

Fairs, Carnivals and Picnics
Sunday, August 20, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle."

Today in a month when our theme is "joy" I want to talk about the times in summer when we take some time to celebrate the miracle of walking on earth. As I remember the fairs, carnivals, and picnics of my childhood and the joy they brought, I hope I trigger your own memories, and that we will make a commitment to do what we can to heal our earth and return summer to days of enjoyment and not days with heat indexes to be feared.

Imagine you can hear Nat King Cole singing the words of Charles Tobias.

"Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer
Those days of soda and pretzels and beer
Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer
Dust off the sun and moon and sing a song of cheer
Just fill your basket full of sandwiches and weenies
Then lock the house up, now you're set
And on the beach you'll see the girls in their bikinis
As cute as ever but they never get 'em wet
Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer
Those days of soda and pretzels and beer
Roll out those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer
You'll wish that summer could always be here."

In my family summer through early fall was a fun time. There were family picnics for Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day. There was a big company picnic for the company where my father worked. There were picnics held in conjunction with family reunions- the Light reunion, the Gettle reunion, the Swope reunion, the Hower reunion. We played cornhole. We had peanut scrambles. There were cakewalks and tug of wars, badminton, croquet, and baseball.

I remember at the company picnic there was a playground in the woods with a tall, metal slide. As children we thought it was enormously tall. But sometimes we would screw up our courage to climb to the top only to find that we weren't really sliding down. We were disappointed to have to scoot ourselves down. That's when some adult would send one of us to the kitchen crew to ask for wax paper so that we could wax that slide down until we could truly slide.

In my childhood baby parades were a thing. There was a baby parade at multiple New Jersey shore cities and at just about every town and county fair. My family built floats for those parades, and my father

would take a Saturday off from work for most of those New Jersey shore parades. My parents would wake us early in the morning to get in the car. I remember seeing the lights come on in the dairy barns before I fell back asleep for the ride. We would arrive at the shore early enough to rent bikes to ride up and down the boardwalk before having the treat of a restaurant breakfast. The parade happened in the afternoon and there was also time to go to the beach, ride a few rides on the amusement pier, sit on the boardwalk shelling and eating a bag full of warm peanuts, and maybe playing a game or two of chance at some boardwalk game stand before we went home.

By late summer and early fall we weren't going to the shore but to the fairs. My sister, the youngest, would ride on the float. Sometimes my brother and I would dress up to walk in the walking divisions of the parades. One year I was Mary Poppins and he was a fruit huckster. After the parade we would walk through the exhibits of quilts, jams, pickles, corn, beans, and gourds. We would see the pigs, the cows, the chickens. We might get a sausage sandwich, a candy apple, ride some rides, and play some games before we went home.

The point is that these were not normal, routine days. Riding Ferris wheels and bumper cars was not something that we did any random Thursday afternoon. Nor was being at the ocean or being in a parade. Summer was the time we took time for special days of fun, days meant just for our enjoyment.

I was a kid. I didn't know that my parents had to budget money for trips to the shore or days at the fair. But even though they had that grown-up responsibility I think they enjoyed those days too. Although my father couldn't swim, he would always jump the waves with us. And at home he built a display case for all the ribbons and trophies we won in those parades. He was quite proud of them. My mother would buy dry split peas to take on those shore trips so that we could feed the pigeons. She would take us to the candy store to see them making taffy or fudge before some was bought to take home.

The world was a wondrous place, and the summer was a wondrous time. Sure, there was blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, but there were also bright lights, music, rides to make you scared or dizzy or both, and food that wasn't healthy or balanced but was fun. There was joy.

I was a child so not of an age to be under the boardwalk, but we passed by those teenage couples who were there as we walked under the boardwalk and out onto the beach. You know that summer song too.

From Arthur Resnick and Kenny Young,
"From the park you hear the happy sound of a carousel
Mm-mm, you can almost taste the hot dogs and French fries they sell
Under the boardwalk, down by the sea
On a blanket with my baby is where I'll be."

The summer song is a thing as is that teenage summer love. The movie "Grease" came out the year after I graduated from high school.

"Summer lovin' had me a blast
Summer lovin' happened so fast
I met a girl crazy for me
Met a boy cute as can be

Summer days driftin' away
To ah, oh, those summer nights...

“Took her bowling in the arcade
We went strolling, drank lemonade
We made out under the dock
We stayed out 'til ten o'clock
Summer fling, don't mean a thing
But ah, oh, those summer nights...”

By the time I was a teenager family trips were harder. There were jobs and band camp and scout trips. But that didn't mean that summer wasn't still for fun. The church youth fellowship would have a pool day or a day at the amusement park. If my friends and I went to the fair, we were more interested in finding romance than in eating cotton candy. There was still joy, just of a different kind.

A song from Eduard A. J. Edgar and Ed Starink that was sung by Louis Armstrong,
“I hear laughter, from the swimmin' hole
Kids out fishin', with the willow pole
Boats come driftin', round the bend
Why must summer, ever end...”

“Oh, love to me, is like a summer's day
If it ends, the memories will stay
Still, and warm, and peaceful
Now the days are getting long
I can sing, my summer song...”

How many of you still remember some young summer romance?

Eventually I became the parent taking my child to the fairs, the picnics, the carnivals, the shore. One of the first toys I bought my daughter after she came to me at the age of 12 was a funny purple and yellow string puppet bought at a stand at an African American festival we went to together. We made a summer trip to Pigeon Forge and a summer trip to Disney World, places that are always carnivals.

Mark Twain said, “To get the full value of joy you must have someone to divide it with.” So, find someone and have a picnic, go to the fair, go to the carnival, go to the shore. And if it is too hot, lay out your picnic in the living room, make funnel cakes in your own kitchen. The fun of summer may not be the most life-threatening danger of climate change, but it will be a loss. Let us do what we can to make sure that climate change does not undo the joy of summer for the young people of Montana who have won the first round of their climate suit and for our own grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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