

Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Spirituality of Resilience

By Rev. Chris Buice

What I am about to share with you may at first seem like a distraction from the spirit of this Sunday, but bear with me. Hear me out.

I always appreciate getting feedback from members of the congregation although I sometimes wonder about some people's motivations. You will understand why when I tell you that I once received a list of suggestions with the title, *Ways to Survive Even the Dullest of Sermons*. (Hmmm, I wonder if someone is trying to tell me something.) So here are some of the recommendations for anyone experiencing boredom during a church service. It is a surprisingly thoughtful list of suggestions.

- See if a yawn really is contagious.
- Slap your neighbor. See if they turn the other cheek. If not, raise your hand and tell the minister.
- Pass a note to the organist asking whether she plays requests

- Listen for your preacher to use a word beginning with 'A' then 'B' and so on through the alphabet. You may get stuck on 'Q' and 'X' though...
- Sit in the back row and roll a handful of marbles under the pews ahead of you. After the service, credit yourself with 10 points for every marble that made it to the front.
- Using orders of service for raw materials, design, test and modify a fleet of paper airplanes.
- Start from the back of the church and try to crawl all the way to the front, under the pews, without being noticed.
- By unobtrusively drawing your arms up into your sleeves, turn your around.
- Try to raise one eyebrow.
- Think about your chin for an entire minute.

- Wiggle your ears so that the people behind you will notice.
- Practice smiling insincerely.

I mention this list because it might help us to wax nostalgic, to remember the days when life was boring and we had the luxury of boring worship services. We have been through a difficult year together. We have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. We have wrestled with ultimate issues that go to the core of what it means to be a human being. We've met physical force with soul force. We have struggled with hope and despair. We have pondered the boundaries of forgiveness. We have been confronted with unimaginable hatred and we have been surrounded and uplifted by unspeakable amounts of love. We have been wounded in body and spirit and we have known healing and wholeness. After going through everything we have, we deserve some boring Sundays. We've got some boring Sundays coming to us. Someone owes us.

I say this so you will know that I look forward to the day when I will look out at this congregation on a Sunday morning and it will be readily apparent to me that a disproportionate number of you are thinking about your chin or trying to lift one eyebrow or wiggling your ears. That will be a good day. You need not worry about offending me on that day. If you come up to me after a service and say, "Chris that was boring," I will pump my fist in the air and yell, "I nailed it." I will take it as a good sign that we are moving back toward the closest approximation we may ever have to normal life. It will be a sign of healing.

Of course, I imagine this is not a church that will go easily down the path of boredom and repose. As one of our former ministers Bob Swain once said, "TVUUC has enough energy to go three directions at once." Our church has often played the role of a respected oddity here in East Tennessee. We have been what Martin Luther King Jr called a community of the creatively maladjusted. It is hard to imagine our church

ever entering into a sustained period of dormancy. There is too much work to do.

When times got tough this year, I would often say, “The only goal we need to achieve this year is survival.” We have surpassed that goal. Aaron Payson, one of our trauma response counselors, said to me, “There is such a thing as post traumatic stress, but there is also the possibility of post traumatic growth.” He was speaking of personal growth and spiritual growth as well as numerical growth. We have known all of these experiences. This kind of growth is never easy, and we would all prefer to experience it some other way, but this deepening of the spirit has been a part of our process as we have made our way forward.

Last year, on the day of the shooting, when I was still grappling to comprehend what had happened to us and how we should respond I kept thinking to myself, “There are more ways to get this wrong than to get it right.” However, at this point in time I think we can say, that we have managed to make a way out of no way. We

have defied the odds and this has required the good efforts of more people than can ever be named this morning.

According to tradition Saint Francis prayed, “Make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred may I sow love.” This has been our prayer, and the prayer of our entire community. This year we have learned what it means to pray with our neighbors of all faiths and beliefs, to pray with our words and our work, “Make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred may we sow love. Where there is darkness may we bring light.” A Hebrew prayer book tells us, “Pray as if everything depends on God, act as if every depends on you.” We can never truly know the depths of spiritual life until we pray in this active way. A Catholic proverb tells us, “To labor is to pray.” Our words and our efforts converging, gaining power and force, moving toward that day when justice will roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In the aftermath of the shooting Beauvais Lyons and Diane Fox put up that wonderful banner that declared, “Love is the spirit of this church” and placed it out on Kingston Pike for all to see, an outward and visible sign of the inward commitment of this church. In the days and weeks that followed we were showered with every possible act of kindness and compassion. People of all faiths and beliefs and convictions, the religious and the irreligious, prayed with us and for us. This they set up a new banner to say “Thank you” to the community for all they have done” once again capturing our inner feelings in outward form.

