

Seeds for Celebration
for the
JUBILEE! *Community*

Summer, 2009

Via Positiva

"OH YEAH!"

Via Positiva: Oh Yeah!

Louis Armstrong was an “at-risk” kid. Could well be the At-Risk-Kid-Of-All-Time Poster Child. He grew up in abject poverty in one of the roughest sections of New Orleans. He was poor and black in a blatantly segregated city. On a daily basis, he was witness to drug deals, prostitution and violence. Born out of wedlock, his father left the family when he was an infant and his mother left him and his sister in the care of his grandmother when Louis was three years old. Their poverty was so desperate that Louis’ mother turned to prostitution in order to survive.

As a child, Louis hung out in the red-light district in New Orleans and listened to bands playing in brothels and dance halls. One of his favorite haunts was a place called the “Funky Butt” which was close to his home. As a young boy, he attended Fisk School for Boys, but got into trouble on a regular basis and was sent to The Home for Colored Waifs – a reform school just outside the city.

During this tumultuous time, a Russian-Jewish family - the Karnofskys - took him in, gave him odd jobs and loaned him the money to buy a cornet – his first musical instrument. The kindness and generosity of this family so impressed Louis, that he wore a Star of David pendant in their honor for the rest of his life. But it didn’t keep him out of trouble. When he was twelve, he was arrested for shooting a pistol in the city and landed in the reform school for two years.

Now the prognosis for a kid like this is not good: drugs, prison, aggression, bloodshed, depression and early death possibly from suicide. It would be ever-so-easy to forecast a life that began like Louis’. But, of course, it didn’t end that way. God knows why or how. Maybe it was his love of music. Maybe it was the kindness of the Karnofskys. Maybe it was flat-out luck.

Whatever it was, one of the remarkable features of Louis’ musical career was that he didn’t end up singing the blues. He sang and played love songs, torch songs, toe-tapping-high-stepping-shoulder-shimmying-fanny-wiggling songs. He played songs that made you want to croon to the tune and boogie with your booty. His songs could smear a smirk across your smackers and stir a stride into your stroll. And his most familiar, most recorded, most often-heard expression was, “Oh Yeah!”

Oh Yeah? Say what? Oh Yeah? Mom’s a hooker, no money, little to eat, cops chasing you down, called a nigger (even in a stage introduction later in life), no respect, no social standing, in and out of reform school. You kick off life that way and can still say, “Oh Yeah”? You can still sing “What a Wonderful World”? and “Hello, Dolly” and “When the Saints Go Marching In”? Say frickin’ what?

Not only that, Louis Armstrong was an inordinately generous man, constantly giving to those in need. Some estimate that he gave away as much money as he kept for himself. Was it his religion? Don’t think so. When asked about his religion, he said he was raised a Baptist, wore a Star of David and was friends with the Pope.

Oh Yeah?

Maybe this musical genius was onto something. Maybe this trumpet-tootling, gravelly-throated maestro somehow got a glimpse of a bigger picture. Perhaps somewhere along the line (or all along the line) Mr. Satchmo recognized the “Yes” in life: the “Yes” that coils the galaxies and the DNA – the “Yes” that scoots Mr. Sperm up close and personal for a dance with Ms. Egg – the “Yes” that shifts Lady Moon from full face to sidewise grin – the “Yes” that jumpstarts dragonfly buzz and ignites thunder boom.

Maybe, just maybe Mr. Magical Big Mouth was able to see that life is more than what happens to you – more than circumstances or situations. It just might be that “Oh Yeah” is a mantra than can reconnect you with infinity, with wonder, with love.

Oh Yeah??? Oh Yeah!!!

- Howard

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

June 21, 2009 – I'M NOT DEAD YET!

1 Kings 17: 17-24

Let this child's life come into him again.

Luke 7: 11-17

The dead man sat up and began to speak.

Did you know: 1) More people are killed by coconuts each year than sharks; 2) Statistically, you are more likely to be killed by a champagne cork than by a poisonous spider; 3) The creature responsible for the most human deaths is the mosquito.

We're all going to exit this planet one way or another at one time or another. As playwright Tom Stoppard put it, "The compass points in but one direction and time is its only measure."

