

Rev. Linda Simmons
Uplifting Each Other
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Desmond Tutu is a South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop who rose to worldwide fame during the 1980s as an opponent of apartheid. He witnessed and spoke out against unspeakable horrors in his country as a result of apartheid.

Since the demise of apartheid, Tutu has campaigned to fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, poverty, racism, sexism & homophobia. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.

The 14th Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace prize in 1989. He was discovered to be the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama at the age of 2 and taken from his village to live in training and isolation in a 1,000 room palace in Lhasa. At the age of 15 years old in 1950, he assumed the full political duties of the Dalai Lama as the ruler of 6 million people, after the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

For 9 years, he negotiated with the Communist China for his people's welfare. In 1959, during and uprising that led to a massacre, he decided to go into exile and escaped his beloved country enduring sandstorms and snowstorms as he and his party summited 19,000 foot mountain peaks during their 3 week escape. He has lived in exile in India watching his country being dismantled for 58 years.

Both of these men met in India for the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday in April of 2015. Douglas Abram's was asked to co-write a book with them based on a series of interviews called, The Book of Joy, Lasting Happiness in a Changing World.¹

It begins with Desmond Tutu saying, "We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy."² And still, asks this man who lived through the brutal human rights crimes of apartheid, What does our happiness have to do with addressing the suffering of the world?

The answer becomes throughout this lovely book, *The more we heal our own pain (and allow the experience happiness), the more we can turn to the pain of others, and participate in the creation of peace on earth*.³

The Dalai Lama goes on in the interview to say, "Many Tibetans spent years in Chinese gulags, work camps where they were tortured and forced to do hard labor. This, some of them told me, was a good time to test the real person, and their inner strength. Some lost hope; some kept going. Education had very little to do with who survived. In the end, it was their inner spirit, or warmheartedness, that made the real difference."⁴

¹ The Dalai Lama Trust, Desmond Tutu, Douglas Abrams The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World (New York: Avery Books, 2016).

² Ibid, 11.

³ Ibid, 15, 91.

⁴ Ibid, 169.

These two men who have seen so much, insist that not only is joy and happiness necessary, it is within our power to call up and must be cultivated as a moral and political discipline in order to bring stability, hope and peace into our lives and so to this world.

Oh that reminds me, have you ever heard of the dharma vac?

It's a *Buddhist vacuum cleaner*. Millions were spent on its development, millions more on advertising it, yet there are about a million sitting unsold in a warehouse. Turns out no one is interested in a vacuum cleaner with no attachments."

I remember when I was traveling in India and I decided to go to Goa on a short trip from Pune where I lived with an Iranian family. I told you that story right? How when I arrived in India, in Bombay which is now Mumbai, at age 21, I was so afraid I could hardly breathe and then after 3 days of wandering in a kind of disassociation, I met 3 Iranian men in a café and they invited me to get on the back of one of their motorcycles and go to Pune with them and I did? And how when I got to Pune, they treated me like I was a queen? How they cooked for me and took me out to the movies and restaurants and watched over me?

Anyway, I must have grown weary of being so well cared for because I decided to book a ticket on a bus to Goa and see what life was like there. The evening I arrived was the festival of Divali, which is the festival of lights. In Hinduism, it signifies the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair. Its celebration includes millions of lights shining on housetops, outside doors and windows, around temples and other buildings.⁵

The streets were full of people, the shop keepers had all their doors open giving sweets to the people to celebrate their good fortune for the year. The god Ganesh, the elephant god who represents fearless beginnings and is the remover of obstacles, was made out of paper mache and balloons and was floating everywhere; real elephants were decorated, lights were streamed up all over and the town was as bright as day. It was a mash of people and noise and laughter and energy. It frightened and exhilarated me really. It was so loud and almost too exuberant for my New England self to contain.

How could so many people surrender to the pulse of the night and this dance within them that tossed them in a human sea from one moment to the next? This kind of interconnection, this pull, was so foreign to me at that time in my life. I stood outside of that event and left it early in the night. I felt I could not belong to such a communion of souls. I needed so much in those days to stand apart as someone who knew who I was and where I was and imagine I was in control.

The folly of this illusion and the way it keeps us separate from life and each other is one I am learning over and over again in the last years.

I now know that the need to be right, to win, to maintain a sense that we can control outcomes does not foster joy or our ability to be transformed by the world around us. I also know how hard this is to let go of when the world around us is in so much turmoil. Giving up the struggle to win, to know the only way, to be sure of the outcome, allows us and others the freedom to thrive, to grow and to begin to develop a trust that breeds gratitude and hope. It is the necessary foundation for joy.

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divali>

But life is so hard sometimes and letting go of the *I am right and if I stay on this I can control it struggle* is not easy. It costs us to set it down, to give it up, to quiet our minds, to still our need to win. It has a price that is worth paying, but that price can be steep sometimes and feel like erasure of self.

