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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
May 20, 2018

*“Exalted” is relevant and here.*

READING – By Marion Posner (written during her travels in France in 2011, adapted)

Tonight we are in Conques, France, a graceful old collection of buildings which no 20th century hand, nor even a 14th century architect's hand, has much touched.

I can hear the organ in the ancient Abbey...music played to the stained glass windows as the light shadows, dims, darkens and closes. Gone are the beautiful colors. Those were broken, in the name of new beliefs...replaced with browns and yellows and beiges....Mesmerizing, they seem to dance with your hopes and dreams. If you were there now, you would be sitting on one of the long old wooden pews, breathing the candle-smoked air, and staring at the nuances in the windows' glass, seeing the notes glance and absorb in the high vaultings above, feeling them drift in amongst the complexities of your soul. You can be an atheist here, but only of a kind because, as you sit, a power that is greater is in the very stone, and poetry exalting it is recited in reverence by the windows.

Tonight, we walked to a little restaurant...I sit at the table with millionaires: we are their guides, on a walking tour. Millionaires. Another species, surely. What must it be like to not worry about tomorrow's money? And yet have they not ears and eyes as I have, losses, fears?...Why do I even give them this name, "another species"? Why not “English-speaking adventurers”? Why a name at all?...Happily, we have eight days in France. The walking together, the eating together, the discoveries together – there is nothing like it to make our differences become quite unimportant. ...Just living with what is, my stereotypes shedding like soft hen feathers, of course, I found the main stuff of us humans to be the same, just the same.

The same awe as we crossed the threshold of the tiny chapel high up in the hills that pilgrim after pilgrim has walked the steep path up to...; so many pilgrims, that the very stones of the path...are worn with the imprints of the feet that have trod them. Awe-inspiring...to place one's foot in another's. The same blisters on our feet....

The same we are too, in the Abbey, grappling with self, with beliefs, with death, and deaths, with our hearts.

*(Sermon follows.)*

### *Exalted*

The world has had a hard week. Another school shooting, 10 dead. A deadly plane crash in Cuba, 110 dead. And Gaza, dozens dead and thousands wounded. Last Monday, split-screen photos from the Middle East tore at many hearts. On one side of the screen, smiles and sunshine at the opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem and, on the other side, violence and tear gas at the border.

A holy place, this part of the world. Rich with religious history. The newspaper headlines spanned the complete gamut of human emotion: anger, defiance, defensiveness, apathy, victory, peril, satisfaction, hopelessness, frustration. So much opinion. And history. So much suffering.

I inquired of my local clergy colleagues how they planned to address the news from Gaza. No one planned to go there. Yet how can we not at least touch it? Not to discuss merits or failings or opinions, but touch, as witnesses, what goes on in our hearts. How can we not touch the struggle?

Nearly ten years ago, when I began my journey to ministry, I arrived at Andover Newton Theological School at quite a distance from my Christian upbringing, having found inspiration and meaning in this wide, free UU faith. Unitarian Universalism was the only non-Christian denomination there, just a few of us. I remember feeling like an exchange student in a “total immersion” program—not quite fitting in, reading books I don’t often read, struggling with worship service language.

We read in the Hebrew Bible of epic battles and wars, mountains of dead bodies piled high – ancient conflict, wrenching then and wrenching now, in a place hardly bigger than the state of Vermont. A poetry class gave rise to a strange tender image of this Promised Land, this place of milk and honey, as an old velvet pillow with tassels on the ends, worn and softened by the years. A place at the same time vulnerable and revered. I’ve not been to Jerusalem but would love to experience that intersection of the great faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. No doubt an exalting experience. Would it be exalting without all that has happened there these thousands of years? Without the struggle?

“I miss feeling exalted,” one of our members said the other day, home from traveling. The word jumped out at me. Exalted? I felt a bit envious! Whenever do I feel exalted? The idea of feeling that good, that free, that lifted up, took up residence in me and in the next few weeks became a prayer of sorts. Not a beseeching prayer, rather an alertness to the possibility of feeling exalted.

