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“ACTING IN GOOD FAITH:
IS THIS A TIME TO LAUGH OR WEEP?”

The last time I was in this pulpit, I said that we must practice all the great virtues, namely prudence, temperance, courage, humility, tolerance, gentleness, fidelity, compassion, - to name a few. Why practice? Simply because love itself, which is greater than all the virtues, is so often absent in this world. And we know we all have failed love, messed up, ourselves.

There are many ways to describe our human failures but I appreciate the rather direct way, Francis Spufford, an English professor, addresses it. He offers this with an acrostic formula, HPtFtU - meaning our **H**uman **P**ropensity to **F**---things **U**p. So let us atone for our ‘flub ups’ by not cheapening the virtues, but work at them.

Again, what do we mean by virtue? Simply put, these are the elevated, excellent behaviors that we of necessity need to emulate if we are to become more fully human.

After all we are not born human; we become such and it will take many births. It is more a destiny, an evolution, a leap beyond the natural order out of which we were bred. Becoming human is a continuous crisis of becoming. It is always a moving forward, with courage and grace. And a civil society demands it from whatever the color of the house we live in, yes, even the Whitehouse.

The philosopher, Andrew Comte-Sponville of Paris, in his recent book “*A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*,” attempted to name and describe all the great virtues. He finally settled on eighteen virtues.

After he had described fifteen of these essential human virtues, he then asked himself “what do we call the virtue that governs our relationship to truth?” He thought sincerity came closest, then he thought maybe

truthfulness, or honesty, or veracity or maybe authenticity could be considered. What he settled on, surprisingly to me, was good faith. And I have come to appreciate his choice of words and their meaning. Our relationship to truth is by a Good Faith effort.

I know that immediately for some, the word faith suggests religious beliefs. And faith is, of course, important in all religions, besides Christianity.

But by Good Faith, Sponville, means something else, something beyond our particular religious beliefs, or our non-faith beliefs. Indeed, Good Faith needs to be practiced by all religions, by all agnostics, all atheists, all humanists, or whatever our ideology, or political party.

A person of good faith “speaks to what he or she believes, though they may be wrong and believes what they say. Good faith goes beyond sincerity. Sincerity means not lying to others. Good faith means lying neither to others nor to oneself.” A Good faith effort strengthens our integrity, it enriches the authenticity of our soul.

“Good faith,” says Sponville, “is not about telling all, it is about speaking on the truth, at least to the best of our belief – unless a higher duty intervenes.” Such as justice, or love, or generosity. Good Faith does not nullify the other great virtues. Neither does acting in Good Faith free us from moral dilemmas. Such as, when to tell the truth and when not to.

Sponville, agrees, adding that “It is sometimes legitimate, even from a moral standpoint, to lie to another person rather than tell him or her the truth.” Such as when your life or another’s will be unfairly damaged or even killed. “But one cannot legitimately lie to oneself, for to do so is to value oneself more than the truth. It would be a sin against truth and against the self,” and we would lack humility if we did.

Yes, if truth need be told, let us, in Good Faith, do it with Love. I learned that in Christianity, but, again, I believe such Good Faith must be practiced no matter one's religious faith or non-faith.

Certainly, we have known persons that we disagree with, but you still like and respect them, because they act in good faith. I believe acting in good faith is the primary way Unitarians relate to truth and appreciate it in others no matter their ideology. You are a society that exercises mutual forbearance for one another even when you disagree.

By the way, Good Faith is a legal term as well, used throughout our free enterprise system. We have good faith written in to contracts, often between labor unions and management and other agencies. Legal arbiters are brought in to assure both parties are acting in Good faith.

When in court we are asked to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we simply are promising to act in Good Faith.

However, Paul Krugman, my favorite economist of the NY Times, wrote recently, "Bad Faith is also a legal term, referring to entering into an agreement without the intention or means to fulfill it, or violating basic standards of honesty. In politics, it usually means pretending to be committed to principles that you abandon the moment they become inconvenient." And he adds, in Washington, "we're talking about bad faith on an epic scale."

That's why congress's rating for integrity is so low. Working in Good Faith, congress would compromise more, and work together for the good of the whole. There would be less lying, less fake news, or alternative facts. Indeed, less hypocrisy, which is the opposite of Good Faith.

Sponville summarizes that: "Good faith is the spirit of the mind, which prefers sincerity to deception,
knowledge to illusion,
and laughter to solemnity."

Which leads to my second focus this morning: Good Faith in the exercise of laughter and weeping.

I have asked several people if they could remember situations in which they didn't know whether they should laugh or cry? Usually this dilemma was due to some stupid blunder they did, like when I slip off the break pedal and completely destroyed our garage door this past year.

