

# "What's So Good About Feeling Bad?"

Rev. Alison Hyder

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First Unitarian Church of Wilmington

## Opening words by Kabir *The Bījak of Kabir #23*

Joy is small; grief at the start, grief at the end.  
The mind rushes on, a drunk elephant.  
Can you forget joy and be free?  
You leave truth and run after lies.  
Fire and light blaze; you burn like a moth, pleasing your eyes.  
Think: what's the way to end sorrow?  
Break your engagement with lies.  
Your birth is guttering out in greed.  
Old age and death crowd close.

World tied up in confusion; everything comes and goes.  
You got a human birth.  
Why are you so deceived?

## READING: by Max Coots "Winter"

The farmer used to know things about the snow we ought to know.  
The farmer used to call the snow "the poor man's fertilizer."  
A homely sort of name -  
A crude, but honest thing to call this drifting promise.  
It is next year's water and next year's grain,  
Fall's end and Spring's beginning.  
So, when was it we learned the earth would end?  
In Autumn?  
Never!

When did we ever learn that life was always Summertime and Spring and harvest time?  
When was it that someone guaranteed a year of twelve Julys,  
complete with everlasting picnics and never-ending potato salads?  
What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said spring could come without December -  
That life was all in June -  
That May and August go on forever?

Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul's fertilizer,  
And Spring within can come only  
if some Winter has come first -  
Can come,  
if something like a seed is kept alive  
through wintering, to sprout and grow.

To sprout and grow because of Winter and the wintering.

Like earth, we have our seasons too.

Now that we think of it, we knew this even then, back when in Summer  
we grew complacent in its sun.

Or when in Fall we reaped the earth, as though all life was caught and wrapped and stuffed in a  
pumpkin shell, to be picked, then lost through Winter eating.

We knew better, even then,

But snow makes for forgetting, so it seems.

**Reading:** Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, in *Start Where You Are*

*Life has taught me the wisdom of moving toward what scares me. The reason we're often not there for others - whether our child or our mother or someone who is insulting us or frightens us - is that we're not there for ourselves. There are whole parts of ourselves that are so unwanted that whenever they begin to come up we run away.*

*Because we escape, we keep missing being right here, being right on the dot. We keep missing the moment we're in. Yet if we can experience the moment we're in, we discover that it's unique, precious, and completely fresh. It never happens twice. One can appreciate and celebrate each moment - there's nothing more sacred. There's nothing more vast or absolute. In fact, there's nothing more!*

*Only to the degree that we've gotten to know our personal pain, only to the degree that we've related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others. To that degree we will be able to take on the pain of others because we will have discovered that their pain and our own pain are not different.*

**SERMON:** "What's So Good About Feeling Bad?" - Rev. Alison Hyder

I once read an anecdote about the playwright Samuel Beckett, who wrote *Waiting For Godot* and other such bleak, existentialist plays. One day, he was greeted by a friend, who observed, "What a gorgeous day this is! Why, it makes you feel good to be alive!" Beckett thought for a moment, looking about him. "Well," he said, "I wouldn't go *that* far."

Sometimes, I can relate to that. I live with the duality between thoughts and moods - my head and my chemistry - that is the result of depression. I'm just not able to make enough serotonin to feel my good personal fortune. So periodically - during the winter season or any particularly cloudy day - I feel weighted and oppressed. It feels like I am wearing armor that weighs down my body and restricts my head. It puts a barrier between me and the objective world. Everything becomes much harder.

It also makes me more compassionate. Having depression deepens my understanding of other people. For the most part I am extremely fortunate: in my family and friends, my skills and character. So depression is a big check on blithe and entitled attitudes. I feel especially sympathetic to people with chronic illness whose lives are hijacked by their bodies. I understand loss and desolation and suicide. Depression gives me depths that I didn't seek but would never surrender. I have learned to look under the surface. It's a grimy, harsh and complex world. Nothing is certain.

And besides, I am on two pretty effective medications. They keep most of my grimness at bay and keep me functional and reasonably optimistic. I can afford to be objective about a problem that's made manageable. I'm living better through chemistry. I have some control over it.

Beings need that sense of autonomy, of choice. It's the feeling of impotence that leads us to despair and resignation. As long as we feel control over our situation we can handle most situations: illness, challenge, loss, displacement. Even a small amount of choice can keep us from surrender. For instance, you may lose your hearing, but if you can still read, feel a beat, and remember a song, you'll handle it. Maybe we can't afford a cruise, but we can take a walk on the beach and feel sunshine on our shoulders. We can't change our boss, but we can control how we think and act. There is nothing good or bad," per Hamlet, "but thinking makes it so."

