

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 8 May, 2011

## Surprised by Joy

Kem and I are perched in the loft of our friend Theresa's house, overlooking her kitchen. It is Theresa's fiftieth birthday. A dozen of us have spent the better part of the last hour bearing armloads of food and drink from where we have hidden our cars down the road, and laying out a feast. Now it's time to turn off the lights, hide, and wait to surprise her. We're silent as Theresa and Ed pull up in their driveway, having circled back from their way out to dinner, allegedly to pick up Ed's forgotten wallet. Theresa walks alone down the dark walk to the dark house. Up in the loft, someone whispers, "Does anyone know if she likes surprises?"

I love surprises – good surprises – both on the giving and receiving ends. I love being happily jolted out of the ordinary to the extraordinary – sudden surprises – and I love those surprises when you slowly but surely realize what's unfolding, believe it or not. One of my favorite teachers, the Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast, writes, "Have you ever noticed how your eyes open a bit wider when you're surprised? It's as if you had been asleep, merely daydreaming or sleepwalking through some routine activity, ... and all of a sudden, you're awake...."

"Humdrum equals deadness; surprise equals life."

The old hymn begins,

Open mine eyes that I may see  
 Glimpses of truth thou hast for me  
 Open mine eyes, illumine me,  
 Spirit divine.<sup>1</sup>

Brother David Steindl-Rast says, "my favorite name for the One I worship in wonder ... is Surprise."<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Clara H. Scott, 1895, "Open Mine Eyes, That I May See." Text based on Psalm 119.

2 Brother David Steindl-Rast, "Giving Thanks for All the Little (and Big) Things in Life," in *Spirituality and Health* magazine, Winter 2002, pp. 34-37

Surprise is an interesting name for g\*d.

Our friend Theresa was truly surprised by her party, and incredibly gracious. Laughing in shock as the lights came up and we serenaded her with our best off-key version of *Happy Birthday*, she was immediately fully present to the gift of the big change in plans. If she had been looking forward to an intimate evening with her husband, she let it go without a trace, giving herself to our raucous song and dance-fest. And I wondered then, as I wonder now, What if we could train ourselves to accept every moment just like this: wide-eyed, awake, and curious; interested rather than fearful of what comes next?

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The dice of G\*d are always loaded.”<sup>3</sup>

Feeling baffled is a waste of time. Reviewing what brought us to this moment, the place in which we find ourselves – surprised or otherwise – is almost certainly only minimally useful. But opening to whatever it is that life is proffering, right now, can make us radiantly alive, if only because, suddenly, our life will appear to us as it really is: fragile, brief, unspeakably precious ... and full of surprises.

Surprise is characterized as messy, but it is also a kind of pure state: heart open and undefended. Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chadin wrote, “Purity does not lie in separation from [the universe,] but in deeper penetration into the universe.... The world is filled, and filled with the Absolute. To see this is to be made free.” When it unlocks our capacity for gratitude, surprise can set us free.

I hope I remember this story correctly. It was told to me by Peter Fleck, my friend and colleague of blessed memory, who, with his wife, Ruth, escaped the Nazi invasion of Holland and made a new home here. Peter had a friend who lived in terror of the Gestapo. Yet when this friend was arrested, rather than being plunged into fatefulness and depression, he said, “Now the time of dread has ended. The time of hope has begun.”

How anyone could have felt anything remotely like hope in those circumstances is far beyond my spiritual acuity. But there is something so beautiful in this: Imagine surprise, even terrible surprise, as a directive to trust in life. Again, first century Roman poet Horace: *Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*. Seize the day, putting as little trust

---

3 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Compensations: Oi chusoi Dios aei enpiptousi*

as possible in the future.

Embracing surprise is, at its heart, the spiritual practice of assuming nothing, and taking nothing for granted. I hop into my car with just enough time to get to a meeting. The battery is dead. It only needed to happen once to inspire me to gratitude, now, every single time the engine turns over. A man describes his work as uninteresting. Amazingly, not many months later, when millions have lost their jobs, he finds himself thankful to have work at all – thankful, and humbled. A woman befriends a man whose child is so disabled she will never have the capacity to respond to him in any meaningful way. Once angry with her inattentive children, the woman feels grateful for them, grateful that she might chose to improve their relationship. Embrace surprise, and take nothing for granted: this is the heart of gratitude.

If you have ever spent time in the emergency room, or in the hospital with people who are very sick, you know you can almost always find someone whose grave situation inspires you to shoulder bravely through the difficulty you are encountering. When we watch the news, there are ten thousand examples in a single broadcast reminding us that, even facing something grim in our own life, we are, indeed, in the great company of the bereaved; even devastated, you are not alone.