It often happens when our government has done something that seems totally wrong, or when something we invested much effort in and it all fell apart, like our last Presidential election did for a majority of us.

Also, as seen on Sixty Minutes recently, an Argentina world champion polo star who had cloned a whole stable of horses, all cloned from his favorite champion horse! The reporter asked what would he feel the day we cloned a whole team of human beings? His reply, "I would either laugh or weep." May it never happen.

Well, in any case it is often good to do both. Being able to laugh or cry are spiritual gifts.

We generally would rather laugh though, to have a glad spirit. And given the despair of political life in our land today, the recent major increase in suicides, and drug overdoses, and one hurricane after another, we could use some Good Faith laughter right now.

James Nelson tells a wonderful story about a friend of his who is also a theologian. He was seated next to a stranger on an airplane and soon the two of them began to chat. Immediately, the other asked him that predictable man-type question, 'What do you do for a living?' My friend replied: 'I teach Christian ethics in a seminary.' To which the other responded: 'Christian ethics? That must be pretty simple, ' Love your neighbor as yourself ' - I suppose that's about all there is to it, isn't that right?'

My friend thought for moment and replied, 'Well, yes, I guess that's true. And what do you do for a living?' The other rather proudly said, 'I am an astronomer.' To which my friend, in one of his finer moments, replied, 'You are an astronomer. That must be rather simple. 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' - I suppose that's about all there is to it.'

Yes, the reason humor is a virtue ought not to surprise us, writes Sponville. "Taking oneself completely seriously is always a fault. Humor prevents us from doing so... beyond the pleasure it affords us." Yes, too much seriousness, even about virtue, is suspect and disturbing and probably make us grabby and judgmental.

One of America's greatest humorists is, of course, Mark Twain, who at age 29 in a letter to his brother, confessed that he had but two powerful ambitions in his life. One was to be a river boat pilot, and the other to be a preacher of the gospel. "I accomplished the one," he wrote, "and failed in the other!"

Even so, Twain wrote that he believed each of us ought to multiply the one or two talents that God trusts us with, and he thought his strongest suit was humor. So he said he felt called to "excite the laughter of God's creatures."

Twain admitted that he didn't think being a humorist was as high a calling as the ministry, but I wonder if any clergy has done as well as did he in adding to the richness, fullness, and moral quality of our lives. Yes, how many people did Twain save from the oblivion of taking themselves too seriously? Well, more than any preacher I know.

Yes, Twain did have a high calling – enabling the laughter of all. As he said of his good faith vocation, "Humor is humankind's greatest blessing – it is the good side of a truth."

There can be no question that humans were created for laughter but if any group needs to remember this, it is we the religious – especially the most solemn and zealous of us.

I do consider myself a serious religious person – my wife thinks I'm just a little too much so, and she is lovingly wise. But none of us want to be thought of as insincere. Alfred North Whitehead, that great philosopher of a generation ago, has an excellent definition about religion in general. He writes:

“Your character is developed according to your faith. This is the primary religious truth from which no one can escape. Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts. For this reason, the primary religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity.”

Even so, sincerity doesn't exclude laughter for laughter truly has a cleansing effect on our character as well. Sadly, in too much of our Puritan history of faith, it seems that laughter was associated more with devilry than being heavenly and so it was frowned on. Solemnity was seen as holier; the more hilarious you were, the more profane.

Once, when quite old, Mark Twain, went back to Hannibal, Missouri to his home church having been ask to preach. He had not ever done a sermon as such before. It was titled “The Gospel of Good Cheer”.

When he stood to speak he said he didn't want to undignify the pulpit, so he would speak from his pew. Well, it was a good sermon. In it he spoke of his long dead mother and how, even at his age, how her character, even from the grave, continued be such a good force on his life – always cheering him up.

No matter how serious we are, how courageous, how moral, we still must be able to laugh. Take Lincoln. It is hard to believe, because all the pictures of him seem so austere, that Lincoln, no matter how grave and gray the country, was one of our greatest laughing presidents. He was,

always enjoying a good joke and ready to offer one at the drop of a hat. None of us would call Lincoln an insincere man.

Once in a debate Lincoln was criticized for being two-faced and thus a hypocrite. Lincoln replied in his defense, “I’ll leave that to the audience to judge. But if I had two faces, do you honestly think I would be wearing this one?”

President Obama could also laugh at himself. Remember when he asked the crowd, ‘Did you ever think a man with the name **Barack Hussein Obama** would even try to run for the Presidency of the USA?’

Lincoln found humor a saving grace and it lifted his burden of being the commander and chief during the bloodiest war in our history. “With the fearful strain that was on me night and day,” he wrote, “if I had not laughed I should have died.”