So on top of being able to let it all go, it seems that happiness, or the condition of joy and peace, insist on the ability to lay this all down somewhere that can take it and us in some way so that we feel seen and loved, so that we can rest, be affirmed and refreshed on the journey.

Sounds sometimes like only a god will due. Well, god sure does work well in this situation. Laying one's burdens into the hands of god who can hold them and love us is a strategy that saves many from horrible despair.

For so many of us, god language falls short, we need another kind of language, imagery, opening. But, this cannot be a cheap replica, smoke and shadows, a play on words. Cheap grace is hollow. I want the real deal. I want to feel overcome by the mystery of love like the Christians and Hindus and Muslims and Jews. I want to dance in the streets to a hope that throws open doors into the arms of neighbors and sets me a top an elephant full of amazement and fills me with sweets until I have a belly ache.

I know the way to begin. Let go of what we most want to control. Whatever it is, wherever it is, however multiple, let it go. Which does not mean giving up responsibility or accountability or my stand as a feminist or climate activist or immigrant justice worker or health care advocate. It just means letting go of the illusion that I have complete control over an outcome. We can participate, give our hearts and souls, show up with all our courage and then we need to love more and angst less, offer our food and close the doors of our kitchen less, visit others more and watch TV less, look in our partners' and friends' eyes more and the computer less. And holding on and waiting for the outcomes we have decided must occur, send us all to the alternative endings of those equations where we need more separation, more quiet, more meals we need to eat away from one another.

And then, the next part, the who or what to give it all to....that's the rub. I have a friend who is a Christian who is having a struggle in her church. She called to ask me for advice so I spoke in her language and told her to give her worry to God, to let it go and trust that she was where she needed to be and that God would guide her in understanding the next step she should take and that she needed to allow the process to unfold and not try so desperately to control it so that she, and her church, could breathe again.

And then I leaned back and prayed that this might all be true for her; that she might indeed feel loved by her god and set free. She knows how to surrender to this god.

And I wondered then, what does this look like for those of us who cannot find this god?

I remember reading a book by Ishmael Beah called Radiance of Tomorrow. He came here one book festival a few years ago. Beah was 13 years old when he was made a child soldier in the Sierra Leone civil war.

Radiance of Tomorrow is about what comes after war when people return to their village. What happens when some return with limbs missing and others return who took those limbs? The question of everyone once again finding balance, their roots, their stories which keep them whole- is the one Beah wrestles with in his book.

At one point in the book, villagers confronted with unbearable suffering reflect, "(T)he reality here (is) the genuine happiness that came about from the natural magic of standing next to someone and being consumed by the fortitude in his or her humanity...⁶ (e)veryone is trying to believe in something these days, and they forget that miracles happen every day when we truly acknowledge the humanity of another..."⁷

When we find the bravery and the patience to remain within our suffering and discomfort and fear and just be with it and ourselves and rest, not in our short sightedness, but in the essence within our humanity, when we can sit still with it all, all of the love and the pain, we can experience a communion that can restore us.

Within ourselves, when we allow the story to no longer own us and we give up the illusion that we can control it, we can sit still with the pain and disappointment straight up and feel it all, and come in contact with a humanity that is shared, that belongs to each of us and to all of us, through which we live and love and are made new.

We all know suffering. We all know the need to control. We all know the desire to be free. And somewhere inside of it all, is a place that connects us beyond language and birth and color and hemisphere and ritual and grants us our very humanity. We are only human because we are human together. We are not alone.

And that is love and that is grace and that is a mystery and a power that is beyond one self. To this we can surrender.

Someone asked me the other day why I was a Unitarian Universalist and I said:

Unitarian Universalism has so much room in it, the borders are drawn so wide and so different for so many of us, but they are there, it does catch you in the darkness, not with the arms of god or salvation or eternal life but with the sanity and wholeness and beauty of a humanity that can love more than it knows how to, that can give when it has nothing left, that can be present when it wants to run and hide. And inside of this humanity, there is a capacity for stillness and waiting and watching and opening that lets us be still enough to fall and trust that we will land.

And when we do, we can open ourselves and find that we are surrounded by others on the very same journey, struggling with the very same issues, engaged in the same battles and dramas and worries and seeking to be restored by the same joy.

And when we can look up again, when we can see that we are one among many and that we are connected by a core that gave birth to us all, we can find the strength to do whatever we want to do: we can fight the health care battle and the immigrant rights battle and the battle for racial justice and the battle for climate sanity and....we can love and forgive and go on and take care of ourselves and let go of what needs to be let go of and stand and do what is needed because we are fed from a well that will not dry up.

⁶ Ismael Beah, Radiance of Tomorrow (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014), 167.

⁷ Beah, 193.

And the lights of Divali that promise that obstacles can be removed and that the good fortune of living right here and now is worthy of our very lives, shine all around us and illuminate our souls, that we find, after all, are not so different from each other's.

And we can go on, and love and forgive and embrace and take our place once more as one among many and be free enough to know happiness.

Be happy my dears. You are beautiful, alive, together. With this, you can change the world.

Amen.