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Enthusiasm—your note sung loud.

To Inly Rejoice

How spacious do you feel as the election draws near?

It creates noise—out loud and in our heads. Alongside videos of injustices that break our hearts and outrage us, the campaigns ratchet up every day, designed to outrage us. People who follow the news, no matter what side you're on, can find themselves pretty worked up without even leaving home. Once in the car, many of us turn on the radio to hear even more. This political season, even my husband John, a newspaper person, longs for what he calls “election-free days.” Spaciousness feels like a rare commodity.

But last weekend, our daughter's wedding provided a welcome break from the news cycle—enough of one that I noticed, on re-entry, how loud the world's messaging is. Words come at us on the radio and TV, on our screens. A constant assault that rattles our sensibilities. At what price do we keep ourselves informed? What does it take, in these times, to hear ourselves think, much less hatch a sweet new thought of our own?

The day after the wedding, Sunday dawned bright and fresh—like a quiet, satisfied “Ah!” As we stood in the sun outside the tent, John's elderly aunt asked me to write a sermon about enthusiasm. Aunt Marguerite exemplifies enthusiasm. Highly intelligent and endlessly curious, the range of her knowledge and interests never fails to amaze us. Nor does her stamina. One zinger after another, her questions come rapid-fire—informed, deep and urgent. Why, then, a sermon about enthusiasm?

If you Google it, you'll find: Get Enthusiastic, 5 Reasons Why Enthusiasm is Better than Confidence, The Power of Enthusiasm, 4 Powerful Reasons to Up Your Enthusiasm, The Strength of Enthusiasm, 10 Ways to Have Amazing Enthusiasm. Clearly it's a good thing and we'd better have it. As if we could summon it up from out of the blue....

But we can't. Enthusiasm comes from within. Yours looks different than anyone else's. That's the beauty of it—what fires you up may leave the rest of us cold. We don't know when enthusiasm will take hold of us, but each of us is wired for it. It surprises us, sparks our attention, and when it comes, like a spiralling rising up of energy, little else matters.

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau talked about a person's light, “With all your science, [he wrote] can you tell me how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?”¹ Fifty years later Muslim philosopher and poet Muhammed Iqbal explored a similar thread. “Where in our hearts is that burning of desire? [he wrote]....Whence comes that drive in us?... We look to the starry sky/And love storms in our hearts./Whence comes that storm?”²

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851*, ed. Daniel Peck. NY: Penguin Books, 1993, p.107.

² Muhammed Iqbal in *Worldwide Worship: Prayers Song and Poetry*, ed. John Marks Templeton. Philadelphia, Templeton Foundation Press, 2000, p. 204.

Some would say that neurology explains it. Others, like French chemist and biologist Louis Pasteur, turn to God: “The Greeks [he wrote] have given us one of the most beautiful words of our language the word, ‘Enthusiasm’—a God Within. The grandeur of the acts of [humanity] are measured by the inspiration from which they spring. Happy is [the person] who bears a God within.”³

Coming off our wedding weekend of solemn ritual and high celebration, perhaps Aunt Marguerite felt a stirring that was hard to put in words. Different than “happy,” she pointed out. Did I know, she asked, that the word “happy” appears only thirty times in the Bible? Did I know that “joy” appears hundreds of times? Can you feel her enthusiasm?

She wasn’t alone in feeling something bigger than “happy.” I did too. The planning and details behind us, a deep joy had set in Sunday. Joy for Laura and Noah. For their auspicious beginning. For the sparkling day. For the gravitas of commitment. Joy for the cloud of witnesses coming together to see and honor.

But Marguerite wanted a message about “enthusiasm.” Behind her request surely lurked a religious question: what does God have to do with our enthusiasm, with those moments when excitement bubbles up within us? The word enthusiasm comes from the Greek “en-thousiasmos”: EN means in; thous means God; to be “possessed by a god” or “inspired.”

There was a time when the word enthusiasm was used in a derogatory sense to describe excessive religious zeal. In the early 1800s, proper Bostonians—and certainly strait-laced Unitarians— frowned upon unseemly displays of emotion in church. (How little we change!) At the same time, prominent Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing was making other kinds of religious waves. He preached not about original sin, but original goodness. He believed in shining the light of reason on theological ideas, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. By the time the Transcendentalists came along mid-century, Unitarianism had moved even further away from orthodox Christianity. They rejected the idea that God was separate from the world and preached instead that a spark of divinity dwelled within all humans. EN THOUS: possessed or inspired by God. “Do all things,” wrote Emerson, “that inly rejoice.”

