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The Gospel of Kermit

Some things, we never outgrow.

I have been drawn to the Muppets for as long as I can remember.

Let me tell you a story.

It was 45 minutes into my rabbinical school interview, and I was almost starting to feel comfortable in my new suit. The questions the faculty had been asking were challenging, but I thought I stayed in character pretty well — poised, calm, thoughtful, and, well, rabbinic. Or at least, what I thought was rabbinic.

Then one of the faculty members asked me if I could share a spiritual teaching that had shaped my life.

I paused, thinking furiously.

A dozen ethical teachings, sayings, and verses from the Torah sped through my head and I quickly dismissed each of them: too cliché, too esoteric, too ... someone else.

A calm, sure voice inside of me said, “You know the answer to this one.”

“Are you sure?” I asked it. “Won’t that seem too silly?”

“You know the answer to this one.”

I took a deep breath and said,
“Well, some of the greatest spiritual teachers I’ve had
have been Muppets.”

The faculty looked up from their notes,
some with quizzical expressions,
some with the hint of a smile.

Somehow, at the word “Muppet,”
the tension and professionalism in the room
that had separated me from my interviewers cracked,
and something joyful and irreverent began to bubble up.

Have you ever experienced that?
Like if you heard someone on the street
whistling the theme song to your favorite childhood television show,
and you burst into song,
sharing a moment of camaraderie with a stranger.

Or if your friend’s child has just discovered the joys of a slinky,
you gleefully rush to show the child
how you can make it slink down the stairs ...
and then you and the other grown-ups spend the next half hour in slinky races.
(No? Just me?)

Picture young kids at a playground —
any kid they meet who is roughly their size can be an instant playmate.
We still have that capacity within us,
even if it’s hidden,
and sharing in these moments of play and childlike wonder
can create an instant bond.

For me, one of the things
that can instantly snap me back to that play-mode is the Muppets —
be it Sesame Street, The Muppet Show,
Fraggle Rock,
or any of their dozens of movies.
Maybe it’s a connection fated in the stars —
the first dance at my parents wedding was “The Rainbow Connection”
and Muppets Creator Jim Henson and I share September 24 as a birthday.

But I see something more.
I see spiritual teachings of great value.
A lot of them.
In fact, it was really hard for me to write this sermon
because there are so many incredible lessons, and I couldn’t pick.
Who knows, maybe this will become a sermon series.

What jumped out at me is that the Muppets simultaneously exemplify childlike wonder and wacky irreverence, deep truths and sublime ridiculousness.

I've found that they also offer something I never expected from them: an easy, three-step recipe for a healthy spiritual community.

The first step is: play.
They teach us not to take ourselves too seriously.
To play, to joke with each other, can create a bond as deep as hours of listening.
We know that playfulness can liven up
and loosen up a room
and it can build relationships.

I know we know this, because this is the church
where we blow bubbles from the front steps .
We have a sassy dance party on Gay Pride Day right up on the chancel,
glitter and feather boas aplenty.
We brought a real live PONY up the sanctuary aisle last year
on the Blessing of the Animals service!
A pony!

In a sermon about playfulness in relationships, the blogger J.L.O wrote that,
“Having fun together is more than an escape from routine.
It is a way of communicating some of our deepest feelings.”
They continue, “[Comedian] Victor Borge said that
laughter is the shortest distance between two people.
Plato is supposed to have said that
you can learn more about a person in an hour of play
than in a lifetime of conversation.
That may be an exaggeration,” the blogger continues,
“but it is based on an important truth.
Often when we talk, we express ideas.
By listening carefully and giving feedback,
we can give a very important message:
‘I understand, and I care.’
But by **playing** with a person, we can communicate a message
that goes a level deeper: ‘I enjoy you, I love to be with you.’

J.L.O concludes, “The first message soothes the mind. The second touches the heart.”ⁱ



When I googled “The Rainbow Connection” and “meaning,” I found that people have really given this song a lot of thought. The “rainbow connection” could be a metaphor for the hero’s journey, could be referencing the Sirens of Greek mythology, and could even be an ode to a sun deity.ⁱⁱ

I think it’s a teaching about having faith in yourself, which is step number two. It teaches us to follow our own dreams and become who we were meant to be.

This is a big concept, and a refrain I think we’ve all heard before from self-help books and from sermons. The rainbow is our destiny, the voice that calls to us again and again. It may seem fleeting, it may seem impossible, and we suspect that it’s probably magic ... but we know that it’s something that we’re supposed to be.

At the beginning of the 1979 Muppet Movie, we see Kermit sitting in his swamp, playing the banjo, and singing the Rainbow Connection for the first time. A guy in a boat rows up to him, and introduces himself as a Hollywood agent. He tells Kermit about an open audition for frogs seeking to be rich and famous. Kermit sits and thinks... by living his dream, he could make millions of people happy.