So the responsibility is right back on our shoulders. Isn't that just a bite? It's no good playing the victim or blaming someone else. We're still the ones who are in charge of our attitudes, if not our conditions. We can, of course, accept our fate passively. Or we can take personal initiative, analyze our expectations and assumptions, and choose what to believe. In other words, we actually have to do some work. It's so annoying.

Admiral James Stockdale was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. As you know, their treatment was extremely harsh and unpredictable. No one knew what was in store. Most of the prisoners were isolated. Torture was routine. But James Stockdale never doubted that he could survive. The people who died, he said, were "...The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And then they died of a broken heart. ... That is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end - which you can never afford to lose - with the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

The key, he concludes, is to "maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND *at the same time* have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." That is what biographer Jim Collins calls "the Stockdale Paradox." [*Good to Great*, by Jim Collins] It is a combination of head and heart that lets you maintain internal integrity and perspective.

It is not easy to step back and see our situation for what it is when we have years of associated memories, experiences, and pain. That's what we talk to our friends, or bring in outside consultants. They can cut through our baggage and present another angle. In fact, one of the things that I'm doing in my interim ministry is to help Rev. Josh see First Unitarian Church with fresh eyes. We have many conversations where we present our observations and discuss their many differences. As a temporary minister, I have the freedom and the detachment to tell the truth as I see it, no matter how difficult. That's very hard to do from within a group.

Here's an interesting example of the power of detachment: Toni Morrison wrote her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, at a difficult time in her life. Her marriage had ended. She was a single mother, struggling to survive. And yet she was particularly productive. She discovered that she wrote extremely well when she was depressed. For many of us, that's the least productive time. One's energy is low and it's

hard to be motivated. So Morrison analyzed what was happening. She realized that the key to her productivity was not that she was unhappy, but that her depression helped her to be disengaged. It distanced her from day-to-day preoccupations. In that internalized state she could 'hear' things, and receive the gift of inspiration. She had to discard her usual routines and certainties and find that creative absence. Once she figured this out, Morrison was able to achieve detachment without manufacturing this despair.

Of course, Toni Morrison is a genius. Most of us aren't quite that wise. We don't know how to separate the perspective from the pain. You can't change until you are ready. Addicts may have to hit the bottom before they can see the light. It can take a shock or a crisis to get us to move. In other words, we have to suffer. We have to suffer to learn how to avoid suffering. It's just the way we are made. All the rest is advertising.

As Max Coots writes,

When did we ever learn that life was always Summertime and Spring and harvest time?  
When was it that someone guaranteed a year of twelve Julys, complete with everlasting picnics and never-ending potato salads?  
What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said spring could come without December -  
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Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul's fertilizer,  
And Spring within can come only if some Winter has come first -  
Can come, if something like a seed is kept alive through wintering, to sprout and grow.  
To sprout and grow because of Winter and the wintering.  
Like earth, we have our seasons too.

Just as a seed must thrust through the frozen earth to reach full growth, sometimes the most vital and compassionate ideals emerge from the dark wells of despair. Rather than settle for an easy approach, doubt demands a deeper look into concepts and values that a simpler faith ignores and often marginalizes. It frees new possibilities for expression. Doubt forces us to discover and to live our own truth, and not only what we have been told to believe. Just like the winter winds strip a tree down to its bare essence, we can sometimes see most clearly when all of our assumptions are gone. Absence reveals what is really there all along. It makes room for new growth.

Pema Chodron explains: "Only to the degree that we've gotten to know our personal pain, only to the degree that we've related with pain at all, will we be fearless enough, brave enough, and enough of a warrior to be willing to feel the pain of others. To that degree we will be able to take on the pain of others because we will have discovered that their pain and our own pain are not different."

It is ironic that after all the scares about terrorist plotters, the pressure of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that culture of constant fear, that the real calamity besetting our country is internal. In the past, wars stimulated an economy. But the United States - and most of the world - is facing an economic crisis of a complex and divisive nature. We are all affected, some radically. People are worried, desperate, and despairing. And while it is good to know that it's not our fault, that we didn't cause most of these woes, it also means that that there is more competition for the resources that

exist. There don't seem to be enough jobs and services. And to make matters worse, there is an attitude of disdain and blame from some of our politicians. They think they live in a vacuum.

But people form communities because we know that they are wrong. We depend on each other, and we are happiest when we acknowledge that truth. You come to First Unitarian Church because you want to be with other people who want to live more ethical and useful lives, who are struggling to find meaning in loss and confusion. You are helped by people who find doubt a tool for exploration and healing (from rigid rules, cultural norms, from oppression and smug indifference). And you hope that here with these people you can open your heart and find friendship, comfort, joy, and purpose. Our lives are intertwined.

