

Soul Matters

A kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, and ideas to engage hearts and minds.



Play and Laughter

February 2015

Dear UUCC:

I'm writing from Chicago, late at night in the middle of another week-long intensive class, looking out the window at the city lights -- and at the pile of art supplies on the table next to my computer. I've used them often this month. The work of transformation is messy, complicated, and often difficult, no matter where it happens or how much we desire the end result.

It is human nature to get tired and start dragging, and seminarians are no exception. By the third week of January, we aspiring religious leaders get awfully silly. Whether it's a ten-minute Friday Lunch Dance Jam to shake the cobwebs out, or playing with colored pencils or silly putty, or giggling at a kitten picture or baby video someone shared on the internet, play and laughter are necessary food for the soul, the nourishment that sustains us on our journey.

It can feel awkward to resist the cultural pressures that urge us to be more responsible, more productive, more efficient, or more mature. How often do we make intentional time to be beginners, enjoying activities not for competition or accomplishment but just simply for the joy of doing whatever it is we are doing? Play is the beginner's task, the child's employment: being entirely in the moment and engaging, with whole and joyful heart, whatever it is that the moment demands to be done.

Go out and play!

-- *Claire Curole*

Laughter is the best medicine.

~ Unknown



This Soul Matters packet was created by Claire Curole at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UUCC Resource Circle, and other sources.

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QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH



Below is a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our everyday ordinary lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won't let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the questions percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone you meet along the way.



Play is the exuberant expression of our being. It is at the heart of our creativity, our sexuality, and our most carefree moments of devotion. It helps us live with absurdity, paradox, and mystery. It feeds our joy and wonder. It keeps our search for meaning down to earth.

Practice play by doing things on the spur of the moment. Take time out to experiment, to try on different parts, to relax. Laugh heartily at jokes, situations, and yourself. Remember, laughter heals body, mind, and soul, and by extension, communities.

*from "Spiritual Practices: Play"
at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/>*

When someone says, "Go play!" what does it mean to you? Sometimes our leisure activities are competitive or productive, and sometimes we do things just for the fun of it. When we focus on accomplishment, sometimes the sheer joy or fun of doing things can slip away. Perhaps we are afraid of failure, or of looking foolish at something if it matters too much.

What do you do for fun? How do you cultivate a sense of playfulness in your life?

What really makes you laugh? When was the last time you laughed out loud?

Many people tell jokes or light-hearted stories to break the ice in uncomfortable social situations. Have you ever used humor to approach a difficult question or situation more easily?

Religion (and religious people) are often pictured in the media as being too serious or having no sense of humor. How does humor fit into your understanding of religious, spiritual or ethical practice? Is it possible to take serious matters too seriously?

When was the last time you were absolutely silly?



Spiritual Practice

A new way of being for all ages

In mid-January, between classes, I visited my family in Louisiana. It is early in the Carnival season, which begins on the 6th of January, so I didn't go to any parades this time. Carnival builds slowly, culminating in the raucous (and frequent risqué) public festival known to the world as as Mardi Gras. "Fat Tuesday," I learned as a child, had its historical origins in the Catholic tradition: a chance to use up rich foods like butter, sugar, eggs and meat, and one last celebration, before the austerity of Lent.

I remember, growing up in the broadcast radius of New Orleans television, watching the evening news on the local CBS affiliate station. Each year on the day before Fat Tuesday, then-editor Phil Johnson would deliver this classic editorial:

*And what else is there to talk about except that which everybody is talking about of course,
Mardi Gras.*

*It's that time again, that wonderful, crazy, colorful, crowded, happy, mixed-up but glorious time
when all New Orleans forgets itself for a day, lets its hair down, puts on a rubber nose, a
funny hat, and walks around laughing at the silly people in the crazy costumes.*

*It's a day for contrasts, a day for change. A day when legions of quiet, timid, introspective little
men forsake their cashier's windows and their neat clerk's desks, put masks across their
faces, and suddenly become Don Juan. A day when a secretary can become queen of
England. A housewife, Annie Oakley.*

*Mardi Gras is fantasy in a fright wig, reality with burnt cork on its nose, a dream with a scepter in
its hand, and pompousness about to be punctured.*

Mardi Gras is fun and laughter, vulgarity and coarseness, color and light, and at the end, quiet.

*Mardi Gras is a state of mind, an attitude, a pose, an opinion. But at its most basic, and perhaps
most satisfying of all, Mardi Gras is the day when New Orleans can tell the whole world:
we're going to have fun. And we do.*

This year, Easter is relatively early, and Mardi Gras falls on the 17th of February. While Mardi Gras is not widely celebrated in Maine, and Lent is not generally observed in Unitarian Universalism, I invite you to take inspiration from this tradition:

- Make and decorate a mask. It can be anything you like - a character or costume, an animal or bird, or just abstract colors. Make it as simple or complex as you like. Try it on, and look in the mirror. What do you see?
- What do you want to be "when you grow up?" Does that mean something different now than it did when you were half your current age? Talk about this question with someone much older or younger than you are, or write a letter to an older or younger version of yourself.
- A long-standing element in the Mardi Gras tradition is the use of humor to highlight difficult situations (for example in 2006, after Hurricane Katrina, flood recovery and frustration with the slowness of political officials and government organizations were popular Mardi Gras themes.) Have you ever used humor or play to help get through a challenging time?



Wise Words

"Laughter is a holy thing. It is as sacred as music and silence and solemnity, maybe more sacred. Laughter is like a prayer, like a bridge over which creatures tiptoe to meet each other. Laughter is like mercy; it heals. When you can laugh at yourself, you are free."

— Ted Loder

"Play exists for its own sake. Play is for the moment; it is not hurried, even when the pace is fast and timing seems important. When we play, we also celebrate holy uselessness. Like the calf frolicking in the meadow, we need no pretense or excuses. Work is productive; play, in its disinterestedness and self-forgetting, can be fruitful."

— Margaret Guenther in *Toward Holy Ground*

"This is the real secret of life -- to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realize it is play."

— Alan W. Watts

"Men do not quit playing because they grow old; they grow old because they quit playing."

— Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

"Laughter is wine for the soul - laughter soft, or loud and deep, tinged through with seriousness - the hilarious declaration made by man that life is worth living."

— Seán O'Casey

"The Buddhists say that one of the signs of true enlightenment is the experience of a vast, immutable joy that underlies the personal joys and sorrows of this life. The Cosmic Giggle suggests that for those in the know, the essential nature of life is such goodness that the only possible response is joy. Perhaps Joy is one of God's commandments. Certainly it weaves like a bright ribbon through the teachings of many of the world's religions. In the cracks between the many rituals and prayers, the Cosmic Giggle emerges and overtakes even the most solemn, the most holy."

— Rachel Naomi Remen in *My Grandfather's Blessings*

