

What Makes Your Heart Sing?

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First Parish in Brookline

“I have seen a mother at a crib, so I know what love is.
I have looked into the eyes of a child, so I know what faith is.
I have seen a rainbow, so I know what beauty is.
I have felt the pounding of the sea, so I know what power is.
I have planted a tree, so I know what hope is.
I have heard a wild bird sing, so I know what freedom is.
I have seen a chrysalis burst into life, so I know what mystery is.
I have lost a friend (to death), so I know what lasting sorrow is.
I have seen a star-decked sky, so I know what the infinite is.
I have seen and felt all these things, so I know what God is.”

This anonymous poem intimates that what we see, feel and do determines what we truly know. What makes your heart sing?

When people ask me what we require of members and friends here, I tell them that each of us must find that which makes our heart to sing, and then do that with all of our being and energy. My heart sings when I play with small children; when I teach young people; when I engage in intimate conversations with any of you; and when we work together to make the world a better place. My heart sings when I have time for some quiet contemplation, perhaps watching the light shine through the stained glass windows, or when we enjoy fellowship together. There is much here that can cause one's heart to sing. Yet, there are those who come here, or take up leadership roles out of a sense of duty, for whom church work is drudgery and life draining, something to be done out of a sense of responsibility. I say to you all now, let them put down their burdens, let the captives go free, we wish to be a joyful community of faith, and so those who cannot find joy in their work should learn to play. That is their spiritual task for now, to learn how to play! Hug your kids, tell your beloved you love them, and spend some time with your oldest and dearest friends, life is for the living! There are more than enough of us that do find joy in the work of this community that those who do not should search instead for what does bring them joy; for what makes their heart sing! For we invite everyone to find this community a source of joy. That is why we, and in fact every true faith community, exists.

As Joseph Campbell says to us, “The divine manifestation is ubiquitous, only our eyes are not open to it. Awe is what moves us forward.” If we live from our center, then the divine lives within us, we sanctify this place by the bliss we encounter. “We cannot cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy.” It is that choice that makes this community holy. We bring our friends, our families, our parents, and our kids, to this place each Sunday because we wish to share the joy we find; we wish to experience this inner lightness together as one. As Dr. Gay Hendricks says, “The happiest [people I] have met are those who are doing what they most love to do.” They ask regularly what do I love to do that adds value to people's lives, that makes the world even a little bit better place to live in, or helps to bind and heal the

interdependent web of all being? It is that aspect of your being we invite to be in community with us. It is that which this community exists for, why so many of us give so richly of our time, energy, and financial resources to help create and sustain a community which can bring us joy; a deep joy, that can accept both the agonies and ecstasies of life, and still know somehow our lives are unfolding as they should. As Joseph Campbell writes in *The Power of Myth*, “any world is a valid world if it is alive. The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself... I don’t think there is any such thing as an ordinary mortal. Everybody has his [or her] own possibility of rapture in the experience of life. All he has to do is recognize it and then cultivate it and get going with it.” So how do we, generation after generation, bring this place to life?

When Rev. Martha asked what makes your heart sing in a worship service last month, people wrote about learning to be a better person, to live a better life, developing a sense of connection with our individual spiritualities and souls. Many spoke of the power of the music and a strong sense of being community. Many expressed joy in the interweaving of music, readings, and sermons to examine our lives and re-energize each of us to go back into the world to fight the good fight. Comments included stretching our consciousness beyond our own short individual lifespan and connecting with our pasts to enrich our present. Many spoke of the diversity of ways to live within the mystery we seek, including challenging ourselves and comforting ourselves, exploring different forms of worship, including earth centered practices, and the importance of our small group ministries. Some spoke of going deeper into being in a community of faith and trust. Some find their hearts singing through meditation and others through the sermons. Caring for each other and the larger world makes some of us joyous. Reaching out to those in need within our community, providing service to each other through committees and other activities, and finding ways to be of good use to one another, are ways we transform ourselves so we can transform the world.

The importance of this community was mentioned by most; to transcend our aloneness in order to know our truest selves, hearing stories from each other’s lives, providing comfort and celebrating together the joys of life. In community we live a shared promise of goodness for all of us, even in the midst of our pain and suffering, for we have each other to share in our comfort and our joy. Some spoke of nurturance, an abiding love, right relationship, an enduring understanding and love of our very diversity. The commitment that we make to each other to care for ourselves and one another while recognizing the beauty and joy in life. Some lifted up the opportunity to be of service to each other and to the larger community; to love and support one another, and to know that there is always a community here to welcome us home again. Many lifted up the opportunities to share our lives with each other so that no one ever needs to be alone. All of us seem to find that feeling safe and accepted is critical to fully experiencing the singing of our hearts, while working together for the common good. A community that cares for each other, offers support to one another, is a community that helps even the shy and lonely. Many wrote of relationships and friendships here that make their hearts sing; friendships that endure even as our life circumstances change. The real possibility of getting to know and be known in deep and authentic ways by an increasing number of people through participation, discussions, and doing social action together, is what makes some of our hearts sing. Friends who come together in times of solace and joy, paying attention to each other, assisting and accepting each other on our unique spiritual journeys. We dream together of a thriving, vibrant,

multicultural, loving community that extends its joy, commitment and energy well beyond the walls of this building in community service and celebration of the arts. We love making new friends while belonging to something larger than ourselves, that we may grow and learn together to be even more loving, embracing and welcoming the stranger as friend.