But death – particularly our own – is not a popular conversation topic. The question, "What do think about death?" is never a good opener at singles bar. Even though we know it's inevitable for each and every one of us, we tend to ignore it until a friend or loved one is in the process of dying. And even then, we mostly grieve and reminisce rather than ask about what it means to us: where we might go from here; and how knowing of our own ensuing death impacts our daily lives.

In the Hebrew/Christian scriptures, Jesus isn't the only one who gets raised from the dead. But none of them – including Jesus – talk very much about what they saw and what, if anything, comes next. Perhaps being aware of our own death brings us back to life. Perhaps death is that final exclamation point that causes us to look at what the story before is all about. Possibly being raised from the dead could mean being raised to an "Oh Yeah!" appreciation of life.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

June 28, 2009 - RISKY BUSINESS

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:15

The sword shall never depart from your house.

Luke 7: 36-50

Her many sins are forgiven; hence she has shown great love.

"If you're not living on the edge," says the bumper sticker, "you're taking up too much room." Like or not, we all live on the edge. We may think we're living in the center – floating comfortably along, safe and secure, far from that dangerous rim from which we could do the Humpty-Dumpty and never get put back together again.

But we all know that all-too-many times, our trustworthy and dependable magic carpet gets jerked out from under us and we find ourselves not just dangling on the edge, but in full freefall.

Sometimes it's our own stupid choices, sometimes it seems to be a matter of chance; but whatever it is that happens, life around us time and again gets topsy-turvy and we wind up feeling lost, abandoned, sick at our stomachs and often guilty.

Read the lives of the so-called "saints" of any religious tradition and try to find a common thread. There aren't any except for this: each and every one screwed up again and again, but through it all, never stopped bumbling his or her way toward some divine goal.

Life is always risky business. But wouldn't it be better to affirm that wild and dangerous ride than simply curse the darkness?

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

July 5, 2009 – PRIMAL FEAR

Zechariah 12: 7- 10

They shall mourn as one mourns for an only child..

Luke 9: 18-24

The Son of Man must undergo great suffering..

The question, of course, is how you maintain a positive attitude when your life is currently getting flushed down the ghetto gas station restroom toilet. Often, when our attitude joins the rest of our life swirling in the crapper, we feel guilty. Inept. Flawed. Unstable.

We ask, "What in the hell is wrong with us? Why can't we face our goop with strength and resolve? Why do we let circumstances drag us down? What are we, wimps and wooses? Boneless chickens flopping around allowing life to fry or fricassee us? Where's our faith? Where's our determination? Where's our strength of heart and mind. And these questions of course, cause us to feel even worse about ourselves.

The Via Positiva is not about grafitti-ing a happy face on top of our poop pile. Not about putting lipstick on our pig or giving a coif to our toilet brush. Saying, "Yes," to life has less to do with liking everything that's going and more to do with blessing the mess. Saying, "Yes," to life is not to argue with the negative – not to beat down the negative or futilely try to conquer the negative. Saying "Yes," to life is to be aware that the negative and positive all dance together on the same dance floor, and often to the same beat; and somehow – in some crazy, magical way – all work together.

No, we can't affirm the negatives of greed or cruelty or racism or injustice or war. But, maybe, the best way to diminish their crippling effects on our world is not with more negativity, but with a resounding affirmation of life.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

July 12, 2009 – O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

1 Kings 19: 19-21

Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him.

Luke 9: 57-62

I will follow you wherever you go.

Sometimes life gives you a call and says, "Hey Bozo! I need you. You've got a gig." Could happen at 4:00 in the morning on your bedside-charging cell phone. Could happen when you're checking your email. The call might come when you're out rafting with a friend and a cooler. You might hear it when you're making breakfast, making a deal, making believe, making a face, making time, making tracks, making waves, making way, making up, making over, making out, making fun, making eyes, making light, making the most of, making a scene, making up your mind or making whoopee.

Priests and ministers refer to this as "The Call," as in "The Call to Serve the Lord." As in, "The Call to Put On a Funny Dress and Pretend You Know What You're Talking About." But, everyone gets a call at sometime or another. Sometimes, you can get 15 calls before breakfast. Sometimes, you can go for months and the phone never rings. But when you get it – when you somehow get the message that there's more to your life than peeing, pooping and paying the rent, Sweetcheeks, it would serve you well to pay attention. It would be in your best interest to say, "Yes" to that call, wrap your lovin' arms around that call and answer that call with your life.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

July 19, 2009 – BROTHER SUN, SISTER MOON

Isaiah 66: 10-14

You may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

Luke 10: 1-9

The kingdom of God has come near to you.