Wise teachers remind us never to go to bed angry, and to tell the people we love that we love them; to live as if we may never pass this way again. The story is told of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Hasid who wept every morning as he left his wife and children to head for work. When a friend asked him why he cried, he answered, “When I begin [my work], I call out to [G\*d]. Then I pray, 'Have mercy me.' Who knows what the Lord's power will do to me in that moment after I have invoked it and before I beg for mercy?”<sup>4</sup>

Brother David Steindl-Rast writes, “Once we stop taking things for granted, our own bodies become some of the most surprising things of all. It never ceases to amaze me that my body both produces and destroys fifteen million red blood cells every second. Fifteen million! ... I am told that the blood vessels in my body, if lined up end to end, would reach around the world. Yet my heart needs only one minute to pump my blood through this filigree network and back again.

“It has been doing so minute by minute, day by day,” he continues, “for the past seventy-five years, and still keeps pumping away at one hundred thousand heartbeats every twenty-four hours. Obviously, this is a matter of life and death for me, yet I have

---

4 As told by Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, pp. 8-9

no idea how it works, and it seems to work amazingly well, in spite of my ignorance.” Brother David Steindl-Rast is now eighty-three years old. His heart is still working.

In 2005, after the devastation of the deluge, Arlington Street created a partnership with First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans, and committed to help them rebuild. This past week, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of this beloved community, we returned to New Orleans and installed a drip irrigation system in a large community garden in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward.

On our last day, we quit at mid-afternoon, and headed to Jazz Fest, which was, as always, spectacular. Legendary tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins is back in New Orleans to play the Fest this year. His is an amazing story.

Theodore Walter Rollins was a teenage sax prodigy in Harlem's Sugar Hill. Under the influence of Charlie Parker and the tutelage of Thelonius Monk, Sonny Rollins played with other jazz greats such as Bud Powell and Miles Davis. In the 1960s, he dropped out of the music scene and travelled to Japan and India to study yoga, meditation, and Eastern philosophy, then returned to New York to play jazz fusion in the 70s and 80s, and world music in the 90s.

He was seventy-one years old when he heard the World Trade Center collapse a few blocks away and was evacuated from his home with only his sax in hand. Five days later, he came to Boston to give a concert, which was recorded live at the Berklee School of Music. In 2006, he won a Grammy for “This Is What I Do Without A Song (The 9/11 Concert).” Here is some of what Sonny Rollins said in a Jazz Fest interview:

“The thing about [the night of the 9/11 concert] is that everybody was so shaken by what had happened. Not just the [audience], but the [musicians], as well; we were all in another world.... I [had been] in our apartment in New York. When I got ... to where [my wife, Lucille] was, ... my legs were all rubbery after walking down forty flights of stairs in the dark ..., so I couldn't even think about a concert. But [Lucille] insisted that we do it....

“9/11 was quite an experience for me,” he continues. “I learned so much....

“I learned that my possessions didn't matter. I'd been living in that apartment for almost thirty years, and I had a lot of books, [stage] clothes, musical instruments, and ninety percent of it was destroyed.... I lost all of that, and I was really mad about it, and

then I came to realize, 'Wait a minute. Those are just material things. That's not what life is about.' That was a big revelation for me....”

“I remember when we were being evacuated. They wanted me to get on the evacuation bus. There were some old ladies that lived in [our] building, and they were sitting there very calmly, and here I was, all upset. I thought, 'I should be ashamed of myself.' Then I noticed how everybody was so kind to each other... It was remarkable to see it.”

Sonny Rollins concludes, “[Many New Orleans musicians who lost everything in the flood] came to the same revelations....” Surprise! “Life is festive. Life isn't all disaster.”<sup>5</sup>

Alice Walker writes, “Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise.”<sup>6</sup>

One more story; you know it. Zen master Hakuin was praised for his pure living. But when the young woman whose family owned the little grocery store in the neighborhood found herself pregnant, and named Hakuin as the father, everything changed. Angrily, her parents confronted the master. He listened attentively. “Is that so?” he asked.

When the child was born, it was brought to him. Though people would hardly speak to Hakuin, over the next year, he cared for the baby with great tenderness. Finally, the young woman could stand it no longer and told the truth: the father of the child worked in the fish market.

Her parents returned at once to Hakuin, begging his forgiveness, and requesting the return of the child.

Again, the Zen master listened attentively. He took the child into his arms and handed it to the grandparents, saying, simply, “Is that so?”<sup>7</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,  
Surprise equals life.

---

5 John Swenson, “Sonny Rollins Talks Back,” in *Offbeat* magazine, May, 2011, pp. 144-145

6 Alice Walker, “Expect Nothing,” in *Collected Poems*

7 Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, eds, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 390

May our eyes be opened to the gifts of the present: spirit divine.  
Let us cast our lot with goodness, and, as far as possible, take nothing for granted.  
Awake and curious, may we welcome the future.  
And may surprise unlock our capacity for gratitude, and set us free.