

Let's Go Ride the Rides
General Assembly, 2008
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
The Rev. Jane Rzepka

So Meg is at Spartanburg's big carnival, and it's hot, and she has promises to keep, her kids are pestering her for the chance to toss rubber chickens and get over to the bumper cars, and to her everlasting credit, what does she say? She says in a moment of prize-winning good-parenting, she says, "Let's go ride the rides."

And here's what she does not say: She does not say, "The lines are too long, the place is a mad house, there's too much going on at once, and I'm way too hot and tired." She does not actually say, "Truly and certainly I am burning in hell." She does not say outloud, "This is a meatloaf town with a meatloaf Spring Fling; we're outta here." What Meg *does* say is, "Let's go ride the rides."

Ever been to a place where it's hot and muggy outside, and there are a lot of eager people gathered in various areas? Ever been to a place where there are too many things going on at once and the lines can be long and you can get hot and tired and there are moments when the whole thing can feel like a madhouse? A place, maybe, where however fun it had seemed like it would be when you thought up the idea of going, there later came moments when you wondered what in the world you were thinking? Ft. Lauderdale? In June?

And then, and then, you snap out of it and you cool off your brain enough to rejigger your attitude and your attention, and something healthy and spiritual and calm kicks in and at last you say to yourself, "Let's go ride the rides!" You begin to notice that the shuttle bus did show up and the workshop was good and then the plenary vote did go your way and the water in the pool was just right. The dimness of your soul passes, and you are up and running toward the beauty, toward the joy.

There are, of course, prerequisites to satisfy before the beauty and joy in life come into view with any reliability. That's what a lot of this service has been about - the prerequisites. Patty and Dan read the words of Mary Oliver, where she talks about how you need to know what you want to do, what you need to be, and you don't stop. Meg sang to us about breaking through the chrysalis. When we heard Charles Albert Tindley's anthem "The Storm is Passing Over," we heard the music of a man famous for singing about prerequisites, about overcoming obstacles. Born a slave who became a minister, he taught himself Greek and Hebrew, and he earned two doctor of divinity degrees. He understood what it meant when a storm truly passes over and the morning light appears.

Well, what *does* it mean that the storm has passed over? Maybe it means that you suffered immeasurably at the hands of oppression and now, for whatever

reason, you are feeling freer. Or you've had some bad luck, but it seems to be turning now. Maybe you've been a long time finding yourself, but your voice is getting loud enough to hear. Or maybe it's just that lately you've been paying attention to the parts of life that make you miserable or make you dull of spirit, and that's not really working for you. But then, feeling hot and crabby at the Spartanburg Spring Fling gets trumped by the person you find inside who finally says with zest and excitement, "Let's go ride those rides!"

Unitarian Universalists ride the rides. We believe that everybody is invited, and not only invited, but free to choose among the death defying scary rides, the tame little whirling tea cup rides, the classic merry-go-round, the rides in the dark, the sentimental rides that have scenery and cheerful songs, or, yes, the bumper cars. We have a theology that requires us to decide for ourselves what kind of a person we want to be, what kind of ride we want to take given the constraints on our lives, and once that's all decided, we are required to help the rest of the folks climb into their seats. Only when we've done that does our religion, our unfettered religion, encourage us to find the beauty and the joy.

Unitarian Universalism encourages us to ride the rides with heartfelt joy at the beauty of it all - not every religion pushes that. We can sing if we want to as we go round and round, or shriek with delight. Ooh and ahh at the view from the top, take delight in our companions, or enjoy the weightlessness or up-side-downedness of whatever ride we signed up for. Maybe you hum some kind of spontaneous chant as the little car carries you along, or you whistle an outrageous oldies tune. But whether your ride is bumpy or smooth, or daring or comforting, the joy of the experience is yours for the taking. As Meg said in the reading I read of hers, "The ride is so much fun, it's hard to believe it is actually allowed!" "Bubbles of joy," she said. "Jubilee."

But wait. Life's no amusement park. We all know that. We bring joy and beauty into our focus in the context of pain and confusion writ small and writ large. Disaster, grief, deep disappointment, betrayal, divine discontent and the hunger heart, injustice - in our own lives and across the globe. And yet, and yet, as the Navaho chants reminded us in the introit, the potential for beauty always exists before us, behind us, above us, below us. The perfect three-pointer exacted by the correct basketball team, the hurricane blowing out to sea just in time, kindness in the face of crisis when the waters rise high, the grand and glorious symphony. Things of beauty, occasions of joy, everywhere you look. They calm us down, slow the gallop, remind us of the peace we're breathing in and the love we're breathing out.

We all get to have: "spots of time," not the fleeting happy moments that flow through our lives, but rather the far deeper, poignant spiritual moments that continue to resonate with meaning many years later. These are, to my mind, the religious moments, that offer us renovation, nourishment, and the healthy repair,

even when experienced watching the bumper cars at the Spartanburg Spring Fling.

We each get to have the beauty and the joy. We turn our attention and there it is. Presto, we find ourselves in a spiritual moment; abracadabra, we are transformed. We each get to have the beauty.