

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Let The Wild Rumpus Start!

Children’s author Maurice Sendak sets loose his protagonist, a boy named Max, where the wild things are. The wild things make Max “king of all wild things.” “And now,” cries King Max, “let the wild rumpus start!”¹

A *rumpus* is “a noisy clamor.” A rumpus is busting out. A *rumpus* is what happens when we fire the critics who live, rent-free, in our heads, and *really* don’t care who’s watching. A rumpus is living large. What I want for us, dream for us, this beloved community, is that we make of our spiritual lives a wild rumpus, that we live a wild rumpus of love, service, justice, peace. Our mission: love, service, justice, peace ... and a wild rumpus! Think anarchist Emma Goldman: *If I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution.*²

In the early 2000s, a team of psychologists gave the name the *spotlight effect* to a specific kind of social embarrassment. Life coach Martha Beck writes, “In the beam of imaginary spotlights, many of us suffer untold shame, and create smaller ... less zestful lives than we deserve. Terrified [of criticism or gossip or of somehow being found lacking,] we never ... allow our minds to explore what our hearts ... [are] calling us to do.” This is the spotlight effect. The remedy is to “develop a mental dimmer switch.”³

Drs. Gilovich, Medvec, and Savitsky,⁴ the spotlight effect team, designed an experiment in which a Cornell University student wearing a Barry Manilow tee shirt entered a room full of peers (Yes, they were mortified, and please, don’t even *think* of starting to hum *Copacabana*. You will not be able

¹ Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

² I don’t think Emma Goldman actually said this, but she could have, or would have, which is probably why history has let it stand ... as will I.

³ Information about the spotlight effect is from an article by Martha Beck entitled *The Cure for Self-Consciousness*,” which appeared in the July 2007 issue of *O:The Oprah Magazine*.

⁴ Thomas Gilovich, PhD, Cornell University; Victoria Husted Medvec, PhD; and Kenneth Savitsky, PhD, Williams College

to stop!). The poor student left as quickly as possible, and then met with researchers.

On average, the mortified students guessed that half their peers had noticed the offending shirt, and might have said something about it. As it turned out, though, less than a quarter of the other students in the room had paid any attention at all. Follow-up experiments found that we exaggerate by *up to six times* the percentage of observers who notice our bad hair, fashion blunders, spilled drinks, or whatever it is that makes us cringe, remembering.

Williams College psychologist Kenneth Savitsky says, “In this case, the truth will set you free. You can’t completely eliminate embarrassment when you commit a faux pas, but it helps to know how much you’re exaggerating its impact.”⁵ We are “blinded by the glare of imaginary social judgments.”

I find this interesting, but what really compels me is the toll it effects. There is nothing positive – not one thing – about these self-limiting behaviors. In further studies, Gilovich and Medvec found that, contrary to what we may believe, the spotlight effect “rarely saves us from what we’ll later regret.” In fact – and here’s the heart of the heart, “*in the long run, [we] most often regret the things [we] failed to try, rather than the things at which we failed.*” “Trying yields either success or an opportunity to learn. Not trying has no positive result [beyond] avoiding mockery or envy” which, as research shows, wouldn’t be nearly as bad as we imagine anyway.

Can you feel yourself being inexorably drawn to the wild rumpus?

I remember our high school chorus conductor, Dorothy Didomenico, stopping us in the midst of rehearsing Handel’s *Alleluia* chorus to say, “If you’re going to make a mistake, make it good one!” She wasn’t impressed with anything less than all we had to give. She wanted a joyful noise! If she’d known about the spotlight effect, she would have told us to amp ourselves up about double. People are paying only about half the attention to us that we imagine.

Where can this lead us? In reflecting on the spotlight effect, I have concluded that it’s going to take a wild rumpus to really make people sit up and take notice! Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!

⁵ Benedict Cary, “It’s Not All About You,” *L.A. Times*, 1/13/03

Where does that manifest in your spiritual life?

Well, for starters, you showed up here, today. There were countless alternatives to rolling out of bed and rolling into Arlington Street Church. By your very presence here, you have declared yourself a spiritual seeker. You have said *no* to spiritual disillusion and *yes* to the possibility of spiritual depth and meaning and purpose in your life. It is my honor to be in your company, this company of spiritual seekers.

