

Time to Rejoice: Celebrating Our Ethical Successes

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Part of my job at Colorado College is to run the human subjects ethics board, the committee that makes sure all research on people is ethical and carried out legally. This means I spend a lot of time thinking about, and a certain amount of time teaching about, human research ethics. Some years ago, I developed an exercise to use in social science research methods classes since professors bring me in regularly to talk about these issues. The exercise goes something like this: working with a couple of classmates, students develop the most immoral, illegal, unethical research project they can possibly imagine and share the project with the class. On occasion I've offered prizes for the most disturbing project in the room. As they describe the project I take notes on the board, broken out in a pattern that I have not explained ahead of time. Only when the reporting is done do I ask what each sub-list on the board has in common. It rarely takes much time for students to recognize the main categories of concern to my committee: harm to research participants, deception of research participants, lack of an appropriate consent process for the research, and so on. The exercise tends to engage the students in the moment, and professors report that the students remember it later.

I came up with this exercise because I love creative design in teaching and it's fun watching the kids go through their paces. So, I wasn't thinking much about it when I asked a particular social science professor to write me a letter of recommendation for my annual work evaluation. I asked him for reasons completely unrelated to this committee or this exercise, and when he sent me a copy of his letter to my boss, I was shocked to see how he went on about my ethical sensibility and that he described this particular exercise in detail. He went so far as to call me "a tremendous champion of ethical standards." Now, right about at this point you're thinking, "she's just bragging up there." But wait. It gets worse. I forwarded his email to Phoebe and my mother to see their responses. Total egotist, me. Arrogant as the day is long. You would never forward such an email. Right?

Well, maybe the story is a little more complicated. If I were forwarding an email complimenting me for scoring high on an exam or getting a project completed on time that would be pretty egotistical. But this is different. The point of the exercise described above is to help people think more ethically and as such, my creation and teaching of it is an ethical act, an attempt to make the world better for researchers and the people they study. I am happy to share the value of this project with others, to be affirmed for doing useful work, and to reinforce my commitment to being what my friend called a champion of ethical standards. And obviously I'm happy to share the story with you, since I chose to begin today's sermon with it.

We are drawing to the close of a long sermon series on practices that can help us choose ethical actions more often, and for the past few sermons we've tried to stipulate that the practices should increase our joy as well as our morality. I can hardly think of anything more joyful than celebrating when our ethical lives go well. And so today I'd like us to think together about why we should do this and how we might go about it. I'll also say a bit about why it can feel

uncomfortable to rejoice when we make good choices and why we should push back against the discomfort.

So, for starters: why should we celebrate our ethical successes? I can think of three reasons that differ from one another in interesting ways.

First, hard work calls for a reward. When we speak truth to power or keep our mouths shut when we are dying to gossip or spend our money in ethically conscientious ways or otherwise make the right decision, we have done something that may well have been difficult. I've argued before that we don't live in a society where it's as easy to act ethically as it is to act unethically. We are surrounded by selfishness, greed, arrogance, self-centeredness and a hundred other problematic traits that have been not only built into our social structures and our culture and are rewarded now that they are there. To push against our unethical culture and society is hard work, if not immediately than eventually. And when we engage in hard work, it's only reasonable to celebrate our work once we've accomplished it. We celebrate completed projects at the job and in our avocations. We celebrate winning seasons if we are athletes. We celebrate a newly written poem or song. We should not be afraid to celebrate our strength and resilience, our courage, our power to do good when we have demonstrated it.

Second, celebrating our ethical successes may inspire us to create more of them going forward. I'm not a strict behaviorist but I know that there are situations in which positive feedback reinforces good behavior. I've learned this year as a host parent that positive feedback even works with teenagers! So, if we celebrate ourselves and our work in the world, remembering that experience of joy and satisfaction may help us get over the hump the next time we face a difficult situation. We may have the foresight in our moment of decision to realize that if we take the next good step there is joy waiting for us on the other side. The expectation of that joy might help us move forward.

Finally, we should celebrate our ethical successes because we should celebrate as much of our lives as possible. We have such a great capacity for joy it is practically a sin that we don't engage it more often. Even if our individual families were not Puritans four centuries ago, we still live in a culture that is profoundly ambivalent about delight and joy, both anxious to play hard and remarkably guilty about doing so. Of course, there are things in our lives we can't celebrate, things that are difficult or painful or that call for a more complex response. But there is so much to celebrate, and our ethical successes should be part of a larger life of celebration. They are not isolated moments but aspects of the larger life of wholeness we are building.

