

SUNDAY 29th August - GUC Service

'Reaching for the High Notes @ Unitarian Experience Week' 2010

Lyanne Mitchell

My service this morning is inspired by Unitarian Experience Week which I attended this Summer, at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire. This is an annual Unitarian holiday which has been running for years, originally known as Unitarian Family Holiday Conference. I first attended it when my children were young and have kept attending over more than 20 years, albeit with gaps.

This year's theme was **'Reaching for the High Notes - to search and find the positives in LIFE'**....and we did!

Rather than attempting to give you a break-down of the programme, I would rather share with you some of the highlights for me this summer, hoping that you, in turn, will also find something to inspire you.

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On Sunday morning, we all went over to the nearby Great Hucklow Unitarian Chapel, just along the lane from the Nightingale Centre. It is a small, very beautiful old building and the guest minister that Sunday, was the Rev Jeffrey Usher. His service had the intriguing title - **'Making yourself Miserable'**. He kindly supplied a copy of this at my request and I would like to share with you, a shortened, edited version. Jeff based his sermon and drew much of it from 'How to make Yourself Unhappy' by Bruce T Marshall, First Unitarian Church, Cleveland, Ohio.

'It is not difficult to make yourself miserable. With proper coaching and a little practice, anyone can do it. And today, I want to offer a few easy rules to help you to become as miserable as you wish.

Many of you will perhaps already know some of the principles. You may already be using some of them. Actually, most of us are already pretty good at making ourselves miserable. However, by fine-tuning these techniques, we can maximise our capacities and develop the dominant potential within.

There are some choices we can make to be more effectively unhappy. Therein lies a catch however; the very suggestion that there may be choices can reduce the level of misery. We are most effectively unhappy when we believe that we are stuck, trapped, victimised ; when we believe that there is nothing we can do, and no way out.

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With that small proviso, let's look at the 6 guidelines for making ourselves miserable.

The First principle is - Simply ask yourself 'Am I really happy?' Then ask yourself "isn't there something in my life that could be better?" Come to think of it, aren't there many things in my life that could be a whole lot better?

This is an easy technique for making yourself miserable. Ask yourself these questions as often as possible; keep asking yourself "Am I happy - really happy - right now?"

Write the questions on a piece of paper and keep it in your wallet or handbag. Make copies; stick one on your bathroom mirror and another on your fridge door. Do you meditate regularly? If so, use these questions as a mantra.

Teach them to your pet parrot. Do whatever is possible to keep these questions always before you, always on your mind.

Because; the human mind is a funny thing. If we don't deliberately and conscientiously keep these misery-making questions on our minds, we may find ourselves sliding into happiness. If life changes and we stop keeping track of the negatives, the danger is, we might stop scoring when things become good. So, the lesson is simple. To make the most of our misery, keep the major questions before you - "Am I happy? - really happy? -right now?"

The second principle - in one word is - GENERALISE.

In one sentence: take an unfortunate or unhappy event - no matter how insignificant it may be, and interpret it as representative of a deeper trend. Have you ever forgotten someone's name? that's embarrassing. have you been asked to do something and you have responded "yes, sure, I'll do it" But then it drops out of your mind. These are mistakes; they are slips, momentary aberrations. They can be a bit embarrassing - but they are not disastrous. But if you want to maximise your potential for unhappiness - make the most of your misery...you need to dwell on these things, and remember the mistakes; and you need to GENERALISE. Generalising allows you to claim that these mistakes are not isolated events. They are examples of a larger pattern. You always make these mistakes. That's an important word - always!

The genius of this principle is that it takes one event which is embarrassing or unpleasant and connects it to a whole set of bad things. Words like 'always'

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and 'never' are important because they give more punch to your claim. This unpleasant thing always happens. You never get anything right. It's the story of your life. Misery is magnified!

The third principle is - Base your self esteem on selective comparisons of yourself with others.

Most of us do this from time to time. We look at the lives of our friends, our relatives, our associates, and on this basis, we evaluate how we are doing. The guiding principle of selective comparison is to take only the outstanding qualities in the people you meet and compare yourself with these. An example might be - "I'd like to look like Robert Redford, think like Albert Einstein, talk like Richard Burton and write as prolifically and as well as Isaac Asimov. (or the female equivalents!)

Don't look at other people as whole, normal human beings with a mixture of characteristics, talents, abilities, accomplishments. Far better to compare selectively so that, no matter where you look, you can always be second best. This is a really good way to make yourself miserable.

The fourth principle is - AIM HIGH - preferably TOO high. Never settle for being average in anything. Set your sights so high that it is unlikely you ever will or can, reach your goals.

Make your personal standard for evaluating yourself - your sense of "this is how I should be if I'm to deserve happiness" - make your personal standard higher than any standard any other person would expect of you. Then, even if you manage to satisfy and delight other people, you'll never quite satisfy yourself.