And given that people went to our church in Knoxville, Tennessee one beautiful July morning and were shot at by a madman, it also says something about your courage, and your conviction that love is stronger than fear. We gather today in solidarity with our kindred Unitarian Universalists, as they worship in their reconsecrated sanctuary, refusing to be terrorized, standing on the side of love. It is good to be together, in the large presence of brave and heart-strong people.

Maybe you also showed up here today, as Alice Walker's Shug of *The Color Purple* would say, hoping that god would show up, too. As Unitarian Universalists, we'd agree with Shug that any god here today is what we brought in with us. We come to church, she says, "to share God, not find God."⁶ So how does that look? Love, service, justice, peace ... and a wild rumpus!

That's the big picture ... and the little picture. No less than the tiniest details and the largest gestures of kindness, compassion, caring: big H *Hospitality*. Yes, large gestures, *big H*: In June, in speaking at the ministers' association gathering with several colleagues from our flagship congregations, when I asked them what had moved them from small and struggling to large and thriving, they invariably gave one answer: hospitality. Hospitality - kindness, compassion, caring - meaning getting out of our own way and growing our souls by clearing the way for others to become part of the spiritual awakening that begins with service.

Did you see *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? It's been out for six years, now, and I can still feel the flush of tribal embarrassment, even without the spotlight, when the WASP parents of the groom arrive for a lavish, over-the-top dinner at the family home of their Greek daughter-in-law to be with a Bundt cake, a cake with a hole in the middle. The Greek mother saves the

⁶ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, p. 176

day by putting a potted plant in the hole. I'm thinking about that, now. I'm thinking about declaring Arlington Street Church a Bundt Cake Free Zone. I'm thinking about what Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford named *prophetic* hospitality. I'm thinking ...wild rumpus hospitality! It's up to each and every one of us to dance to that revolution!

There's a lot going on here at Arlington Street, and way, way more to come. There is beautiful music and great worship to create, together. We're up to something almost every night of the week, and you are always welcome. We have service projects in Dorchester; Guatemala City; Lesotho, Africa; New Orleans; in a prison; and everywhere that immigrants rights are being threatened. There is a war to help stop, and a new president to help elect. This is all spiritual work, the work of making manifest a just and peaceful world. Please come, and bring a friend; come, and make a friend. Let's see what we can make of heaven, right here on earth.

I want to close by sharing what life coach Martha Beck did in her own life with the spotlight effect. When she really internalized the fact that we are only commanding half the attention we imagine, leaving lots of room for living larger, she decided it all came down to a simple question we could ask ourselves, a question she calls the Universal Question. Here's her awakening:

“Once,” she writes, “I had an intense, emotional cell phone discussion with a friend while riding in a taxi. At a certain point, I fell into a strangled silence.

“What’s wrong with you?” my friend asked. “Why aren’t you talking?”

“Covering my mouth with one hand, I whispered, ‘The driver can hear me.’

“At this point, my friend said something so lucid, so mind-expanding, so simultaneously Socratic and Zen-like, that I memorized it on the spot.... I encourage you, too, to memorize this question and use it when you find yourself shrinking back from an imaginary spotlight. My friend said, and I quote:

“So?”

We can just say “*so?*” *Remember* that failing to act will almost certainly leave us with more regret than taking that potentially embarrassing leap. Try this:

If you say what you really think, people might not like you.

So?

If you leave that alcoholic or abusive or dead-end or just plain dead relationship, his or her friends will never speak to you again.

So?

If you make a deep commitment to your spiritual awakening, and to the spiritual awakening of all people and the healing of the earth, you will wake up happy, joyful, and free.

So?

So? We most often regret the things we failed to *try*, rather than the things at which we failed. *So?* Let’s try!

My spiritual companions ...

Let’s stop shrinking in the glare of the spotlight,
and take up, fill up, the space we were given!
Let’s show up and jump in, mistakes and all!
Let’s step up and dance a revolution!
Let’s wake up to love, service, justice, and peace!

Let the wild rumpus start!