Let the Good Times Roll

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**Words from Rumi**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.  
  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Message

Mardi Gras, you might know, is French for “Fat Tuesday.”

Lots of holidays fall on the same date each year, but not Fat Tuesday. Fat Tuesday is tied to Ash Wednesday which is tied to Lent. Lent is 40 days long. And Lent leads up to Easter which is tied to cycles of the moon, which do not correspond to the modern calendar, which itself is random and dates back only to the year 1582.

So the date of Fat Tuesday floats. It’s different each year.

This is really not so out of character for the Roman Catholic church, which has a history of mucking around in cycles and celebrations that are thousands of years older. When Christianity hit Rome, Mardi Gras was how the church co-opted the raucous celebrations of the ancient Romans, including Saturnalia and Lupercalia. These bishops and popes, they were not dumb. They saw that absorbing these festivals into their own faith was way easier than trying to kill them. Make it sound like it’s their idea.

Saturnalia, which used to fall in December, carried with it all kinds of stuff that we UUs might find interesting. It was a time of role reversal and a relaxing of the rules. Slaves could dine with their masters, even talk back to them or disobey without fear of punishment. It was a time of liberty and free speech. And a time when everyone threw off their buttoned-down white togas and wore colorful dinner costumes instead.

In the service description for today, I encouraged you all to wear purple, green or gold. These are the colors of Mardi Gras, decreed by Rex, the king of the Carnival, back in 1892. They are not random. Purple stands for justice, green for faith and gold for power. How UU is that? A faith that seeks justice, that speaks truth to power.

So anyway, after reading a while about Saturnalia, I thought, naturally, of course, about Epicurus, Greek philosopher, namesake of Epicureanism, which these days we use pretty loosely to describe a certain high-falutin’ taste in food and drink, and a general disregard maybe for ethics or right living. Epicureans are all about pleasure. The easy life. Undeserved. You can see privilege in there. And elitism. They stand against Stoics in our minds. Stoics, who work hard and rarely get everything they deserve. And we admire stoics, even if we can’t be that way ourselves all the time.

But all this really does a disservice to Epicurus, who was not a glutton, who would not recognize himself in what we have commonly held to be Epicurean. Epicurus was trying to describe the human condition, what drives us, and what we might strive for.

In fact, Epicurus, like all Greeks, believed in moderation in all things. True happiness comes, he said, not from wanton excess, but from self-control.

In this light, Epicureanism starts to sound a whole lot more like Buddhism. Why is there suffering in the world, the Buddha asks. Where can I find true happiness, says Epicurus.

And are we not this way? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all .. are endowed … with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Happiness, Jefferson writes.

The aim of life.

Jefferson might not have fully appreciated what he started. The pursuit of happiness in so many ways has come to define, and strangle, our culture.

“Happiness,” writes David Koepsell, an author and educator, “is the god of a modern cult,” a cult that supports a whole branch of the pharmaceutical industry and a host of pop psychologists.

“(But) is it the best value to strive for, and should we seek it as an end in itself? Certainly all of the other emotions serve functions and should be valued. Our finest art is often steeped in ‘negative’ emotions and is produced from states and lives whose happiness quotients were low indeed.”

He has a point. But I have to wonder whether Koepsell’s definition of happiness, especially in light of this conversation about the “real” Epicurus, is a straw man. “Of course all creatures “like” happiness, Koepsell says. We might really be talking about the same thing.

And if the United States indeed is a nation devoted to happiness, we’re not doing so well. According to the World Happiness Report – yes, there is such a thing – the U.S. ranks 15th, behind Mexico. Top of the list is Switzerland. Which is filled with Calvinists, go figure.

Back to Mardi Gras. Not only is it the day before Lent, it is the last day of the Christian season of Epiphany, which started back in January, on Three Kings Day. The word epiphany, in classical Greek, was used of the appearance of dawn, also of an enemy in war, but especially of the appearance of a deity to a worshiper. It is the time when god shows up.

I have long sought these times in my life. The times when god shows up, when things are clear, when inspiration strikes, when I feel myself a part of the universe. This, for me, has been the sweetness. And it has not always been in the best of times. Sometimes it has come when life has been hard. An enemy at dawn. Even then, should it be any wonder we celebrate?

Happiness will not always be with us. But life will, as long as we live.

Taste the sweetness.

Live life.

Be grateful for whoever comes.

And when they do,

Let the good times roll.