

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Be Happy

A sermon for Covenant Renewal Sunday

In 1968, no one talked about it if your father suddenly went missing. I mean, they didn't talk to me, when that happened to our family. I'm sure they were talking to each other, which is part of why my grief was rutilated with shame. People in the church knew he was gone — one Sunday he was there, the bass soloist in the choir, and one Sunday he wasn't. But none of them asked me anything about it, and I sure didn't want to talk about it. The only person who ever said anything to me was our minister, Dana Greeley. He asked me what had happened. I couldn't bring myself to make up something and lie to Dr. Greeley, so I told him the truth: I didn't really know. One morning my father was there, and one afternoon, after school, he wasn't. Dr. Greeley said, "Well, never mind." Never mind: with those two words, he gave me one of the most important directives in my life: If it's not yours to be ashamed about, never mind. And, by extension, if it is, clean it up. Just that.

Well, people at church could just as well have *acted* like nothing happened, too, but they didn't, and that's the point — the reason I'm telling you this story today. I would get home from school and there'd be a casserole on the back steps — not like when someone dies, and they let themselves in and sit down to visit — but left there, so I didn't have to talk about what I didn't want to talk about. On Sunday mornings, a church family pulled up in their boat of a station wagon and made room for my mother, my sister Lisa, and me. When summer was coming, we the Women's Parish Association had money for us for camp. No one said anything about why. It was amazing. And I suspect there's a lot more that went on to keep us afloat, a lot we never knew — generousities small and large, a kind of safety net of care, emanating from the church and spreading out to catch our little broken-hearted family. I loved those words to the old Thanksgiving hymn, "For love that enfolds us and helps and heals and hold us." For me, that was the church.

All these years later, I carry with me both profound gratitude and no small sense of indebtedness. I could have paid it forward in 10,000 ways, but the church

was certainly the best vehicle I knew, and know — this beloved spiritual community of memory and hope. The generosity that kept us, kept me, from coming undone was the gift of dozens of individual hearts and hands.

Later, I saw what the church could do when those hearts and hands were rallied to common cause. I know this sounds like the beginning of a bad joke — Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas, and Unitarian Universalists came into a parish hall — but in fact, just three weeks ago, having rallied that highly unlikely gathering of faith communities, Beth and I looked out over our parish hall as we all worked together with Rise Against Hunger to package more than 20,000 meals. The fruits of our labor will be sent to some ruined place not only to feed people, but to remind them they are not forgotten, not alone.

The money to pay for those meals had been raised two weeks before that, when our own Indulge team — a vast network of extraordinary Arlington Street people and generous community members — produced a magnificent, gala evening; fundraising and fun-raising. I love those huge events, and when all is said and done, even when you spent everything you meant to spend and more, they're so uplifting.

Reading from his father's writing, Lawson Wulsin, A Unitarian Universalist from our congregation in Northampton, told this story of one of his family's adventures in Kenya. "During the next three hours, we spun dead into the mud at least ten times. The road threw the vehicles around with violence, engines ripped through bamboo forest, tires burned, the radiator steamed. Each time we got stuck, the porters and the driver(s) would get out [and] study the situation... everybody shouting ideas ... in quick spurts of Meru, their tribal language.... Then suddenly, they would settle on a plan, tell me to shift forward or back or just sit there while they lifted me, shouting rhythmically, '*Harambe! Harambe!*' as they rocked this beast of a machine up out of one rut into a better rut or onto solid ground. Then I gunned it forward, all four wheels flying and them rocking me until the tires burned ... and one caught and the Jeep lurched and they shouted more at it and it lurched more and mud flew again and suddenly, we would rise up and out and ahead to dry ground to load up ... until the next mud hole."

Harambe, the official motto of Kenya, is a Swahili word that means "all pull together."

"Once," Mr. Wulsin continues, "our road was blocked by the trunk of a fallen eucalyptus tree, four feet in diameter; it would take an elephant to move it.

So all 19 of us lined up, one shoulder into the trunk. We chanted together, ‘*Haram ... be! Haram ... be!*’ and started rocking it. And together we did the elephant’s work, and then we kept going.”

This is yet another huge production, another story of “all pull together,” emerging victorious and uplifted.

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I want to say something about investing in this kind of experience, this kind of life. In their book *Happy Money*, Liz Dunn and Mike Norton have a lot to say about the connection between happiness and what they call “prosocial” spending, by which they mean giving money that connects us to each other. The more we invest in others, the happier and healthier we are.¹ This isn’t just true in America; “the link between prosocial spending and happiness is ... universal ... in poor [countries] and rich countries alike. [Between 2006 and 2008,] across the 136 countries studied in the Gallup World Poll, donating to charity had a similar relationship to happiness as doubling household income.” It turns out that “the proclivity to derive joy from investing in others might just be a fundamental component of human nature.”² And this is not just true of adults; two year olds show the same joy in giving.³

Mike Norton tells the story of exhaustively researching these connections between giving and joy. Along the way, he’s heading from his teaching post at Harvard Business School to the University of Alberta, and the Canadian customs agent asks him the purpose of his visit. Mike is wearing ripped jeans and sporting a shaved head and a full beard. He responds, “business.” The agent isn’t having it. Here’s their interaction:

Agent: And what line of work are you in?

Mike: I’m a professor. [I’m giving] a talk in the Marketing Department.

Agent (after what seems like a thirty-seven-minute pause, further inspection of [passport,] photo, outfit, beard): What’s the talk about?

Mike: It’s about how spending money on others makes you happier than spending money on yourself.

¹ p. 109, 124

² p. 113

³ pp. 114-115

Agent (incredulous): Well, that's obvious!⁴

We do already know this: The biggest bang for a buck is generosity, and, especially, when we contribute to a shared experience. We are the happiest when something brings us together with others, fostering a sense of social connection; makes for memorable stories; and links to our sense of who we are and who we want to be. What does this sound like? It sounds like Arlington Street Church! And this is what I want for us, this happiness: investing in this place, this beloved spiritual community, and living into our mission of love, service, justice, peace.

In 2015, the London School of Economics did a study on sustained happiness. I wonder if they were surprised at the outcome: Joining a temple, church, or mosque — not participating in any other community organization, not volunteering for a charity — but participation in a religious organization is the only social activity associated with sustained happiness. There are many theories, but no one really knows why.⁵

Sometime in the 5th century, the Buddha's chief disciple, Ananda, said,
 Friendship with what is beneficial,
 association with what is beneficial,
 intimacy with what is beneficial:
 this is half of the holy life.

And the Buddha replied,

Don't say that, Ananda! Don't say that.
 Friendship with what is beneficial,
 association with what is beneficial,
 intimacy with what is beneficial:
 this is the whole of the holy life.⁶

Beloved spiritual companions,
 "For love that enfolds us
 and helps and heals and hold us:"
 This is church.

From raising funds and fun

⁴ pp. 131-132

⁵ Please see time.com/collection/guide-to-happiness/4856978/spirituality-religion-happiness/

⁶ *Samyutta Nikaya* 45.2.2-3, trans. Andrew Olendzki

to packaging 20,000 meals
to becoming a 19-person elephant to move a fallen tree
the joy is in *harambe* — all pull together.
The more we invest in others, the happier and healthier we are.

Here's to our health:
Let's dig deep today,
and give until it feels good.

Here's to our generosity
and joy to the world,
today and always.