home city of Wilmington Delaware. Whether it is seeking justice and equality for our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered brothers and sisters or just dealing with the anxiety of going through another ministerial search process, we experience suffering right here and now. Perhaps there is something going on in your life today that is very painful and you would wish to avoid it. No one is going to offer you a magic wand to take away that experience. In fact our church is here to ask you to do deeper into that pain and that suffering and that anxiety. Let it inspire you to act. Let it teach you about who you are and what you value. For it has no meaning until you give it meaning. And only then will we understand that every little thing is gonna be alright.

May we together bless our beloved sister Rev. Barbara as she embarks on her exciting new path. Bless us as we embark on our exciting new path. And help us to transform our suffering into action, so that all those who suffer may be free. Amen Blessed Be.