

Radical happiness

From Rev Claire MacDonald in London, 13 March 2020

Good morning and thank you for welcoming me, at least virtually, into your community this Sunday morning. When I proposed this service on Radical Happiness, and the workshop on how we connect our spiritual values with our social activism, I little thought that my journey to you would be postponed due to a global virus. There is a widespread view that the digital world is isolating us, but today it is re-connecting us when we have been forced apart, and as I write I am thinking of all of you, thankful for the good connection that the digital world offers to us, and hopeful that we will meet before long.

In March 2017, on International Women's Day, I heard the veteran activist Angela Davis speak to a packed audience in London's South Bank Centre. She said that we live in critical times, and that critical times are the best times for hope. We cannot do the work we need to do without hope — and without joy. As an activist of long standing, her call was to understand hope and joy as shared tools for change, part of a long tradition of understanding the *public* aspect of what it is that we think of as 'happiness'. That tradition says we have been conditioned to understand happiness as a private affair, but public happiness is about participation in those public spaces in which we co-create the structures of our collective life — the social, religious and political institutions that we have made in order to function.

The sociologist Lynne Segal calls this participation 'radical happiness'. Her book, *Radical Happiness*, is a response to social unease and uncertainty and it contains a proposition. We can find happiness in our utopian dreams and our shared creativity. This means working for a future we can build as hopeful activists, not by scrolling down a to do list of jobs to make a more equal world, but by creatively imagining ourselves into a world we want to be in — a world not ruled by economic rules but made in imagination and love. It's not a new idea. You could put it down to that well known early radical Jesus — but in the 20th century it was proposed by Richard Titmuss, the first Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. His research found that people give, share and make change through compassion and connection and not when they are simply given statistics on how bad things are.

And they are challenging.

Lynne Segal says that we have become less happy because happiness has become equated with rating individual success. It has been co-opted by commerce and the world of statistic, metrics and measurement. Instead, she says, we need social spaces that foster connection, and that the *kind* of connection that allows for ‘social dreaming’ and the sharing of joy makes the difference between a world where collective purpose is crowded out and a world where human flourishing is primary.

Of course we are each important. Part of nourishing the spirit is caring for ourselves and our journey. We know the importance of giving our own well-being attention and being comfortable in who we are. We know that being at home with ourselves is essential in caring for others. We also know that caring involves not just wiping up, but celebration. You know that old song Bread and Roses, written by Rose Schneiderman at the turn of the last century? It says that the worker must have bread but she must have roses too.

Let me pause there and say this — I am not a prophetic voice, I am a citizen like you, who feels that we live in very uncertain times. There has never been a time when I have not felt that uncertainty lurking somewhere, and maybe there has never been such a time in all of human history. So the question of how we make positive changes, especially now when we feel very divided, is important. Like you, I am committed to justice and fairness — and I am also committed to the idea that hope emerges through joy and the celebration of common purpose and values, and through our deep delight in a world we do not want to lose.

Celebration is a fascinating word. Its origin in Latin is as a religious word about honouring and performing ritual. It has an even older connection to the Latin word *celer* — which we also see in *accelerate*. It contains the idea of pace and frequency, something that is seen to happen and so gets renowned. Celebration has an even *older* connection to Greek, from the word *kello* — which refers to a ship putting in to a harbour or a shore. So ‘celebrate’ contains the idea of coming home to safety like a ship coming to shore, and it suggests something that happens again and again and is renowned among a throng of people, and something that moves swiftly. A celebration is a crowded coming home, a moment of collective joy.

A worker must have bread but she must have roses too. Rose Schneiderman's times — and she was a Polish born American union leader in the early 20th century — were tough, and so are ours. And we still need roses as well as bread in order to really flourish. Between the bread and the roses may be where we find God. Keith Hebden in his book *Re-enchanting the Activist* says that God is what we find when we shape that better future we can only make together; that God is the word for the dynamic spirit of human flourishing that happens when we allow that spirit to rise between us.

Radical happiness is always potentially present, even in uncertain times. Radical Happiness is something that connects what we need as individuals to what we want to change together. Radical happiness allows us to let go of rampant and destructive *individualism* but not our precious *individuality*. It suggests that we find our best selves, and the divinity that rests there, when we are together in common purpose; that we can live differently in these times of binaries, agitation and aggression when we become more than the sum of our parts and when we dare to love the world in all its uncertainty.

Carolyn McDade, the song-writer whose beautiful hymns *Spirit of Life* and *We'll Build a Land* are among my own favourites, says on her website:

‘...I often wonder what it would be like if we dared to love this life - the fragile and the vulnerable, the endangered, daring to be humble before the magnitude of our beginnings, daring to lean our species into a stubborn and pliant wonder, until reverence shines in all that we do - until we live an economics of reverence, a theology of reverence, a politics of reverence - until it permeates education, development, and health care, homes and relationships, arts and agriculture - a reverence for life, for planetary, social, and personal wholeness.’

Below this she adds: ‘This is our purpose now. May we do it well, with thoroughness and love.’

May it be so.