



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “Is Your Sky Blue?”

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A reflection delivered on November 25, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody. Chinese Proverb*

*Blue skies smiling at me. Nothing but blue skies do I see. Irving Berlin*

*Just because you are happy it does not mean that the day is perfect but that you have looked beyond its imperfections. Bob Marley*

*If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it... Joy is not made to be a crumb. Mary Oliver*

### Reflection:

This is our last Sunday to focus on the theme of Emotions. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said of Unitarians that we were God's frozen people because we didn't want to experience emotions. But we need to express emotion because that's part of what it means to be human. However, since four Sundays are not enough to feature the full range of human emotions, I let Bobby McFerrin's expression, "Don't worry, be happy," guide two of my choices.

I began the month referring to the storm clouds of anxiety. I end the month by referring to the blue skies of happiness. I didn't plan to use weather-related analogies – but our moods and emotions do seem to match the weather. It may explain why I had difficulty preparing a service about happiness while sitting by a window looking out upon cold and cloudy Cleveland, Ohio, my location until late last night.

Days upon days of darkness and cold snow or driving rains tend to make one miserable, as people who live in far north locations that experience less daylight in winter know, if the rate of alcoholism serves as an indicator. Even without living up north, people who spend too much time indoors during the winter may suffer from Seasonal Affect Disorder, or SAD, an appropriate acronym for getting too little sunshine. It's no wonder northern hemisphere people view the winter solstice as a time of hope and celebration.

Our bodies and spirits long for warm sunshine and blue skies, perhaps because we need sunlight to make the essential Vitamin D. Known as the sunshine vitamin, it boosts our immune system and helps strengthen our bones, thus sun exposure actually makes us healthier. Of course, too much sunshine can cause problems, so we learn not to get too much.

Despite limited daylight in winter, Scandinavian countries consistently outrank all others in annual assessments of happiness. The United Nations produces an annual World Happiness Report which examines a variety of factors to determine happiness. These include economic indicators, psychological health, national policies, and more. There's even a Happiness Research Institute in Denmark. Researchers don't just create an amusing list of rankings. They hope to better understand what contributes to happiness and how a country's policies, like healthcare, might impact happiness. In the latest report, Finland topped all others; America ranked 18<sup>th</sup>.

But statistics in global reports don't really convey what it means to be personally happy. Our own happiness can't easily be quantified, especially since one person's reasons for being happy may differ from another's. Also, both our inherent and learned ability to manage life experiences differs, so we're not equally prepared to be happy. Just as we need to balance the amount of blue skies and sunshine we're exposed to, our ability to balance life's ups and downs affects our happiness.

Think of a see-saw. If the challenges in our lives weigh us down so much that we can't experience or recognize the joys in our life, we won't be happy. And if the joys in our lives are all we experience, we'll stay on a sugar-like high, which is impossible to sustain and would keep us stuck in one place. But if we can experience the highs and lows and come back to equilibrium, we're more likely to be happy.

We can better balance our emotions by accepting that we will experience disappointments and sorrows at times in our lives, and by realizing that these will be offset by successes and joys, too. In addition, if we seek the silver lining in the gray cloud, if we learn from our disappointments and use them to change ourselves in a positive way or be encouraged to try something new, we'll be happier. And each time we rise above small disappointments and challenges, we'll gain confidence to face really tough times.

Balancing our emotions by accepting life's ups and downs encourages us to be content with our lives. Whether you're a doctor or teacher, parent or partner, musician or minister, you'll face challenges and stresses. If life becomes all gray skies with no spot of sunlight, seeking professional counseling might be helpful. It also might signal it's time for a change in your life.

Many of you know I worked at the National Geographic Society before becoming a minister. I started working there after college and intended to work just a few years before going to seminary. But I was happy at Geographic and a few years turned into 25.

I stayed because I had numerous opportunities to be creative, I was constantly learning new things about subjects that interested me, like archaeology and astronomy, and I formed meaningful friendships with co-workers. There were challenges and stresses, times I made mistakes or wasn't able to do something I wanted. But there were also great successes, times when I was proud of a book, article, or game I'd created, times when I felt what I did made a difference for others.

When a new editor-in-chief arrived and changed the editorial structure, I lost a great deal of creative freedom and authority. The rewards of the job were no longer present to balance out the difficulties. I wasn't happy.

One day I arrived home from work, drove the car into the garage, and accidentally hit the emergency alarm button on my car-key fob. The horn began blasting off and on in the narrow confines of the garage, and I struggled to find the right button to shut it off. Suddenly, I found myself in tears. The stress and disappointment had built up and my tears were its release. I knew I needed a change. I knew there had to be blue skies somewhere else. I found it in ministry. Happiness was the byproduct of my finding a new, meaningful career path.

Whoever we are and whatever we do, identifying what gives our lives meaning, and seeking that, results in greater happiness. Happiness itself really isn't the goal. We can't pursue happiness like we might pursue the latest hot toy for Christmas or the perfect soul mate. Obtaining either doesn't guarantee happiness. Happiness results from a balanced attitude and by living in harmony with what matters most to us. I sought a new path that provided a better balance between stress and reward, sorrow and joy. Happily, ministry offered that for me.

What gives your life meaning? What joys balance against your sorrows? Do you feel happy? Might focusing on the joys improve your perspective, help you see blue skies and not just gray storm clouds?

We're about to enter the period Christians call Advent, a period of waiting for something or someone special to arrive. I hope for you that includes experiences that contribute to your sense of happiness. But for many, holidays are not happy times. We often hold high expectations for family harmony during these times, so we're often disappointed when that's not the case. Accepting that families and holidays, like everything else, include their share of good and bad, should help us get through tough holiday gatherings a bit easier and happier.

To help you balance the good and bad in the coming weeks, I encourage you to adopt a spiritual practice during Advent of paying attention. At the end of the day, take time to reflect, to notice at least three good things that happened that day. Write them down to impress them on your mind and heart. Even if the day felt mostly sorrowful, consider what you might be learning from it. Seek out the silver lining. Look for that shaft of sunlight trying to break through. Then give thanks for all that is your life, its ups and downs, and especially for the people who companion you on this journey we call life. May this community be counted among your companions.

May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. Do you consider yourself a mostly 'blue sky' or 'cloudy sky' person? What might encourage a greater positive attitude in response to life's disappointments or changes?
2. What or who makes you happy or gives joy to your life? How do you express that feeling?
3. Does being a part of this UU community give you a sense of happiness or meaning? Share.