

Three Tips for Surviving 2017

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The other night I found myself watching Pastor Joel Osteen preaching to the world on TV. Pastor Joel seems to be about as personable a guy as you would want to meet, or at least as personable a guy as you could imagine preaching to the largest Protestant Church in the United States; a congregation of 52,000 members. He was pretty impressive and, since I'm always looking for tips on how to spread our good news more personably and more effectively, I thought I'd just have a little look-see at how successful mega-churches do the job. The more I watched, the more I learned.

First, Pastor Joel didn't say anything I found offensive. That makes sense. Grow a mega-church by not saying anything that would put anyone off. If you don't discourage them, they might come back. Note to self: repel as few visitors as possible. Second, Pastor Joel preached platitudes that were simple rules to live by. Chicken soup for the soul, a page from Life's Little Instruction Book. That made sense, too. Life is hard enough on its own. No need to complicate it with more complications on the complications. There have got to be good simple rules to live life by. But it was late, so I turned Pastor Joel off before he finished his sermon. While I was drifting off into the night, visions of the Unitarian Universalist Mega-Church of Buffalo were dancing through my head.

The next morning I began to wonder what a Pastor Joan "inoffensive sermon of platitudes" would look like. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it, so I present to you "Three Easy Tips to Survive 2017," the only things you need to know for the coming year.

First, find your center – Know yourself. This is not new news, but it is good news. Perhaps the first prescription to know thyself was written on the walls of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in the eighth century BCE. This instruction was accompanied by other simple, sensible instructions such as “Nothing in Excess” and “Don’t take any wooden drachmas,” but those are for other sermons. People flocked to the temple to speak with the Oracle: a priestess, born between man and goddess. It is said, due to her divine powers and the vapors she was inhaling from the fissures in the rocks, she could predict and prophesy. She could foresee the future.

As we perch on the cusp of this new year, living on the threshold, especially during these uncertain and anxious days, we are sadly without the helpful vapors of Delphi. We would do well to peer into the now that will breed our future. We would do well to peer into the now, look at the signs of the times, to find bread for our children's mouths so their dreams will not reflect the death of our dreams. We would do well to peer into the now, into today, so we can shape history, bend history, direct the future rather than become victims to history’s whims.

We would do well in these anxious and uncertain days of 2017 to listen to the Oracle of Delphi and know ourselves. After all, we may survive 2017. But none of us will get out of the whole adventure of life alive.

We were never meant to survive.

And, when the sun rises we are afraid

it might not remain

when the sun sets we are afraid

it might not rise in the morning.

when our stomachs are full we are afraid

of indigestion

*when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish, when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

It is better to live, to survive, to act, to consciously choose every day, this day, now. It is better to make history, than be pushed around by history. Be a fully responsible actor and not a victim. Find your center, because life isn't going to get any easier.

We would do well, in these uncertain and anxious days of 2017, to listen to the Oracle of Delphi and know ourselves. We would do well to find our centers. We would do well to know ourselves. This is why: when the world goes crazy around you (which it will, if it hasn't already) and the world wants to pull you in all directions at once (which it will, if it hasn't already) you, because you know yourself, because you know who you are to the core of your being, because you have found your center, you can remain solid and sane. So that's the first thing to know to survive 2017. Find your center, know yourself.

The second easy tip for surviving 2017 – and this may sound contradictory to the first, but bear with me – the second easy tip is a simple phrase: “It’s not all about me.” Although your center is very, very important, very, very precious, your center is not the entire universe. Your center is no more important than anyone else’s center. Sure, in an Upanisadic, Wordsworthian, mystical sense your self is actually part and parcel of everything in the universe. But that too is another sermon.

I want to take you back in time with me, back into the misty haze of high school, to an angst-ridden period of teenage heartbreak. It was Sunday morning and I was helping out in the Religious Education program, preparing juice and cookies for the classes. The night before I had been on a date with my latest crush. I’d daringly asked him out for a movie and a milkshake. He had let me know over the milkshake that he didn’t want to be my boyfriend, he was still hung up on his simpering little ex, who I loathed. The next morning, in Sunday school, tears streamed down my cheeks as I poured juice into Dixie cups and doled out arrowroot cookies. Frankly, I was wondering about the whole point of existence, let alone juice, cookies, or even Sunday School. So into my mind floated those irrepressible Nina Gordon lyrics:

*Why does the sun go on shining?
 Why does the sea rush to shore?
 Don't they know it's the end of the world?
 'Cause you don't love me anymore.
 Why do the birds go on singing?
 Why do the stars glow above?
 Don't they know it's the end of the world?
 It ended when I lost your love.*

Needless to say, I got over that infatuation, and others, and the world didn't end. Regardless of how you may feel, it's never all about you.

Exercise: After I say each of these phrases, you say, "It's not all about me."

Your eight-year-old's birthday party is a fabulous success.

You got a raise.

You didn't get an expected promotion.

Your partner leaves you.

You fall in love.

Your teenager screams "I hate you. You are the worst parent in the world."

Your teenager tells you he loves you.

Your team wins.

Your elderly loved one is failing and you find you don't have the strength to take care of her.

I am sure you have your own examples. It really is not all about you. So the first tip for surviving 2017 is to find your center and, although it seems like a contradiction, the second tip is that it's not all about you.

The third tip to surviving 2017 ties it all together. The third thing you need to know is that you are precious. You are connected to each other, to your community, and to the universe. This is also not new news, I say it all the time, but it is good news, life-saving news. If you are going to survive in this crazy world and everything, I promise, it will throw at you, from climate change storms, to war and threats of more war, to injustice in government and on the streets every stinky day to death and pain in your very own home. If you are going to survive this very difficult world, you need to know you are not alone. You are not alone in the world. You are connected, linked, held, regardless of what is going on around you. Regardless of all this craziness around you. Regardless of what anyone may say or do to you. Regardless of anything you may say or do. You are blessed; you are valuable, very, very valuable.

Those are the only three tips you need to survive these anxious and uncertain days of 2017. Find your center, know when to say “It’s not all about me,” which is almost always, and know that you are valuable and connected to everyone and everything. I have no idea how Pastor Joel Osteen finished up his inoffensive sermon of platitudes for his mega-church. I suppose he ended it with a prayer of rededication to the Word of God and Christ as Savior. To tell you the truth, I’m not quite comfortable doing that, so we might not become a mega-church after all. Rather my prayer would be for your survival through the coming year. Not just staying alive, but survival in its deepest sense. After all, we might as well speak, we might as well act, because we were not meant to merely survive, but fully survive.

Spirit of Life and Love, Give us Courage to face challenges that test our tempers, obstacles that break our hearts, and the trials and tribulations of daily living. Give us Hope to get us out of bed each morning, to find meaning and purpose in our lives, and the enthusiasm to build the land of which we dream. Give us Love that comforts us when the news is dismal, that helps us work for justice and equality, and that carries us with joy into the days to come. Spirit of Life and Love be with us this day, and every day. So be it blessed be and amen.

For Further Study

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