I love the idea that enthusiasm was all about “religious zeal” once upon a time. Chances are that few of us here identify as religious zealots, minister included! But what better describes the momentum of being caught up with delight or the heights of soaring into orbit with a marvelous idea? Enthusiasm’s reach is broad. It fuels weighty thoughts, philosophy and scientific discovery. And it sparks plans to bring red leaves home to California friends, visions of a driftwood arch for your wedding, dreams of an expanded, light-filled UUFES that serves the wider community, sweet ideas for brightening the living space of someone you care about.

Enthusiasm is a big YES. It consumes us. Lights us up and feels crazily good. Too big for words. That’s as religious and holy, as life can be!

³ https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Louis_Pasteur

Some people embody enthusiasm all the time. Like New Yorker Aunt Marguerite who still walks all over Manhattan at 92, asking questions of strangers and living her zeal for understanding. Or my eccentric dad whose zest for life burned bright. He discovered sailing when we were kids and was so enthusiastic that on Christmas, he'd dress us in foul weather gear and orange life jackets, and out we'd go, dragging the Aqua Cat across the snow to the icy harbor. "Anything worth doing," he used to say, "is worth overdoing."

Some of us remember enthusiastic times and wish for more of that today. It's a lovely part of being human—times we're fired up by a dream and little else matters. I don't mean losing track of time on Face Book or watching all the Star Wars movies for 15 hours running. I mean being lost in a reverie when our minds take off with an idea for a poem, a novel, a trip, a reunion, a song. I mean being immersed in a project in the basement or up at camp. Sewing all weekend long. Or sitting at the piano—or the easel—for hours, inspired. Enthused.

Pay attention to the urge to go there. Moments of enthusiasm are far from a waste of time, even if nothing material comes of them. They're a way you express your essence—what makes you you. In her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about a colleague's way of seeing and honoring his own essence, what she calls his integrity:

"[He] thinks of his life as an orchestra. Reclaiming his integrity reminds him of that moment before the concert when the concertmaster asks the oboist to sound an A. 'At first there is chaos and noise as all parts of the orchestra try to align themselves with that note. But as each instrument moves closer and closer to it, the noise diminishes and when they all finally sound it together, there is a moment of rest, of homecoming.'

'That is how it feels to me,' he told me. 'I am always tuning my orchestra. Somewhere deep inside there is a sound that is mine alone, and I struggle daily to hear it and tune my life to it. Sometimes there are people and situations that help me to hear my note more clearly; other times, people and situations make it harder for me to hear. A lot depends on my commitment to listening and my intention to stay coherent with this note. It is only when my life is tuned to my note that I can play life's mysterious and holy music....'

Deep inside [writes Dr. Remen], "our integrity sings to us whether we are listening or not. It is a note that only we can hear."⁴

Imagine that "...Somewhere deep inside there's a sound that is [yours] alone" and you could "tune [your] life to it." Portland homeopath Nancy Frederick calls one's essence—VESEN in German—"the note God sang when you were born."

Think of someone you love—anyone, any age. We can't know whence their note comes, but we know it. We recognize the unique note of the person who breaks through a limiting condition—a disease, a disability, age. We recognize the note of the dying man, long paralyzed by a stroke, who rallies and speaks for the first time in months when his granddaughter comes to say goodbye.

⁴ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2000.

And while we may know a loved one's note better than our own, listen for the note that is yours alone. Tune into it. Your enthusiasm is your note sung loud. Lived loud. It's your life force on display.

This winter, we didn't know whether Noah's brother would be at the wedding—thirty years old, had had battled advanced pancreatic cancer for two years, unsuccessfully. Then the tide mysteriously turned. His wife pregnant, he has become strong and vital. The doctors cannot explain it, but maybe enthusiasm can—his note sounding, the life force surging at the prospect of a baby.

Part of your birthright is delight that bubbles up in you and you alone. Call it human nature. Call it the divine spark within. Pay attention to it. Turn off the news and listen for it. Give your enthusiasm a chance. Some spaciousness. Make room for YES. YES to life.

So may it be.