Over the years, many people have said that Kermit was really an alter ego for his creator, Jim Henson. In this scene, it’s really striking. “Jim wanted to make a difference,” says Jerry Juhl, the head writer for the Muppets and Fraggle Rock for over forty years. He continues,

“[Jim] was brave enough to be able to say,
‘I want to do a show that brings peace to the world,
and I want us all to sit down and talk about it.’
He knew that television shows do not bring peace to the world,
but he was not so cynical as to say we can't think about it.”
Jerry concludes, “There was a kind of idealism there
that could seem naive and childlike,
but that didn't mean it couldn't come true.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Children naturally live in the realm of fantasy and imagination —
they conjure up amazing play-worlds,
and they dream with wild abandon.
As we get older, many of us have learned to censor our ideas,
even to ourselves.
We're afraid to be made fun of, afraid to fail.

Jim Henson is an inspiration to me to dream wild dreams.
I say to myself, “This thing that you're trying to do may be impossible,
but that doesn't mean we can't talk about it.
That doesn't mean you shouldn't do everything you can to try to succeed.”

I think of that famous quote
that's attributed to motivational speaker Les Brown:
“Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.”
Jim's television shows haven't brought about world peace.
But his creations have enriched the lives
of millions of people around the planet,
giving three generations the gift of laughter, playfulness, and hope.
He landed among the stars.

Later in *The Muppet Movie*,
Gonzo is swept up into the air by a bunch of errant helium balloons,
and he falls in love with the sky.
He comes back down to earth with a bang,
but he knows he's caught a glimpse of his destiny.
(If you want to find out why,
you'll have to watch *Muppets from Space*. I'm not telling.)
Never mind that he makes a nice living as a plumber,

never mind that he doesn't have wings.
He's going to go back there someday.
"Come and go with me," he says, "It's more fun to share."

This leads me to step three
in the Muppet Healthy Spiritual Community Recipe.

On the surface, The Muppet Movie is a story
about how Kermit tried to get to Hollywood
to follow his dream.

But one by one, we are introduced to a host of other Muppets
who each have their own dream.

Fozzy's dream is to be a comedian.

Dr. Teeth and his bandmates want to open up a coffeehouse
with real good music and organic refreshments.

Big Bird is heading to New York City to break into public television.

Gonzo's dream is to go to Bombay India and become a movie star.

The big bad guy in this movie is Doc Hopper,
a business tycoon with a dream of his own:
to open up a chain of a thousand French fried frog legs restaurants.
He wants Kermit to be his spokesperson
and is willing to kill Kermit and have him do the commercials stuffed –
anything to get more money and power.

At the climax of the movie, there's a showdown.
Kermit stares down Doc Hopper,
and looking down the barrels of a dozen rifles, says,
"Yeah, well, I've got a dream too,
but it's about singing and dancing and making people happy.
That's the kind of dream that gets better the more people you share it with."

This is the third step:
have faith in each other.
Dreams get better the more people they're shared with.

This spring, I submitted a candle card here
that announced that I'd been accepted
at Andover Newton Theological School,
and had decided to transfer out of rabbinical school.

The decision to change my path was tumultuous one,
and I spent a lot of this spring wondering
how all the pieces were going to come together.
I lit this candle as a personal milestone marker,
a way of telling myself that I had moved closer to my dream.

Even though I thought I was lighting that candle just for myself,
a dozen of you came up to me to pat me on the back,
to wish me luck, to ask me about my vision.
I was humbled, but felt really supported and seen.
Not only did it give me a huge burst of energy on *that* Sunday,
but in the moments this summer when I've felt nervous or unsure of myself –
like when I look at the 27 books I'm required to buy and read this fall semester –
I think back to how deeply and strongly you all have believed in me,
and it helps me to believe in myself.

How many of you have ever been afraid
to share something you're excited about with others
for fear that you'll seem narcissistic?
How many of you have ever been afraid
to ask for support for fear of seeming selfish?

I spoke to Reverend Rebecca Froom, our former intern minister,
after the service when I lit the candle.
Rebecca assured me that sharing news and dreams with the congregation
isn't narcissism, it's building community.
The congregation really *wants* to celebrate with us and encourage us on our way.
Likewise, when you ask for support, you're contributing to someone –
by giving them the opportunity to contribute to you and to your dream.
We all long for that. We all want to believe in each other.

I invite us all to light more candles of sorry and joy.
I invite us to share our hopes and our dreams with each other.
I invite us to come up to folks after their candle has been read and tell them,
“I'm on your side. I believe in you.”
I invite us to get to really know someone at coffee hour
by asking them about what makes them come alive.
I invite us to ask each other: If nothing were “in the way,”
what visions, dreams, and goals would you pursue?
Tell us your dreams. They'll get better the more people you share it with.



Here and now, this is my wish for our spiritual community:

Step one: Play with each other.
May we be wild, wacky, whimsical, and welcoming.

Step two: Have faith in ourselves.
When you start to say to yourself,
“Are you sure? Won’t that seem to silly?”
Remind yourself
that you know the answer to this one.
May we listen to that voice inside of each of us,
even if it’s telling us things we think are impossible.

Step three: Have faith in each other.
May we share our dreams, support each other, and celebrate with each other.

This sermon is called “the gospel of Kermit”,
and “gospel” means good news.
The good news is that you’re already doing this.
Keep it up.

ⁱ <http://www.swedenborgstudy.com/articles/marriage/jlo83.htm>

ⁱⁱ <http://sg.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20061111071048AA9RoZf>

ⁱⁱⁱ *It's Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider*. New York: Hyperion, 2005, p.152