Some people call this principle a commitment to excellence. The problem is that it can also be a foolproof method for keeping yourself dissatisfied and miserable.

If we set ourselves goals that we actually reach, then we may be tempted to feel good about ourselves and about our accomplishments, Boyed up by the success of reaching one goal, we may try another, and another. That's NOT the way to make yourself miserable. People who keep reaching goals they have set for themselves are well on the way to being happy.

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So, if you want to make yourself miserable, set your sights HIGH. Set them so high as to be out of reach. If by some chance you do achieve one of your goals, even by accident, then shame on you! You're obviously aiming too low. You're expecting too little of yourself.

The fifth principle is :- View life as fate, not as a matter of choice.

We are most effectively miserable when we see our lives as devoid of meaningful choices.

Practise saying things like : "It doesn't matter what I do, things just never work out right for me". OR "I have no choice - life is stacked against me".

The more powerless you feel, the more miserable you are likely to be.

Let's say you try something - making a new friend, trying for a new job - and it doesn't work out. One response is simply to go out and try again, learning from the experiences and having another go. But if you want to make yourself miserable, the better response is to conclude that the fates are against you. They have singled you out and decided to doom you to failure.

People who are convinced that the world is stacked against them - that they are born to lose - are well on their way to maximum misery.

As Unitarians, we often emphasise the choices which are available to us throughout our lives. This presents a problem for people who are committed to being miserable.

Some years ago, a survey was conducted at Columbia University, in which 100,000 Americans were ranked on a happiness / unhappiness scale. The results were interesting : Fundamentalist Baptists scored highest on the unhappiness scale, followed by orthodox Jews and Roman Catholics. Guess who scored lowest on the unhappiness scale Unitarian Universalists and Quakers.

If you really want to dedicate yourself to true and lasting misery, you may need to change your religion. Our Unitarian approach, with its emphasis on freedom and choice, may not be the one for you.

To complete the half dozen, the 6th and final principle is - LIVE for the FUTURE.

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That can sound innocent enough, but it is another effective method by which you can make yourself miserable. Think of all the things you have to do between now and this time next week. There are probably several unpleasant chores, some things you've been putting off, also maybe some things that you're worried might happen. Think of them all together at once. If you are at all like me, then you'll begin to feel at least a little dread.

But maybe you've got a light week ahead. So try the next month - as a whole, all the stuff you have got to get done next month. I just think about that and it's better than caffeine - my heart thumps harder and I break into a sweat, can't sleep. Still resistant? Try the whole year ahead!

Life becomes more manageable when you break it down into pieces, when you deal with each task or challenge in turn, as it comes. If you lump everything together, you get overwhelmed. But if you want do one thing at a time, you can manage, then you're in danger of being happy.

So, to be as miserable as possible, resist the temptation to take life as it comes. one day at a time, one hour at a time. Keep in mind all those things that you have to do, and all those things that just might happen to you, and throw in a few extra worries for good measure. You should soon start to feel weighed down, overwhelmed, unhappy.

When Rev John Midgley was our General Assembly Development officer, he led a memorable session at a District Association Conference. He introduced the subject by inviting participants to compile a list of 50 ways in which they could try to DETER visitors to their churches and thus inhibit any chance of growth. Fun was had with such ideas as:-

- Leave the building dirty
- Use old, torn, dusty hymnbooks
- Turn off the heating
- Keep the building locked until just before the service is due to start
- Make sure that most members arrive late
- Avoid smiling
- Ignore any visitors

Then of course, we went through the list to look at the opposite of each idea as a way of encouraging visitors and thus providing the kind of conditions in which growth and development might occur.

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In the same upside - down way, let's summarise the guide-lines for making yourself miserable by looking at the implications they have for creating happiness.

1 - Participate in life without concern for whether you are happy or not. Happiness is elusive. It tends to sneak up on you and catch you unawares.

2 - Avoid concepts like 'always' and 'never'. Each moment is new.

3 - Avoid selectively comparing yourself only with outstanding qualities in others.

4 - Set realistic short-term goals for yourself. Break longer term goals into smaller, achievable pieces and remember to celebrate when you accomplish each one.

5 - Be aware that there are always choices available. We are not powerless or at the complete mercy of the fates.

6 - Take life as it comes - one day at a time. Make the most of NOW.

This has been a small taste of Unitarian Experience Week 2010. I hope some of you might decide to attend and experience the real thing. This holiday week in the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire is well named - 'Experience Week'. One has to *experience* the blend of fellowship, hobby workshops, theme speakers, morning and evening services, social evenings etc, to really understand and appreciate its unique quality. I came home inspired and re-energised. My friends at UEW go back many years. This is a truly loving community where everyone is welcomed, valued and accepted for just who they are.

Thank you for allowing me to share some of it with you this morning.
