

Ted Lapis
Sheridan Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
November 13, 2017

Humble Joy

Spirituality, in my view, sustains us through periods when other support may falter, or even fail. When societal behaviors careen out of control, spiritual beliefs can sustain the individual, family, or community. When personal relationships are stressed or ruptured, spiritual beliefs can help us find the “better Angels of our nature;” helping us to honor less than perfect humans, and not seek to do them harm. When health fails, spiritual beliefs can provide rich sources of support, to either help us get better, or help us die.

When our beliefs or myths are challenged, we are likely to seek out people we are spiritually close to for support. Most times, we seek the safe past. Sometimes however, our lives challenge us to accept that which we did not anticipate. In these times, life, like science, requires us to be open to new ideas. Indeed, in the most earth-shattering times even new realities, and to embrace change. Being open to surprise takes discipline, and a lot of preparation, to make a leap of faith.

In his classic work “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” Thomas Kuhn debunks the idea too often hyped on social media about impending scientific breakthroughs. If you know what you are looking for, you are not doing science. Science asks great questions, and uses techniques to answer questions that may offer novel answers to assumed knowledge. Results must be independently verifiable. Surprises advance knowledge, not the pursuit of greatness, though social media would have us believe that the cart comes before the horse.

My own most recent encounter with “Humble Joy” was years in the making, though I did not see it coming. Life is what happens, while we make other plans. .

I’ll start my story with my most difficult birthday. I turned 30 living in a small apartment in the Denver area. I was alone. Traveling some 75,000 miles a year by car, plus significant air miles, I was lonely. Not just the splendor of solitude, I was pit-of-the-stomach lonely.

I had given up on the idea of getting married, and was focused on my new career as a “sales engineer.” Technical sales for mechanical and electrical equipment,

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morphed into a career in process control, which changed to remote monitoring and control.

While I had some book knowledge of equipment, what enabled me to thrive in my career, was observing that a few people were asking questions the rest of their industry needed answers to, but they asked first. By cultivating our relationship, they would talk to me about what they saw as challenges; and I only needed to show them that talking to me was not a waste of time. I would find out what they wanted to know about, and what could be done to fix the issues, or prevent the problem(s).

Connecting people and ideas provided me with a way to harness my people skills, and my technical bent. I started cold calling around Denver and Wyoming. Customers in the energy industries responded well during the boom years of the late 1970s & early 1980s. The business grew, and I moved to Sheridan in November of 1980, while extending my territory to include Montana, as well as North & South Dakota.

About a year after moving to Sheridan, I went to the Silver Spur Café for breakfast. When I introduced myself to the attractive lady a few seats down as Ted Lapis, she rocked my world with her rejoinder: “Lapis, semiprecious blue stone, highly prized by Egyptians and redheads.” That red head of course was Sally G. Tibbs, she was wearing 3 pieces of Lapis Lazuli. My life changed when she batted her eyes.

It is not part of the Unitarian Universalist tradition to celebrate magic. We prefer the expression epiphany to describe the indescribable, but I will resist the temptation to fit in. My experience was much closer to being transformed. SallyG teased me about having missed my only opportunity to escape, by not running out the café door.

I didn't want to run away. I don't think I could have, if the thought ever occurred to me. I was happily “trapped” (under her spell) for 33 years.

My territory grew to include four provinces of Canada, and several more states. Being away from SallyG was the hardest part, but she was very independent.

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Process control emphasizes safety, quality, reliability, performance, but the emphasis is on control. Many checks are performed to insure that the product is high quality, made when the start button is pushed, and stops when the stop button is pushed, unless an emergency stop event occurs before.

Great emphasis for remote process control is put on instructions being both attributable and deterministic. You want to know who did what when, and that that remote commands are carried out according to plan.

I was certainly not “in control” but I enjoyed my partnership with SallyG. It was, more like a ride on a magic carpet.

I spent almost two years before she died caring for her as my main activity. Sometimes it was overwhelming, but for the most part, it was the most rewarding time of my life. When that ended, I was again lost.