On Friday night a few of us gathered for homemade soup to discuss some of the pain in the congregation trying to Live on Less. We know that there are members with severe financial problems, who struggle to pay basic bills. Christmas will be difficult. Some parents can't pay for both a babysitter AND a movie. There are members who have given up job-hunting. A number of you are trying to figure out how to get by on half your retirement income. Here at First Unitarian and all around the country people are trying to live on less. So a bunch of us got together to brainstorm and plan what we can do to help.

But first we have to acknowledge the very deep identity we get from money. No matter how liberal or independent we think we are, almost all of us get some of our self-image from our class and our possessions. In this country, there is very real shame when we have to downsize or do without. Poor people are stigmatized as lazy parasites, trying to live off of others. The Calvinist message is clear and strong - misfortunes are your own fault, a punishment from God. You obviously deserve to suffer.

We know that this isn't true, and yet it's so easy to be drawn into that trap. I was full of self-doubt and worry when I was between jobs. I began to think I was a one-church minister, unsuited for anyplace else. Thank goodness for First U! But many of you worked for the same company for most of your careers. It was your identity. Who are you without it? How can bear losing your job and your house too? The pressures pile up. But it is not your fault. You are more than your money, more than your car. We really don't care what you wear to church. It's you we want, not your wardrobe. I know - very intimately - that it is hard, but you can get past the shame.

Even better, you can use it as a tool. To experience compassion for others, we must also feel it toward ourselves. We must recognize the feelings and impulses within us - even the ones we hate, the ones that make us uncomfortable or lonely or discouraged. We have to be with them, honor them, and be grateful for how our feelings help us to cope. We can remember what they teach us.

For we are far from helpless. We came up with some very good ideas at our "Living On Less" meeting, ways to help us care for each other financially and spiritually, by providing community as well as help. Suggestions included regular intergenerational potlucks, monthly or more. Those who can't afford to bring something don't have to; there's always enough food. We can add free social activities like movies, karaoke, and games nights, simple fun that brings us together. We also discussed a food closet where you can give or take at your discretion. We'd like to start a skills bank where people can post the services they can offer others. A couple of members volunteered to lead sessions on cooking for less. Scott talked about planting a vegetable garden on the church grounds. None of these ideas are going

to give you jobs or keep a house from foreclosure, but they can provide comfort and support in this edgy time. We'll be talking more about these projects in January. In the meantime, I'll be starting two "living on less" open groups, Tuesday nights and Wednesday afternoons, where we can talk about the challenges and express our fears, and get advice and understanding from people who care. There's more information online and in the January *Quest*.

Suffering is not a punishment, but it can be a tool. Let's use this time to build a closer community, one that is based on compassion, understanding, and strength. It may never get a lot better, but I think that we have the courage, the intelligence, and yes, the faith, to cope with our troubles and find deeper resources within.

I want to close with a beautiful and fairly pertinent story that seems to want to be here. It is about Moses Mendelssohn, the composer's grandfather. Moses Mendelssohn was a notable scholar who helped to modernize Judaism. He became an advisor to the court of the King of Prussia. He was intelligent and wise. But he was not attractive. He was short, with a hunched back and a large head. One day in 1760 Moses visited a merchant in Hamburg and fell hopelessly in love with the merchant's daughter, a lovely young woman named Frumtje. It was a one-sided affair. Moses repulsed her. Still, one day he gathered up his courage to speak to Frumtje one last time. She was so beautiful, but she could hardly bear to look at him. They made their way through awkward silences. Finally, Moses asked, 'Do you believe that marriages are made in heaven?' 'Yes,' Frumtje answered, looking at the floor, 'and do you?' Moses replied, "Yes I do. For you see, in heaven at the birth of each person, the Lord announces whom you will marry. When I was born, God pointed my future bride out to me. Then the Lord added, 'And she will be humpbacked.' Right then and there I called out, 'Oh Lord, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please Lord, give me the hump and let her be beautiful.' Frumtje looked up and into Moses' eyes, stirred by some deep memory. Then she reached out and gave Mendelssohn her hand. She became his devoted wife." [adapted from a chapter by Joyce and Barry Vissell in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*].

The world is our mirror. But to see its reflection, we have to look within, to the beautiful truth that lies inside of us. May we all grow in compassion, wisdom, and a little bit of cunning.

***Closing Words: "Song II" by John Hall Wheelock***

Lift your arms to the stars  
And give an immortal shout!  
Not all the wells of darkness  
Can put your beauty out.

You are armed with love, with love,  
Not all the powers of fate

Avail to do you harm -  
Nor all the hands of hate.

What of good and evil,  
Hell, and Heaven above -  
Trample them with love!  
Ride over them with love!