Lincoln’s greatness was that he took seriously the Biblical injunction, as did Obama, that,

“There is a time for every matter under heaven,
A time to weep and a time to laugh.
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

In fact, they go together if we are to be whole. A person who can only weep is pathetic; a person who can only laugh is absurd.

But in all seriousness, we all could use more laughter. Especially so since there has been so much that saddens us, makes us weep for our country and its polarized leadership. We have a president who even his supporters know lies more than any who have ever held that office.

So, often, confused, we don’t know if we citizens should laugh or cry.

Jesus, who wept over Jerusalem, also thought there is a time to laugh and a time to cry. But he shook his head at his generation because they were too hard hearted to do either. He said, when the music played, they did not dance, and when it was time to grieve, they did not mourn.

Nothing pleased his religious community, so up-tight they were! I am sure Jesus, looking at all the nit-picking critics about him, didn't know if he should laugh or cry. Perhaps he would feel that way about the churches that bears his name today. Surely, he wouldn't mind if there was more gaiety in them.

Because of much scientific research on laughter today, we now know Aristotle was not quite correct when he said, "Only the human laughs." We have discovered forms of laughter in much of the animal kingdom although it is not quite the same as with humans since we, with our higher consciousness, know the difference between how things are and how they ought to be.

For humans, laughter is truly a spiritual matter and if it is missing in our life, our good faith is less developed.

Yes, there is a humor that is sacrilegous, that profanes all that is holy. And there is laughter that simply demeans others, makes fun of them, belittles the worth of others.

Children easily laugh, and that's a good thing, even before they can talk. But children can easily laugh at other children's misfortunes. Adults need the easy laughter of children all right, but adults who laugh over another's misfortune, or use laughter simply to ridicule, are being just that – childish and mean.

The great thing about Mark Twain's humor, even though it could cut right through you, wasn't mean. Contrastingly, to much of humor today, it was cleaner, less obscene.

Yes, laughter, as virtue, has its place in this our divine comedy of life, especially if it is on ourselves.

We know laughter is good for us physically. Medicine has shown that laughter:

- aids in the healing process
- benefits the circulatory system
- assists digestion
- promotes mental health by helping us cope with fear, boredom, shyness, depression and stress
- and laughter actually causes the body to produce its own painkiller, the release of endorphins.

Laughter has rightly been called the “miracle drug with no side effects.” It is like an internal massage of all our main organs. Laughter is good medicine.

Most doctors affirm laughter to be good for the heart, and that a majority of people beyond middle age do not laugh enough. But that is not a new prescription. 2500 years ago we read in the Bible that, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” Prov. 17:22

Did you know there are now over 6,000 yoga clubs in this world where laughter is the primary discipline?

Laughter also brings people together – it is contagious.

Laughter also lightens us up and keeps our anger in balance. It keeps our judgments from being too one-sided.

As David Rankin said, “Laughter is a bridge over troubled waters; the hand of God on the shoulder of a fragile world; a mode of salvation when all else is lost.”

Yes, laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone.

True - but we ought to do something about that.

Indeed, the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (Obama's and James Comey's favorite theologian) is right when he said,

“They who refuse to laugh are beyond redemption.”

So, in our good faith community here, among other gifts of the spirit, let us laugh a lot more. An ancient Jewish proverb is right,

“What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul.”

If I fail at laughing at myself, as I often do, I often think of a clergyman I knew many years ago. So straight-laced and proper was he. He dressed impeccably, was never out of uniform, always attentive to the decorum of his divine status.

He never told jokes, was serious about everything, and you always had the sense about him that you should always be on your best behavior when he was near.

I wasn't present, but was told by a friend, that one day this so correct clergyman was conducting a service at the graveside on a raining day. It seems he had just invited everyone to prayer. And with heads all bowed, he took one short step back, and, as smoothly as a snake slithers in the grass, he slipped between the casket and the fake grass that hid the opening into the six-foot grave.

At first, in the long-bowed silence, no one was sure what had happened. But then there was a meek and humble cry for help from the grave.

He certainly was a sight, dripping with mud, as the pall bearers dragged him out of that hole that belonged to another.

Well, thinking of him, I confess, always brings me a laugh and, perhaps, puts a little dent in my own pride that cometh before a fall. In the long run, I am sure it was good for him as well.

But really, it should help us all to realize that it is not from laughter that we will die, but if we don't shape up, we could die from despair, crankiness, and a constipated soul. Better that we have a Good Faith effort, by realizing -

“A humorless saint is a sad saint. A humorless sage is something other than wise.”

Let me know what gives you a laugh or a pain, besides long-winded preachers!

Amen.