So many things to feed your soul, so little time. So many ways to invite your soul to belly up to the bar to eat, drink and get fat and drunk.

Da soul need to be fed. Oh, yes it do! And what does the soul love to slurp and chow on? Well, of course, there are different strokes for different souls, but mostly, souls like the flavors of infinity. Eternity. Souls like to sip and munch on whatever it is that hooks you in to the possibility that time just might be only an idea; and infinity is what's really happening.

So, an evening under the stars can do it. A lover's kiss can do it. A baby's giggle can do it. Smell of fresh coffee on a frosty morning can do it. Skinny-dipping under a waterfall can do it. Looking into the eyes of a long-time loved one can do it. Sharing tears with a good friend can do it. A home-grown tomato sandwich with Duke's mayo, a slice of Bermuda onion, just a shake of salt, pepper and cayenne on Wonder Bread can do it.

One of the best ways to say, "Yes," to life is to allow life to say, "Yes," to you – "Yes" to your soul, your spirit, your hoohah and your wahoo. Just remember, your soul speaks the language of Infinity. Fluently. But, never doubt that anything – make that any thing in this goofy life and fanatical planet is not imbued with The Infinite.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

July 26, 2009 – A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Deuteronomy 30: 11-14

The word is very near to you... in your heart and mouth.

Luke 10: 25-37

You shall love... and who is my neighbor?

Everybody enjoys a good pat on the back, pat on the butt, pat on the head. Everybody loves to be affirmed – loves to know that somebody appreciates who we are or what we do. We like to hear a good, "Atta Boy!" Or "Way to go!" or "You rock!" Or, "You done good!" Or even as in the movie, "Babe," we like to hear, "That'll do, pig; that'll do."

But all the strokes, affirmations and encouragements in the world ain't worth a promise from the government unless you take them to heart – take them inside and let roll around and have their way with you.

Marketing experts claim that most folks have to see or hear an ad 15-20 times before it begins to sink in and create an interest in the product. It may well be that it takes at least that much affirmation for most of us bozos, before we begin to let it seep in and awaken us to the miracle that we are.

That's where love comes in. And forgiveness. And compassion. There's something about those big three that open the floodgates to the river of affirmation that runs through our lives. The river of affirmation that gushes not just from other humans, but flows through clouds and stars, through wind in trees and whoosh of surf, through dew-drenched grass and bee-buzzed blossoms.

So many ways to hear, "That'll do, pig." So many ways to hear the Yes of the everything.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH! (Howard gone)

August 2, 2009 – TENDER MERCIES

Genesis 18: 1-14

After I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?

Luke 10: 38-42

Martha was distracted by her many tasks.

In her much acclaimed book, *Sacred Pleasure*, Riane Eisler chronicles the demise of pleasure as a sacred rite. She describes a time in human history when pleasure – specifically sexual pleasure – was considered holy and sex, regarded as a sacred act. She attributes the downfall of sacred sex to the rise of the warrior/king/god as a cultural symbol – when power usurped pleasure as the focus of religious ritual and societal importance.

Though we have somewhat loosened the chains and lessened our worship of power and control in what we call “Western Civilization,” we still tend to believe that armies are more important than kisses and missiles more vital than caresses. We still bow at the feet of supremacy and relegate pleasure to the circus of the superfluous.

Yet we all know that a tender touch can take us to heaven. A shoulder massage at just the right time... a kind and unexpected word on the Email... a smile from the grocery store clerk... an embrace from a friend when you just got bad news or a dance with a friend when joy moved in.

Three of the most powerful forces in human society are forgiveness, compassion and love. These forces can't be organized or institutionalized. Doctrinalized or dogmatized. They can't be locked up or chained down, and all the armies in the world can neither stop them or make them happen.

Any act of pleasure or tender mercy may still be one of the holiest of sacraments.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH! (JUBILEE! 20th Birthday)

August 9, 2009 – INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM

Genesis 18: 20-32

Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Luke 11: 9-13

Ask and you will receive.