These are some reasons why we should celebrate our ethical successes. How should we celebrate them? Obviously, the specifics of ethical rejoicing will differ for each of us, but I can think of two main ways to celebrate: in our hearts, and with others.

When I first received my colleague's letter of recommendation with its high praise about my ethical work for the college, I did not immediately send it to anyone. I read it through a couple of times, smiled, and thought about how happy I was to receive such a compliment. In my mind I made sure I thought my colleague was not going overboard, and then let myself feel delight in the depths of my heart. It was a very quiet moment, actually, but a marvelously rich one. That's

one of my ways of celebrating an ethical success. When I actually teach the classes where I carry out the exercise I described above, at least some students usually applaud as I leave the classroom and I tend to head down the hall with a little extra bounce in my step, smiling and maybe even singing softly a little. That's another way I celebrate ethical successes. I'm sure you all have your own ways to delight in the good that you do. I hope they are many and deeply rewarding.

But I don't think it's necessary to hide our ethical lights under a bushel, and in fact our good works can be an inspiration for other people. Not that this is why I forwarded the complimentary letter to Phoebe and my Mom – I just wanted them to be proud of me. But I sometimes describe an occasion of making a good ethical choice on Facebook, where literally hundreds of people will see it. And, more modestly, I'll sometimes tell a friend about a situation where I made a good decision. Again, we all have our own ways to share our joy at our ethically lived lives with other people and our reasons for doing so.

Now, I wonder if any of you felt even the slightest bit uncomfortable when I first talked about forwarding that email to Phoebe and my mother. It really does sound like bragging, doesn't it? And many of us are taught that bragging is bad, that we shouldn't draw too much attention to ourselves, that you don't stick up above the crowd. This phenomenon is even stronger in societies that are more communal than individualistic. But I think we learn plenty of it here in the US as well. And while there are some good things about not being too self-centered, and while humility is generally a positive trait and arrogance a negative trait, I think it's unfortunate that celebrating ethical successes can come across as self-absorbed. After all, what's the alternative? Trying to do good without enjoying your ability to do so? Not sharing very important aspects of your life with other people? Refusing to do good because it would be unseemly to enjoy it? I think we need to find a middle ground here, where we are not claiming that we are better than other people but we are acknowledging the good that we accomplish.

There may be another reason we are inclined to downplay the ethical good in our lives, and I think this also might be a Puritan holdover. After all, why be too self-satisfied when we could always do even better? Sure, we did something ethical today, but why didn't we do five things, ten things, a hundred things? Why, in fact, weren't we perfect today? And this is an area where Unitarian Universalists have not shed our Puritan heritage; we tend to subscribe to a theology of salvation by works, even if we claim to have long since discarded the concepts of both theology and salvation. Now, there are some good things about believing in salvation by works since this strengthens our commitment to do good in the world. But we are inevitably imperfect and part of that imperfection is our inability to be at our best every single waking minute of every single day. Given that this is the case, why not celebrate when we do feed our good wolves, when we do make a positive difference? Again, the alternative is a sort of grim dissatisfaction or simply not paying attention to the fact that we lived out an ethical value. Those both seem rather bleak to me.

So, if you have any hesitation about letting delight sink in when you take the harder road, let it go. Be pleased with yourself. Be proud of yourself. Be committed to keeping up the good work.

Before we close, I'd like to take a few minutes to carry out an ethical celebration meditation, something that will give us quiet, private practice in celebrating the good we do. Start by closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Now bring to mind an ethically good thing that you did sometime recently. It does not have to be today. Just something that represents you living up to your best values. Think about it in silence. Remember what it felt like to make that decision and to take that action. Now take a deep breath and see if you can celebrate your ethical action. Pay attention to both what you are thinking and how you are feeling. What does your particular form of celebration feel like? Are you proud of yourself? Contented? Do you have a warm feeling in your chest or stomach? Are you smiling? Do you feel very calm? Do you feel a little energized? How else do you feel? What else are you thinking?

When you're ready, take one more deep breath and open your eyes. We're going to go around the circle but please don't share what your ethical act actually was. I know that will be hard for some of you but I'm aiming for what arises in common here, not the specific differences of what you did. If you are willing, please do tell the group what it was like to celebrate your ethical action – what you were thinking and what you were feeling.

My friends, our lives are filled with opportunities for ethical behavior and opportunities for joy. May we take advantage of both types of opportunity, and may we never fail to rejoice and be exceedingly glad for the good that we do right here on earth with every day that passes. Amen and blessed be.