What makes your heart sing? We have just begun our annual pledge campaign, to discover how much each and every family in this community is willing to commit for next fiscal year to support our costs, our staffing, and our programs here. I know some of you are uncomfortable with me talking about money, but we as a community are getting better at these discussions. Already several families have come together in Canvass dinners to share with each other what makes their heart sing and then to tell our pledge canvass what they are willing to commit to make it so. Many more will have that experience over lunch today or a potluck dinner in the coming weeks. If you haven't signed up yet to participate there are still a few openings at parishioners' homes during March. Two thirds of our costs are personnel-related: salaries, benefits, and expenses for our ministers, our Director of Religious Exploration, our music Director and section leaders, our Parish Administrator, part time controller, membership coordinator, and our part time sexton and custodian, etc. These costs grow as we grow the kinds of services and number of people being served by this community. They are paid for by the annual pledges committed by members and friends, as well as our other fundraising and building rentals, and historically, when revenues fell short, by drawing from our endowment to fund operations. Fortunately, largely through our community's growth and the growing generosity of members and friends, pledge income has more than doubled over the last five years, allowing us to reduce our dependence on our endowment from 55% of our costs to less than 40% of our costs. So we could absorb the million dollar drop in our endowment when the financial crisis hit us, thanks largely to the generosity and growth of our members and our friends. However we still need to grow our pledge income by about another 45% over the next 3 years for this community to be truly sustainable longer term.

What makes your heart sing? Last year's pledge drive focused upon our most generous givers, those families pledging over \$5000 annually to this community, and their 20% increase in pledges helped position us to sustain this financial downturn. Now the canvassers are also focusing upon those families that are actively involved here but have pledged less \$1000 per family in past years. Since our operating costs are close to \$2000 per family per year they are hoping that a large increase from some of these families, particularly those who have the means to be able to afford to do so, will help to bring this congregation closer to long term sustainability. We are a voluntary community, so all pledges and gifts are gratefully accepted, but we are also a self supporting faith community. There are those among us, particularly some who have not previously participated in a community of faith, or perhaps those who participated in communities that were otherwise funded, who may not know what it takes for this community to thrive. There are those who cannot afford to contribute very much, and they are every bit as beloved here as those who contribute a great deal. For we are an economically and culturally diverse community just learning how to talk to each other about these things. We wish everyone to contribute what they can of their time, their talents and their treasures to make this community as robust and self-fulfilling as possible. I am mindful that some of us are experiencing deep distress from the current economy; some here have lost jobs and even more are deeply anxious about their own job security. There are many who have lost savings or retirement funds that

were invested in the stock market, and it is unclear when if ever those investments will return to their previous value. This is a time of financial anxiety for many, and so of course I have been pondering what advice to give for us all in this time of distress?

To see what our forbears did in an earlier time, I have been reading minister's reports of this congregation for the 1930's. Our building was newer and in better shape, this sanctuary was built in 1893, even some of the stained glass windows hadn't yet been added. Our endowment was much smaller; having only begun in 1919, it was a mere \$30,000. We first lent our communion silver to the MFA in 1930. Rev. Abbot Peterson, for whom we later named the Peterson room, was the minister here throughout the Great Depression. Our membership was larger then, 270 members versus 229 today. But listen to Rev. Peterson's report to the 1932 Annual Meeting: "In a year which has been one of the most trying periods within the memory of most of us, a time when most businesses have had to limit the scope of their activities and reduce dividends, it is a satisfaction to be able to report that one organization at least has continued full time operation and maintained output. Whatever may have happened to your other investments, there is one which is still a going concern. I am happy to say that your church, in spite of the depression, can report a good year... First of all, let me congratulate the treasurer upon his outstanding achievement of guiding the Parish through this past year without a deficit. Few churches can equal that record, without having recourse to additional appeals [of its members]. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that without the help of our Endowment Fund, such an achievement would have been impossible. Our endowment fund, modest as it is, has certainly justified itself as a stabilizing influence." Times of adversity are also times of opportunity. The generation that responded to the Great Depression in this place funded a faith community that thrived here throughout the next 40 years.

This congregation came through the Great Depression just fine. Thanks to the generosity of its members and friends it not only met its budget most years, by 1940 it had an endowment of nearly \$100,000, due to new contributions more than financial returns, which often fell short of the annual draw for the needs of the parish. Today our endowment is nearly \$2 million, helping us to maintain this wonderful building and to cushion this community in times of financial shortfall. We too can survive this financial downturn. This is about money, but not just about money, it is about who we are as a community. If each of us is prepared to remember what we love about this community, and to fund its expenses to the extent that we are each willing and able, then we will emerge from this financial crisis as our forebears did the Great Depression, with balanced budgets, a sustainable expense growth rate, and a growing endowment. All we need is to remember the words of the theologian Howard Thurman, who said "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." So may it be for us.

I love you all dearly, Amen and Blessed Be.