

## **Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness**

### **Sermon by Rev. Kent C. Matthies**

*Many Unitarian Universalist congregations call Sunday morning services a “celebration of life.” As a nation, we remain committed to the universal right of the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. How do we enjoy these rights? (July 2, 2006)*

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Thomas Jefferson sat here in our beloved Philadelphia 230 years ago and put his feather pen and ink to work on a sacred document entitled the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson wrote, “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”. Jefferson the slave-owner never freed his own slaves and he was the primary author of a document, which contributed to the creation of a very imperfect democracy. Over time it became a document which served as part of the foundation for great improvements such as the abolition of slavery, the right for women to vote, civil rights legislation, gay rights, and more.

Of course, people worked and sacrificed in order to expand the civil and human rights in this our country. And like many places in the world, we have always had a gap between the principles we espouse and the reality of how we live. Unitarianism and Universalism were both strongly tied to Jefferson, Adams and many of the founding fathers. We have always been a questioning faith, declaring and working to expand the spiritual and religious principles of democracy, freedom, liberty, and happiness. Yet we have also always participated in the systems which maintain exploitation.

Talking about the hypocrisy of America not living out her declarations, James Baldwin said, “to be born in a free society and not be born free is to be born into a lie.”<sup>1</sup> In 1963, Baldwin published a novel entitled, *The Fire Next Time*, which contributed directly to the Civil Rights Movement. Telling his community’s truth, Baldwin’s book disrupted and disturbed Americans with an examination of the consequences of racial injustice. Intensely personal, the book served as a model for many in the Civil Rights movement in areas of preaching, confession, testament, and urgency.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Quotable Rebel*, Teishan Latner, p. 338.

Ever year at this time, as we prepare for our nation's birthday party, we benefit from examining the history and current opportunities for marching forward. Even over the most recent decades, many folks of color and white allies have identified ways in which Unitarian Universalism has been less than truthful about our ways of being. In some ways we don't explore and work to dismantle many of the areas of white privilege, which are hurtful to all of us. Yet I believe with all of my heart that the huge majority of UU's feel called to work together towards creating communities of congregations where all people are invited to the table in celebration of life and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the most recent incarnation of this work our congregation's Ending Racism team has been collaborating with our sister UU Church of the Restoration in these efforts.

If we are to keep on finding our way we must lift up success stories. I think of Fannie Lou Hamer. Ms. Hamer spent her childhood and early adult years as a Mississippi sharecropper. After decades of suffering under a system of brutally hard labor, blood, and sweat, with intense poverty, Hamer volunteered to attempt to register to vote in 1962—for which she was savagely beaten. By then 45 years old and a mother, Hamer lost her job and continually risked her life through her activism. Hamer went on to become a nationally recognized leader. She challenged the Democratic Party and President Lyndon Johnson. In 1968 she took the podium in Chicago rejecting an offer from the President for token representation saying, “We didn't come all this way for no two seat.” She said they would only accept full and meaningful participation in the convention because, “all of us is tired.” For the rest of her life Fannie Lou Hamer found ways to teach the American people about our duty to fulfill our country's promise. From the beginning she opposed the Vietnam War. She organized to feed, clothe, and provide medical attention to the poor. She worked to organize women of all colors together and youth of all colors together.

Fannie Lou is buried in her hometown of Ruleville, Mississippi, where her tombstone reads, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." She wanted a world where, among other things, everyone had a chance to enjoy the simple pleasures of life like she did even while sharecropping. She recalled looking at a pretty group of birds flying over in a V formation at sunset or enjoying the smile of a child as a friend pulled a fish out of the river at the end of a fishing line.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “This Little Light of Mine,” Fannie Lou Hamer, Kay Mills, p. 5

My mother works in fair housing in the Chicago area. Through her work she has met a woman named Ethel Bailey. Ms. Bailey openly shares how she spent many years of her life as a mother on welfare struggling to pay the rent and put food on the table. The low point of her life came when her only son was murdered on the streets of Chicago. The young man had a nice job working for the railroad, was raising his daughter, and had a good life. One night he was hanging out in his West-side neighborhood and a gang member came by flashing a gang sign. Mr. Bailey said “We don’t ride that way around here man”. He meant we don’t involve ourselves in that kind of gang activity around here. Because he spoke out against destructive forces in the neighborhood Mr. Bailey was shot dead. Ever since then his mother has raised his child—her grandchild.

While committed to taking care of that child in the absence of a parent, Ms. Ethel Bailey could have remained collapsed in grief and given up on most of life. She has not. She got sick and tired of being sick and tired and has worked to change cycles of pain in her community. She works now as an executive director for a non-profit organization, which helps women go from welfare to work. She loves her work, telling her staff that they have to find passion for their work or they will burn out. My Mom says that when you are around Ms. Ethel you experience a woman who exudes strength, peace, and joy. She demonstrates that finding happiness in our daily tasks often has a ripple effect out into the broader community.

Many of us know that deciding you are sick and tired and going on to make the needed changes can be very hard. With this in mind, activist and writer, Toni Cade Bambara wrote in her 1970 book, *Black Women*, that “. . . revolution begins with self, in the self. . . . We’d better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships.”

As Unitarian Universalists ringing in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in 2006 we must recognize that our societal success with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will always be limited if we don’t have individual successes in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As a spiritual community we can never fully abandon one for the other.

Mahatma Gandhi worked and sacrificed greatly for the lives, liberty, and happiness of others. Yet, he knew that he himself had to be disciplined

in finding freedom and happiness in his own heart. He said that service to others provided the most joy, but he also found happiness taking long, rigorous walks and talking with friends. James Baldwin talked about the zest and joy for life that he found in church potlucks and dancehalls. Breaking bread, dancing, telling stories, laughing, and hearing soul-stirring jazz were essential to his life's journey.

Fannie Lou Hamer said, "I'm trying to make Mississippi a better place for all of us. And I'd say, 'What you don't understand is that as long as you stand with your feet on my neck, you got to stand in a ditch too. But if you move, I'm coming out. I want to get both of us out of the ditch.'"<sup>3</sup>

Getting out of the ditch together is usually the best way. There are so areas in which we keep each other in the ditch with domestic violence, too much gun violence in the streets of our beloved Philadelphia, too much litter on the streets of our beloved Philadelphia, environmental degradation of our beloved mother earth, and on and on. As long as we participate in or don't make the necessary sacrifices to put an end to these patterns of behavior we are all pinned down in the ditch and missing out on many aspects of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But it is also true that many of us are stuck in tough places, which involve low self-esteem. Many of us over-focus on pleasing others so that often we can't find happiness no matter what. Many of us are kept away from the spirit of life by believing that we don't belong, by forgetting that we are precious children of God who deserve to be loved. Sometimes the bondages of anxiety and preoccupation are too much and we need to proclaim, "We are sick and tired of being sick and tired." We can let go of some of our emotional burdens and make space and capacity for joy.

Over Labor Day weekend hundreds of people will meet in NYC and San Francisco to do Yoga for Peace. Each participant will do over 100 sun salutations, which involves connecting to earth, reaching for sky, and opening one's heart to the sun. Those doing yoga will stretch and breathe in efforts that will bring them peace while also spreading goodwill and love into the wider world. We do this with our regular spiritual practices here in the life of our own congregation.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.

Let us continue working for peace and justice while always finding a zest for breaking bread together, singing, dancing and finding heaven right here on earth.

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