Tourists love reservations; adventurers love spontaneity. Tourists want to get what they expect; adventurers want to get what they can't imagine. Tourists love being shown around; adventurers love finding their way around. Tourists want to see what's listed on the itinerary; adventurers want to see it all. Tourists take things as they are; adventurers can't wait to see what else might be. Tourists get the itch to go to a particular place; adventurers just get the itch to go.

One thing's for sure: Ain't none of us full-time tourists on this buggy. As much we like reservations and itineraries – as much as we chase after security, confidence and guarantees; in the final diddle and doodle, there ain't no such things. Ultimately, we are all adventurers. We all make discoveries in our lives that never appeared on the itinerary. We all run into totally unexpected situations and are forced to fly by the seat of our panties.

But though we are all born adventurers, some of us actually take it to heart. Some us challenge the itineraries that have been presented to us by governments, churches and educational institutions. Some of us are convinced that there is undiscovered treasure in the most unlikely places. Some of us are always itching to explore new worlds, new possibilities, new ways of being. Some of us refuse to simply accept everything as it is. Happy Birthday, JUBILEE!

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

August 16, 2009 - BABETTE'S FEAST

Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 2:18-26

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat, drink and find enjoyment in their toil.

Luke 12: 13-21

Be on your guard against all kinds of greed.

Louis Armstrong had a rough childhood. Make that a get-down-and-dirty rough childhood. He grew up in abject poverty with no father, a prostitute for a mother, drugs and violence everywhere. He was a poor black kid in a blatantly segregated New Orleans.

Somewhere along the line, a family took him in. The Karnofskys, a Russian-Jewish family opened their home and table to this virtually homeless kid. They gave him odd jobs to do and loaned him the money for a cornet, his first musical instrument. Louis was so grateful for the family's generosity that he wore a Star of David pendant in their honor, for the rest of his life. It could well be that it was the Karnofsky's generosity that redirected Louis and thus gave the world a musical genius. Who knows?

But that wasn't the end of it. Louis Armstrong was known all of his life as an enormously generous man. He gave again and again to those in need. Some of his associates claimed that throughout his life, he gave away half of his financial resources. Was this also because of the Karnofskys? Who knows.

One thing is pretty clear, however. Generosity jumpstarts generosity. Whether you're giving shekels, sherbet, shoeshine, shellfish, shofar, shuttlecock, shoulder massage or the shirt off your back, chances are that your giving will give birth to giving. And who knows what even the smallest gift might offer the world. Generosity is a mighty fine way of shouting to all creation, “Oh Yeah!”

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

August 23, 2009 – ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

Genesis 15: 1-6

Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...

Luke 12: 32-40

Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out.

“Ring the bells that still can ring! Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in,” musically-mutters Leonard Cohen in his tune called, “Anthem.”

Lots of different ways, of course, to be cracked. You can be broken-cracked, split-wide-open cracked, out-of-order-cracked. You got your wise crack, voice crack, whip crack. You can crack up, crack eggs, crack doors or have crack babies. Or, as Asian ducks would say, “Crack, crack, crack.” So many ways to crack and be cracked; so little time. Nor is Senor Cohen clear about which kind of crack it is, that is found in everything.

Cracked, of course, also means crazy. Mentally unstable. Loose screw in the penthouse. And a case could be made that it is that kind of cracked about which the good Mr. Cohen is singing.

Sometimes it takes a little craziness – a little folly and foolishness – a little lunacy and loonyness - to get a new picture or see things in another way. If we are, indeed, all bozos on this bus, then it might behoove us to spend less time trying to patch each other's cracks and more time basking in the light that comes in.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

August 30, 2009 – DANCES WITH WOLVES

Jeremiah 23: 23-29

Is not my word like fire... like a hammer that breaks rock?

Luke 12: 49-53

I came to bring fire to the earth.

Where did we ever get this idea that the spiritual life was all about calm and inner peace? What kind of mushroomed California la-la do you have to be, to really think that spirituality means nothing more than sitting around with your eyes closed in some awkward position thinking happy thoughts and being aware of awareness?

