

“Celebrations - a homily” Rev. Brian J. Kiely
September 11, 2011 Unitarian Church of Edmonton

In retrospect, it seems odd that I chose this topic of Celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the Twin Towers disaster. It was accidental...I didn't note the date when I was planning services, but maybe something was at work subconsciously. I am not sure how many average citizens would have paid that much attention to the anniversary this year if not for the media frenzy. I recall that I was profoundly moved and saddened by the event, that we worked with Westwood to hastily call an informal sharing type worship service that evening for anyone who needed it – that our staff meeting's agenda that Tuesday morning got kicked to the side of the road as DRE Karen Mills, Intern Meg Roberts, Administrator Linda Stolee and I sat around trying to make sense of it all, and that the planned topic for the Sunday service was hastily revised. We all stopped that day. We noticed. We marked the event.

But 10 years is a long time. Some of what happened in the aftermath was good, but a lot more was bad. 9-11 became an excuse for excessive military adventurism, paranoia and the virtual bankrupting of our neighbours to the south and a financial burdening of many nations around the world including ours. 9-11 redefined the world alright, but I am not sure that after the initial responses of heroism, courage and grief, that it has brought out the best in us.

Sad as it is, we do celebrate the day, as the dictionary defines it, “mark a festival or special event with festivities”. In a skewed sense, 9-11 is getting its share of festivities – darkly framed. But I intended this service to be a look at more, well, festive festivities.

I have never been all that good with celebrating all the days we are supposed to note. I do love Christmas and Hallowe'en, Canada Day and Heritage Day, not because I should, but because those festivals appeal to me personally. Far lower on my list – to a point of sometimes being forgotten, are Thanksgiving, New Year, Labour Day, Easter and even St. Patrick's Day. For one thing, Monday's are my usual day off, so there is no special release from the working grind. For another thing, well, what these days mark as special bother me a little. For example, gratitude is something we should notice a lot more than once a year, the real new year is the day the kids go back to school, Labour Day is really New Year's Eve since it's usually the day before kids go back to school and because I have never had a union job and Easter...well, if you never have or no longer believe, the festival kinda loses its significance.

Oh, and to be grumpy for a second, forgive me for absolutely loathing Valentine's Day. If you are in love, and want to stay there, you need to celebrate that love a whole lot more than once a year. And if you are yearning for love, it becomes a day fraught with the risk of despair and self-loathing. Perhaps the best example of how many landmines Valentine's Day holds is the way it is handled in elementary schools. You have to bring a Valentine card for EVERY kid in your class, or else none at all. I am not sure you can mandate love very successfully, but at least the teachers mandate inclusion. I'll come back to kids celebrations in a moment. And since I have no interest in offending today, if you love Valentine's, please feel free to keep doing so, but feel equally free to leave me out, thanks.

So a lot of the “gotta” celebrations leave me cold. I imagine your list is a bit different from mine, but I bet there are some holidays you wouldn't miss if they disappeared.

So what is worth celebrating? Well, I guess my answer is a Unitarian one. What is worth celebrating is what matters to you, what moves you, what touches your life and your emotions. There are events in each of our lives that have power – great power. Perhaps it's the day you came to Canada, or moved to wherever you currently live. Perhaps it's the day you married...or the day you divorced. Perhaps it's the day someone was born, or that someone died, or that a diagnosis was received, or the day you got sober, or that a new phase of your life started.

Now you might notice two things about that list. Most of those events are tied to a specific date – a date unique to your life perhaps, but a day that can be marked, recalled and celebrated in some way.

The other thing to be noticed is that not all of those events are obviously happy ones. In fact, many are bittersweet at best. Perhaps some change you made is the best thing that ever happened to you, but there is a good chance it was a hard won change – that you gave something up in order to make that change. This summer during Donna French's – Gordon Ritchie's mother's memorial service it was recalled that she considered the day of her breast cancer surgery decades ago as almost like a birthday. She was always aware of just how long ago it had been and used this tally as a reminder to seize every day.

In our Principles we remind ourselves to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That affirmation necessarily has to start with ourselves. It's pretty hard to truly appreciate the worth of another if we don't not first appreciate our own worth, dignity and value. We matter. Noting the events on our personal calendar of holidays and celebrations is one way of affirming our worth and dignity. That's what Donna did. We affirm ourselves by marking our own significant dates, giving them meaning, honouring the power of the event. Still, one must be careful. Some of us ring the dates of our failures on the calendar and revisit them far too often, never really letting go, never thinking that we deserve more than suffering. I disagree. Sometimes the progress of emotional health can best be measured by the lessening of power over time these dates have. The rings around some dates need to be allowed to fade. Maybe that's why 9-11 slipped past me this year.

Now the circled dates on our personal calendars are important, but I hope that's not the extent of our celebrations. And that brings me back to school yard Valentines. The folks at my daughters' school, and probably most schools, know how to celebrate the little things. Aside from all the usual biggies like Hallowe'en, Christmas, Valentines and dress green for St. Pat's Day, they also have hot dog days, pizza days, team uniform days (wear the jersey of your favorite team), pajama days, break a rule day and on and on and on. And while this reflects the cleverness of the teachers, it also reflects the cleverness of the children, all children. Kids know how to celebrate. They love each other's birthdays as much as their own. And if there is no party scheduled, they make it their doll's birthday, or score the imaginary winning goal of the Stanley Cup or whatever. I get probably 20 cards a year from my daughters made just because they want to celebrate something...anything.

We can learn a lesson from them. We don't need to wait till February to say I love you or for Thanksgiving to be grateful or for Mother's Day, Father's Day or whatever. Each one of us is free to mark any event in any given day if we want to...though you might not want to celebrate every single thing. People will talk. We distrust excessive happiness in grown-ups.

If we but look there is cause for celebration everywhere. Celebrate the end of tough week, the laugh that breaks a mood, celebrate time with a friend, celebrate a nice phone call, one more day clean and sober, the love of a pet, one pound lost – though I don't suggest chocolate for that particular celebration. Celebrate last week's weather. Celebrate how much you loved that person who died so long or so shortly ago.

You see, celebration is not a card or gift, or party. It's a state of mind, a way of being in the world. Donna French celebrated surviving cancer early and often. She understood: to celebrate is to be grateful and to grab hold of life and make it work for you.

In her poem, Jo-Anne Elder Gomes celebrated church:

And there are those who come to this church
and flower before our searching eyes,
who breathe joy into the green spring air,
who open their hands and release their gifts
into the lives of their beloved and not-yet-known friends...

We open our hands to bring,
to release and share,
to gratefully receive.
And no one leaves this place empty-handed.

In our meditation Mother Theresa was really writing about celebration:

Life is a risk, seize it.
Life is beauty, admire it.
Life is a dream, make one reality.

Life is love, rejoice.
Life is a mystery, delve deeply into it.
Life is a hymn, sing it.

Life is an adventure, dare to take it.
Life is a struggle, accept it.
Life is a promise, fulfill it.

Life is a challenge, face it.
Life is a game, play it.
Life is precious it, take care of it.