Stella Montano’s Caregiver groups at the Sheridan Senior Center helped immeasurably. For the most part, I was silent, and appreciated how fortunate my life was. Other people suffered far more than I, and my faith, family, & friends helped buoy my spirits.

There is a popular audio book that I listened to called “The Year of Magical Thinking,” that puts into words another person’s experience was loss. Everyone experiences grief differently. My family and friends helped me in many ways. My UU, Quaker, and Buddhist spiritual support helped keep me going, as did the Grief Group at the Sr. Center.

I spent almost 1-1/2 years feeling like I resembled someone I used to know. That is an out of body, indeed out of mind experience that shaped my reality. I would not care to repeat it.

Traveling helped me to gain perspective, and relieved me of being in the ‘echo chamber’ of our home for too long. My father’s legacy of putting one foot in front of the other, made what seemed to be impossible happen while I was making other plans.

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The first year I traveled for roughly 8 months. The second year I was only gone for more than a week for about two months (up to now). When I went to see my cousin in NC, I had no idea my life was about to be radically changed again.

His wife had a friend over, and we had a nice time. Not rockets & fireworks. Dinner, a trip to a museum, another evening dinner, dancing. On the way home we sat in the back, and I quietly kissed the back of her hand. Who knew that would prove to be such a powerful gesture?

When I took off for my uncle's place in Kentucky, I didn't appreciate how much of me was still in NC. Marcia's recent retirement as a special education teacher had prompted her to consider moving back to her childhood (and early adult home) of Montana. She thought about putting her house on the market, then did not follow through.

A few days later while in KY, I sent Marcia a note asking if she would like to meet in Virginia. To my great surprise she accepted.

We spent a few idyllic days at a cabin on a lake in Tennessee. We fell in love. She bought a plane ticket West on that basis, which seems courageous to me.

Having spent a total time of less than 30 days together, we were talking at the table one day, when I said something that almost sounded like a proposal. I got down on one knee, and rectified my clumsy communications with an earnest request, sans the ring. She accepted my proposal, and a few days later we got the ring.

Last weekend I called my friend Barb and asked her "What's new?" She said "I can see!" When I followed up with "What's going on?" She explained that she had cataract surgery, and they had also done a lens replacement. She was exclaiming about how blue the sky was, and how bright the leaves seemed." Then I shared my observation about how the sky also seemed bluer, and the colors brighter in my neighborhood also. When I said I was surprised at how much eye surgery & being engaged had in common, we shared a laugh. . . However, being engaged is much more confusing!

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I'm going back to NC later this week to meet more of Marcia's family, and introduce her to more of mine. I'll come back for my Public Land Users Committee meeting in early December, returning to NC until after New Years.

We plan to be married August 5, 2017 on the Litchfield Beach in SC. Our families and friends will gather for a week before to share stories, and celebrate. We plan a honeymoon in Italy, and perhaps France, before returning to Wyoming in time to share the total eclipse on August 21. The Wyoming Friends Meeting of Quakers is having a retreat on the Willow Creek Ranch, which includes the Hole-in-the-Wall.

We plan to live in Sheridan. Marcia enjoys helping with adult literacy, and may well join my efforts to bring the benefits of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to Sheridan County. Marcia has an undergraduate degree in economics, and a Masters of Business Administration, which may help some local nonprofits. I plan to continue advocating for public access to public lands for recreation. I'm also exploring bringing a Waterkeeper Chapter to Wyoming. Water quality seems to be a passion that sustains my interest.

My situation was not my doing. I did accept the challenge, but many aspects were not in my control.

Life is a sweet adventure. We must make the best use of our limited, unknown time.

One of the most surprising observations I've been privileged to learn recently, is that groups that ask more of their members thrive. I'm going to give everything I can to my new relationship, but we need an active community to support us.

I did not see Marcia's impact on my life coming. While I have been practicing my deer in the headlights look, it is vital to not freeze. Taking things in stride as a couple means learning to communicate effectively. Life provides opportunities that can enrich us, if we are open to accepting and embracing them.

Humble Joy seems to be the most appropriate stance for me. Life with Marcia Jarrell promises to be inexplicably wonderful. I hope you will help sustain us!