Tomorrow night we will host a concert to say Thank You to our community, a concert featuring guitar music. Last year a guitar case contained an instrument of destruction. This year the guitar cases will contain instruments of peace. This past Friday, in Radford Virginia, at the Southeastern UU Summer Institute, the largest gathering of UUs outside of our annual General Assembly, participants were treated to a play by the teens, no one knew what the play

would be until it was performed, the play was Annie Jr. The youth of our movement from all parts of the country saluting the youth of our church. We are not alone this morning. The thoughts and prayers of our entire denomination are with us on this day.

Our denomination has launched a national campaign, inspired by our witness together, to encourage people all over our nation to stand on the side of love. To surround those who are vulnerable and marginalized and at-risk of hate crimes with compassion and understanding. The Universalists of the early 20th century affirmed a faith in God as eternal and all-conquering love. Our challenge is to work with people of all faiths and beliefs to be instruments of that kind of love in the world, instruments of peace dedicated to overcoming evil with good, hatred with love.

School counselors describe a phenomena they call “the bystander effect” as it relates to bullying. When bystanders do nothing, aggressive personalities feel that they can commit their actions with impunity. Bullies

come in many forms. Sometimes they are found on the school playground. Sometimes they carry arms. At other times their words are their weapons. Sometimes, they have their own radio or television shows or internet sites. Sometimes they run for office. At other times they infiltrate the workplace, the civic group and even the congregation. When we are intimidated by these bullies, they win. We must send a message, when we are confronted by hatred we stand on the side of love.

The evening after the incident last year, we gathered to regroup in the Presbyterian Church next door because our own sanctuary was still a crime scene. We thought there would only be members of our congregation there but instead we found ourselves surrounded by love. The worship hall was filled with our neighbors from various churches, the synagogue, the temple, the mosque and other civic organizations. People were crowded in the aisle, sitting around the altar on the floor and standing outside in the rain. There was a feeling in the air that night, the presence of a love that is greater than all our

differences. I carry that feeling with me this morning and I know that feeling will be with us tomorrow night.

I believe that our experience has shown us that it is our challenge to do everything in our power to create a positive bystander effect, so that an act of hatred is followed quickly by an act of love, so that what happened in Knoxville can happen anywhere in the world.

We must always remain creatively maladjusted to hatred, creatively maladjusted to bigotry, creatively maladjusted to intolerance. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." We must continue to live our role as a respected oddity in our community and in the world.

I once heard someone say, "Ships are safe in harbor, but that is not what ships are made for." And I would add, "Churches are safe when they refuse to speak out, but that's not what churches are made for. Congregations are safe when they

retreat into themselves and forget the troubles of the world but that's not what congregations are made for. Temples, mosques and holy places are safe when they remain silent when one voice might make all the difference, when one voice might change the world, but that is not what faith is made for. Members of a community who do not stand up to a bullies and intimidating personalities think they are safe, but that is not what real communities are made for. And we are called to be real communities.

A story is told of a small town where a very ecumenical revival was held. The next day the Baptist minister, the Methodist minister and the Unitarian minister met for coffee when the Baptist said, "That revival was good for us, our church gained 4 new members." The Methodist said, "That revival was good for us too, our church gained 6 new members." Finally the Unitarian minister chimed in, "That revival was really great for us. We got rid of ten of our worst trouble makers."

All kidding aside, we should never seek to be a church wholly free of troublemakers, wholly free from the maladjusted and the discontent. Instead we should all strive to be filled with a divine discontent, a holy restlessness always striving for that day when everyone of will be free. For none of us can be free until all of us are free.

We have been through a tough year. Some of us are not doubt craving for some boredom. No doubt Ted Jones, our outgoing president, and Grier Novinger, our current president, have more than woken up with the cold sweats with the conscious or unconscious prayer, “Give me boredom.” And when boredom comes I will be the first to welcome it. But I sincerely doubt that the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church can ever stay boring for long. One of the reasons I joined the UU church is because it is a difficult church to stay bored in.

Sometimes when someone asks me to explain our faith tradition to them I will say, “Mark Twain said, ‘Three things make this

country great. We have freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the prudence not to practice either.’ Unitarian Universalists are the imprudent ones.” And I hope we will continue to be the imprudent ones.

We must speak out. We must lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty. We must stand in the company of the prophets who were no strangers to violence and blood shed and intimidation, but who continued to persevere. We must stand and say in the words of a modern American prophet, words that we have said before in this sanctuary before, and words we must say over and over again. (Congregation says the words in italics of this responsive reading which is an adaption of MLK’s speech at the Lincoln Memorial)

Let freedom ring

from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring

from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring

from the heightening Alleghenies of
Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring

from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring

from the curvaceous peaks of California!

Let freedom ring

from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring

from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring

from every hill and every molehill of
Mississippi.

Let freedom ring

From every mountainside,

Let freedom ring

From this sanctuary

For when we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, from every sanctuary and every holy place, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, red, yellow, black and white, gay and straight, people of all colors, people of all faiths, people of all nations will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old African American spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"