As far as we can tell, Jesus spent little time meditating on a yoga mat. Mohammed didn't just eat tofu, take vitamins and go on silent retreats. Confucius did far more than sit around thinking up clever sayings. And even Gautama Buddha, who was big into finding inner peace, abandoned comfort and ease in order to do so.

If you're going to dabble in the spirit, Sweetcheeks, you'd best be prepared for some wild times – some rude awakenings – some untamed and untamable behavior.

Whatever it is we call “the soul” has never read Ms Manners – never been to finishing school. That part of us which longs for the timeless, which sniffs out the infinite, which barks up the Imagination Tree – that part of us is wild and undomesticated – cannot be domesticated – cannot be controlled. You can cage the soul, but you can't make her behave. Dress her up, but you can't take her out.

It could well be that the inner peace we seek might best be found not in running away, but in dancing with the wolves.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

September 6, 2009 – ZORBA THE GREEK

Isaiah 66: 18-23

I know their works and their thoughts.

Luke 13: 22-30

Some are last who will be first; some are first who will be last.

Shakespeare liked to turn verbs into nouns and flip nouns into verbs. By switching a part of speech from one form to another, the word took on new and multiple meanings. The word became more than a word. It became a mini-dance floor on which your imagination could boogie.

Mr. Bill also liked to do that with characters and plots. He could cannon-ball a character out of the story line into the air using nothing more than a monologue, and when the character landed back in the plot, it could have your mind doing the salsa.

Puck was the classic flipper of plots and characters. In “Midsummer Night's Dream,” Puck never stops twisting the tale and flipping the focus, so that the characters never can get a handle on what's happening.

And the audience howls with delight, because, perhaps they sense that Puck (or some trickster like Puck) is not just a mythological figure in a play; but is, in some way, real, active and always in the shadows – always flipping the daily pancakes in such a way that you're never really sure where to put the syrup.

Maybe all the world is a stage; and maybe the only way we can make sense of it all is not to make sense of it all, but simply to join in the dance.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

September 13, 2009 – FORREST GUMP

Proverbs 25: 6-7

It is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower.

Luke 14: 1, 7-14

All who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Our word, "humble" is derived from the Latin *humus*, meaning ground, earth, soil, as opposed to *hummus* meaning a party dip made from garbanzo beans and garlic.

In merry old 15th century England, if you were called "humble," it meant that you lived close to the earth and made your living from the earth, as opposed to the merchants and royalty who lived close to their riches and made their living from those who lived close to the earth. Humble folk didn't have much political clout and didn't make the invitation list to most of the fancy parties. Living close to the earth, humble (or *humus*) folk tended to be dirty and smelly and have poop on their pedal-pushers.

So, on the one hand, being humble back then, sucked: Never getting to go to the ball, never being able to date the princess, never getting to meet the Pope. But, like all words, time changes meanings. And today, living close to the earth is a way of living close to the Source - living in touch with where we came from – being connected with the essence of life.

Whether or not you try to be cool and call yourself, "green," when you live humbly, as in closer to the earth, you sometimes realize that being connected in society don't hold candle to being connected to creation.

VIA POSITIVA: OH YEAH!

September 20, 2009 – FIELD OF DREAMS

Proverbs 9: 8-12

Awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Luke 14: 25-33

None of you can be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions.

"All we are saying," sang the 60's hippies, "is give peace a chance." And lots of old stoners and others have been singing it ever since.

But then, a whole heap of us humans have been singing it one way or another since we crawled out of the slime. The old story says that even angels sang a version of it when Jesus was born. Part of the reason for the Roman Empire was to get everybody working together instead of killing each other; and our own World War I was supposed to be the biggie that ended all wars.

But we still have wars: some just ending, some just gearing up and some on the distant horizon.

Likewise, with feeding the hungry: We've always had hungry humans. Blame it on drought, politics, stupidity or greed, there have always been starving members of our species. And there have been countless attempts to feed them all. We know there's enough food around to do it. But we don't. People are starving right now.

So, why not throw in the towel and say, "The hell with it?" Tens of thousands of years bumbling around on this rock and we're still hungry and fighting. History certainly makes a good case for cynicism, pessimism and gloom.

But, somehow, it's never stopped the dreamers. Stoned or not, there are still those among us who continue to dream and live out the dream. And that makes all the difference. Oh Yeah!