

The Joy of Missing Out

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Not Giving It Up © Rod E.S.Q.

There's a phrase that's been making the rounds over the past two or three decades, which sums up the sense of anxiety that comes when we have the impression that we're not keeping up with others – the *fear of missing out*. This is often shortened with a fashionable

acronym (a word made of the beginning of other words): FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). Although it may sound like another word that is sometimes used as a slur, FOMO is rather used to express that sense of loss, sadness, and lack of fulfillment that comes when we think that others are having it better, or getting to have fun that we're not having.

To be sure, the basics for FOMO aren't all that new. The adage “keeping up with the Joneses” betrays a similar sentiment. But FOMO is often used to illustrate a stronger and more pervasive version of that feeling, especially one that has been amplified by the easier access we have to information, and particularly social media.

Now that many people have taken up the habit of documenting many parts of their lives – and advertising them by sharing them on their social media – it has become common to feel like we're passive observers in what seem to be the amazing lives of others. Not only is everyone's lawn much greener, but so are their salads... their desserts are sweeter and fancier, their coffees frothier, their pets funnier, and their vacations more exotic.

Of course, that is only our *perception* of others, since many of those amazing parts of their lives tend to be but mere snippets of more regular lives, which are carefully curated to project a certain image. Not only

that, the fact that so many people do this, also means that we're liable to be getting dozens, if not hundreds, of these constructed lives in short amounts of time, maybe within the same day.

Part of the issue is, in fact, the reality that the possibility of being part of so many things has never felt so easy. Getting to know about exciting events, and about things we could get, or be part of, is just a click or notice away. The very fact that we can get *to* more stuff, and *get* more stuff, is a constant reminder that we're not doing or getting that stuff.

This has been a real observed phenomenon, particularly among the younger generations, and it has often been tied to higher rates of anxiety and depression, as getting massive doses of perfectly manicured lives can give the impression that our lives simply don't live up to those of others, and we risk fearing that we're missing out on something that everyone else is having, or getting to do. Somehow, this may give the impression that we are not enough.

Of course, the bulk of this is an illusion, but it is hard to fight that sense that our lives somehow don't measure up.

There is a better way.

What if, instead of focusing on those things we think we're missing out on, we can cultivate a practice of intentionally missing out?

As I've already mentioned, the basics of this sense of having gaps between our lives and those of others is not that new, even though our current technology may make that gap feel even bigger.

Meanwhile, there have also been spiritual practices that invite us to grow in our sense of self and community by intentionally giving up some of the very things that we think we want more of. Many faith traditions have some kind of practice that includes fasting. This has typically been done by giving up certain foods, or giving food up at certain times (although this practice can be tricky for folks who have

eating disorders or a complicated relationship with food). But the concept can be extended beyond food, to giving up other things, or reducing our reliance on some material things, or maybe even taking up practices that centre our needs less to focus on others – and our relationship with them.

Some of us have looked into Muslim practices, which include fasting during the month of Ramadan. Among other things, this practice invites contemplation about what we really need, as well as compassion for those who have less, by voluntarily sharing in part of the experience of doing without. Almsgiving is also part of the Muslim practice, by sharing one's wealth among the community through acts of charity.

Closer to our heritage, we're now a couple weeks into the Lenten season that comes before Easter. And some form of fasting has been part of observing Lent for a long time. This can be seen as a re-enactment, a communal pageant, of the fasting that Jesus is said to have taken for forty days shortly before his death.

You might know that a Lenten fast has been done in different ways through history. In Roman Catholicism, this has included giving up meat on Fridays, which is why fish might be a bit more popular around this time of year.

Many others extend the practice to giving something up... it is sometimes fashionable for chocolate to be one of those things, but many of us might choose something else to give up, or at least reduce, like a habit we've identified as being an issue in our lives.

I myself have previously given up social media for Lent, on more than one occasion. As can be the case, a habit might come back in full force after the time of fasting, and that has sometimes been true for me with me with my social media fast. But even then, having taken up that practice, at least for some time, has taught me something about myself and my relationships with others. The practice has, indeed, become a rehearsal, an enactment of a "what if?" that has given me some real-life

experience of what my life would look like if that fast became a more regular part of my routine.

Among the lessons learned is that I am usually happier when I do less social media. Taking up the practice, even when temporarily, has offered me a glimpse of the realities that a different way of living can bring. And it has increased my awareness that too much social media can be hazardous to my health.

And indeed, after a few trial-runs of the sort, I've noticed that, while I was never a particularly heavy user of social media, I now do it much less than in other years, even during "ordinary time", sometimes going days or weeks without feeling the need to check the latest buzz.

This doesn't mean that we need to give these things up altogether. In my case, I make use of social media for some ministry-related work, as well as some social connection, but it's now a more balanced part of my life. There is lower risk of FOMO, *and* there is a higher quotient of JOMO – the Joy of Missing Out. Because sometimes the act of giving up also gives more of other things. In my case, it's been clarity as well as time – spending less time on one thing, allows for more time on other, perhaps more fulfilling things.

The author and journalist Oliver Burkeman, has recently written the book called *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. The number four thousand may seem big in some contexts, but in this case, it refers to how many weeks are in the average human lifespan, which suddenly doesn't sound like all that much. In that scarcity, Burkeman finds the affirmation that, with limited time, we may feel the freedom to give up on taking on too much, to give up on the idea that we need to do it all, which was an impossible task to begin with (for those of us who are mortal). And when we give up some things, we may find that we end up having more of other things.

For instance, Burkeman contemplates the difference between having a *to do* list and a *done* list. Now, a *to do* list is a very useful tool – I use

one myself – as it helps in keeping track of tasks. And some of those tasks may be vital to doing what is important to us and those around us: work that brings in a salary, and which we may also find fulfilling; taking care of our homes and our families; taking care of ourselves – all of these are the *real* important things.

And a *to do* list may remain useful as long as we remember to give up on doing everything that we could possibly add to that list. Burkeman suggests a *done* list – things which we didn't have to do (or were given the impression that we should do them) and rather things that we've taken up doing for our sake and the sake of those around us.

My friends, some of you may have already taken up a version of that practice, such as a diary or journal – that is a *done* list that allows us to witness to the life we have taken on. Another way to look at it is as a practice of gratitude – celebrating the reality of our lives as they are, rather than maintaining an illusion of overly-ambitious lives that cannot be and which we fear missing out on. Burkeman notes that this kind of practice helps remind us that we are enough, and there is no need to constantly justify our existence.

My friends, the Lenten practice of taking up more of life by giving up on the illusion of living up to other impossible lives, is a liberating spiritual tradition. It is an opportunity to train ourselves in enhancing our awareness of what matters most, by foregoing the more superfluous trappings of things we need less of.

My friends, the joy of missing out involves celebrating the love that is more powerful than the fear of missing out.

So may it be,
In gratitude and joy
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #16 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple**

Words: Joseph Bracket, 18th cent.

Music: American Shaker tune

SIMPLE GIFTS

Hymn #191 Now I Recall My Childhood

Words: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1941, recast, based on poem LXXI in Tagore's *Crossing*

Music: Alfred Morton Smith, 1879-1971, © Church of the Ascension, Atlantic City, New Jersey

SURSUM CORDA

Closing Hymn #168 One More Step

~)-| Words & Music: Joyce Poley, 1941- , © 1986 Joyce Poley,

~)-| harmony by Grace Lewis-McLaren, 1939- , © 1992 UUA

ONE MORE STEP