

YOU BEFORE ME

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Several nights ago, after a long day at the end of a long week, my wife Holly and I decided to watch a movie. It told the story of a quadriplegic, and it reminded me of one of my daughter Zoe's favorite books from her childhood. Both the movie and the book concern a king (or a king-like figure) and a jester. And both stories describe people in miserable circumstances trying to discover a source of joy in their lives, even a source of laughter.

Given the daunting circumstances we face as a nation, not to mention the global challenges that lie beyond our borders, my own view is that we should do the same. Especially now, who among us doesn't want to feel merry? Who doesn't need a good laugh? Perhaps these unlikely sources of wisdom can point the way.

The children's story appears in David Saltzman's book titled, *The Jester Has Lost His Jingle*. It was loaned to Zoe by her kindergarten teacher after Zoe had told her teacher about the death of her eleven-year-old cousin Krista — my niece — from a brain tumor. Krista had been diagnosed with the tumor at age three, and five surgeries and eight years later, she died at age 11, by then mostly blind and mostly paralyzed.

The book about the king and the Jester sets the scene in the following way:

Our story begins quite removed in a castle far away.
Our story unfolds, unfortunately, on a very unfortunate day.
You see, this morning when the world awoke,
no one was in a mood to joke.

The story goes on to say that the king in particular found himself in the foulest of moods on this day, and he lashed out at the Jester and the Jester's sidekick named Pharley, banishing them from the castle. In response, the Jester and Pharley begin searching the land to discover where all the joy and laughter have gone.

The story continues:

They looked in vain for flowers. They heard no songs of birds.
But they saw lots of angry faces and heard lots of bitter words.
"Everyone here is so moody. Everyone here is so mean.
I must confess this city is the saddest place I've ever seen.
Maybe someone here can tell me. Maybe someone here might know.
How come people aren't laughing? How come spirits are so low?"

“Ask that man,” Pharley motioned, “that man over there, the one with the briefcase blowing smoke into the air.”

“Laugh? That’s a laugh! The best I’ve had in years!
The world is not a funny place. It’s filled with pain and tears.
Don’t you read the papers? It’s all there in black and white.
Everything is going wrong, and jokes won’t make it right.

I have no time for laughter. I have no time for you.
I’m sorry that’s the way things are... There’s nothing you can do.”

I know that man — the one with the briefcase blowing smoke into the air. Except that he’s seldom blowing smoke, and he often isn’t holding a briefcase, and half the time he isn’t even a man. Often, the person is one of you.

“The world is not a funny place,” you say, one way or another, echoing the lament of the man with the briefcase. “It’s filled with pain and tears.” You tell me about experiences you have had, or articles or books you have read, or you send me video links, so I can see for myself what you have seen — sometimes in black and white, but often in full color. Either way, it’s hard to look at.

The newly-enlivened forces of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and Islamophobia in our nation vie for attention with long-standing threats posed by terrorism, climate change, nuclear weapons, and the increasingly-fierce global competition for water and food. And so on. Given the weight of the evidence, it’s hard not to draw the same conclusion as the man with the briefcase.

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The state of the world makes you want to stop reading the papers, and turn off the news, and log off Facebook, and ignore Twitter. This desire to escape the cares and worries of this world wasn’t created by modern technology, however. This world has been filled with pain and tears since the beginning of time. Jesus spoke about the desire to escape these travails during his ministry nearly 2,000 years ago.

What did he advise? “Therefore I tell you,” Jesus said, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet they are well fed. And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

On my reading, Jesus isn't taking issue with people who spend their time doing what needs to be done. Rather, he's cautioning people who spend time worrying about life rather than embracing it – embracing the freedom it offers to us, the beauty it holds before us, and the gift of time it bestows upon us, hour by precious hour. If we're going to embrace what's good about life, Jesus suggests, we need to spend at least some of our time looking — not for what's worrisome but for what's wonderful.

That's what the Jester and Pharley end up doing. After a search, they finally happen upon a little girl in the hospital who has a tumor. And she helps them find what they're looking for.

I thought of the Jester story Holly and I watched the movie *Me Before You*. We were looking for something to watch that was light and sweet — and that was PG-13. The movie is based on a best-selling book by the British romance novelist JoJo Moyes, whose books are especially popular with women. Despite being a romance novel, the book was reviewed in the *New York Times*, and the first line of the review by Liesl Schillinger reads, "When I finished this novel, I didn't want to review it; I wanted to reread it."

Like the book, the movie tells the story of a privileged young British aristocrat named Will, who grew up king-like in a castle, but who suffers a tragic accident and becomes a quadriplegic. Like the storybook king, Will spends his bleak and dreary days mostly in silence, which he breaks only to complain bitterly about his condition or lash out at those trying to care for him.

Will's would-be Jester is an excessively-perky and zany-dressed young woman named Louisa, known as Lou, who hails from the other end of the economic spectrum. She has no prospects in life: her family is poor, her father is unemployed, and she has just been fired from her job selling cupcakes at the local bakery. Even so, when she lands the job of keeping Will company, she turns her thousand-watt personality to the task of cheering him up.

Initially, the opposite happens. Instead of her lifting his spirits, his bitterness drags her down. She becomes miserable too and desperately wants to quit. But she can't because her family needs the money.

Then Will's former girlfriend and his former best friend come to visit — the first visit from either of them in a long time. With awkward apologies, they let Will know that they are getting married. This news breaks Will's heart, and a few other things get shattered as well. But it provides an opening for Will and Lou to see each other's pain and to recognize their common humanity. They learn to cry together, and eventually to laugh together. And that's when the important part of their story begins.

The movie bears the title *Me Before You*. Will and Lou each compare themselves as they were before they met with the people they come to be after they learn to know each other. And the transformation in both cases turns out to be remarkable. But the title of the movie could more accurately be reversed: you before me — not you prior to me, but you in front of me, here and now.

By opening their hearts to each other, Lou and Will learn to share the burdens they had each carried alone. And they discover how to have fun together — to cherish each sweet moment of life, to live fully and deeply, and yes, to laugh. It doesn't change Will's condition or his prognosis, of course, but it decisively changes the quality of the time they have together.

Strictly speaking, the role of a Jester is to distract the king from all the bad things that are happening in the world. But in so doing, the Jester also serves to remind the king of another equally-vital truth: not everything that's happening is bad. There are good things happening as well — wonderful things, joyful things, and even happy things.

As we head into the December holidays, I'd like for us to make the revised movie title our motto for the season: you before me. Take time for the people before you — the people at home, at work, at school, even on the bus or the subway. Give them the gift of paying attention to their fears and anxieties, whether about their own lives, or our nation, or our world, or our planet. But I'd also like for each of us to find our inner Jester — that playful, joyful, exuberant spirit that looks for what is wonderful in each moment, what's worth celebrating, what's worth laughing about.

After all, the celebration of Christmas happens in the bleak midwinter for a reason. When days are dark and nights are cold, and we end up feeling beleaguered and forlorn, that's when we most need to hear the song of the angels — tidings of comfort and joy. The Gospel accounts say that Jesus was born in order to bring great joy to all the people. If we open our hearts to the spirit of this season, some of its joy can be ours as well.

Yes, this world is full of troubles, and we have more than enough problems to worry about. But this world is also full of wonders, and we have more than enough to be merry about. So look for reasons to be merry. Look for reasons to be joyful. As the song says, even in the bleak midwinter, "When our hearts are open, love is born again."