You might think “exalted” feels too strong, too religious for your everyday world of relationships, work, keeping up house and health. Feeling exalted might sound over the top given the hours we spend thinking and worrying, not to mention staring at our screens more hours than we’d care to admit.

But don’t you want to feel it? Exalted is more than being in a good mood. It’s feeling high on life, lifted up from the ordinary, far from our demons, even beyond the voice of our inner critic. My inner critic had a heyday the other night when my husband John was performing with his

rock bank class at a bar in Dover – a fun time until the man across the table asked if John were my son. Life abounds with un-exalting moments, no?

In this gritty life of ours, “exalted” may *be* too much to ask for. Our culture sets us up to think we should feel great all the time – happy, successful, good-looking, yes and youthful! As if not suffering were a reasonable expectation....Yet we’re not so simple. We wrestle with loss and disappointment. We struggle with each other, too, not to mention with our own shortcomings. Fair to say, we can put more effort into finding relief from suffering than to seeking to feel exalted.

The good news is that we don’t have to go to Jerusalem or to the abbey in the mountains of France to feel exalted. Exalted is right here. We needn’t wait for it. We can invite it. Tuning into its frequency gives us a chance – and a good chance – to realize that exalted is not such a long shot.

If we’re not paying attention, we might miss it, so the point is to pay attention. When we are on the lookout for joy, something in our experience shifts. Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen reminds us: “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

While the hiker finds joy atop a mountain, it also can lie in that complicated mix of *place and people*. Because we are in this life together – right and wrong, good and bad, millionaires and tour guides. As Marion wrote, there is nothing like being in it together “to make our differences become quite unimportant.”

Last week a UU colleague wrote from Washington, DC where he attended the kick-off of the Poor People’s Campaign. Inspired by the campaign of the same name once organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., its goal is to unite people across the country in a series of non-violent public protests to fight what keeps America suffering: the enmeshed evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation.

After a morning of training for the non-violent protest, my colleague joined the rally in front of the Capitol Building: hundreds of people of different faith traditions, civil rights organizations, labor unions, and others concerned about the massive inequity in our country. “Were you arrested?” I texted him. His reply:

“Yes. They put us in holding pens on the Capitol Lawn and processed everyone that way to avoid transporting us. Then we had to go to the station the next day to pay a fine and to be fingerprinted. It was a meaningful experience. UU President Susan Frederick-Gray was there....And Rev. William Barber himself invited all the clergy up front during the rally, so we sat in front of the podium for much of it. We basked in his prophetic energy. He is a dynamic force.”

Inspired by our UUFES traveler’s word “exalted,” I was ready to feel it. My antennae were up. And that message about basking in Rev. Barber’s light *felt* exalting. Like being in the light of a Nelson Mandela or the Dalai Lama. Hopeful. Transcendent. Part of that exalting moment in

Washington was surely that its energy and light were born out of struggle. Generations of pain, hate and greed had again given rise to a cry, another step toward change. Justice. Hope. Another inspiring moment of people choosing love. There's a Poor Peoples Campaign rally tomorrow at the State House in Concord. Think about going!



Just before the end of the royal wedding ceremony yesterday, Harry and Megan moved off to the side and exited the chancel area to sign documents. An long interlude followed, filled with chamber music. It turned out to be an extraordinary, elevating moment as all the hype – the fascinators, celebrities and royals – grew quiet, their collective tempo slowing to the pace of the music that filled the cathedral. Just as organ notes mesmerized Marion, playing off the once-shattered stained glass windows in the abbey, so yesterday's cello transported the guests and many of us watching from afar.

The interlude stretched out a good 15 or 20 minutes, the cello's voice warm and resonant. Not so much a performance as a time for people to just *be*. The camera panned the guests' faces. You could see them become reflective. They looked exalted...as, I'm guessing, did millions of viewers! Exalted by the music. The architecture. The bowers of white blossoms and greens reaching up and over the archways. The arches themselves...the stained glass windows. Exalted by the cathedral, the moment, the blending of cultures.

Natural beauty exalts us. A work of art exalts us. History in the making exalts us. Our mighty struggles exalt us too, steeped in generations of making art and making war. May our struggles transcend heartache and lead us toward love and justice. May we soar, exalted. Amen.