

"The Good Life"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, January 9, 2011

Do you walk fast? Do you eat fast? Do you often do two or more things at the same time? Gandhi said, "Speed is irrelevant if you're traveling in the wrong direction." Today I want to talk about some ways we are traveling in the wrong direction. Listen to this: it's Thanksgiving Day and 9-year-old Jeffry Johnson is stuffed full of turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie, and he's at the computer enthusiastically typing out his Christmas list. He and his mom are going shopping the next day, and he plans to show the list to Santa at the mall. Even though he stopped believing in Santa Claus a couple of years ago, he plays along because he knows it will get him lots of toys.

His list contains an MP3 player, a cell phone, the new Xbox video game console, the Lego Ultimate Building Set and more. The next morning, bright and early, Jeffry, and his sister and mother, set off for the mall. When they get there, there are already 1000 people jockeying for the parking places. The mall is packed with shoppers frantically hunting and buying and rushing around. Two parents are fighting over the last *Dave the Funky Shoulder Monkey* toy, a robotic simian that can wave, laugh and burp – which was forecasted to be a sell-out toy this Christmas. One mother is in tears because she realizes she's too late to get a *Dave the Funky Shoulder Monkey* toy for her son, and she feels terrible because her daughter begged her to sleep in the parking lot overnight, and now she wishes she had.

Jeffry waits in line for almost an hour to deliver his list to Santa, after which he pleads with his mom to give him money to play video games in the mall arcade while she does some serious power-shopping. On the ride home, Jeffry and his sister negotiate with their mom to watch a movie when they get home so they won't be bored. They have at least one hundred different games, puzzles, and toys stuffed into their shelves and closets, and there are a few dozen children their age who live in the neighborhood, but if they're not out shopping, they're inside watching Cartoon Network or playing Nintendo. Jeffry and his sister are convinced that if they cannot watch a movie they'll be bored.

True story? What do you think? Jeffry is not a real child, but a conglomeration of kids based on ones I know, ones I live with, and this is adapted from something I read in a book called *Affluenza*.¹ What makes us buy into a culture in which this is an ordinary occurrence? What makes us buy into the

¹ *Affluenza*

consumption-obsessed lifestyle we live and breathe? What compels us to perpetuate the disheartening and contagious, socially-transmitted dis-ease of overload, debt, and waste? What makes us so dogged in our pursuit of more? And we can find ourselves wondering, at times, why it feels like our lives are spinning out of control, or wonder why our lives are not quite satisfying. It's because we're being sold a *lie* every day that tells us that we can buy happiness. What's Coca Cola's new ad? *Open Happiness!*

Did you know that the average American sees 5000 ads a day? For comparison, in the 1970's the average was 1000. Today we see 5000 ads a day, and every one is skillfully crafted to promote dissatisfaction: "...I need a new phone, an upgraded computer, a better car and bigger house, 6-pack abs ...". It turns out that the accumulation of material goods is at an all-time high, and yet so is the number of Americans who report feeling a sense of emptiness in their lives. It's because we're being sold a seductive lie about where our happiness comes from. In the meantime, we're wreaking havoc on our earth, our health, and our children's future. When will we wake up?

So often we confuse artificial joy for authentic joy; in fact, we are groomed to do so. Yet, there's a still small voice in each of us that's saying "something's wrong!" But when will this deep truth break through for long enough so that we can hear what we need to hear, and do what we need to do to wake up and start living fully and meaningfully? That's what I want to talk about today. People sometimes come out of church and tell me, "Marlin, you were speaking right to me today. You must've been listening-in to our conversation in the car on the way to church this morning." I always let the person know who says that that I preach sermons about what *I* need to hear, and I'm always glad when someone else can relate. I'm wrestling too ...with how to be *in* this culture but not completely *of* this culture. To be part of this society without being consumed by this society's soul-sucking superficial values that are also destroying the planet.

Our theme this month is Creation. If you were here last Sunday, you heard me take a highly unorthodox look at the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve, and the Bible's view of creation. Today, I want to look at why we are living in a way that goes completely against what we really want for ourselves, and our children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And yet we somehow keep going... like hamsters in one of those running wheels, and we cannot seem to get off – at least not for very long. I heard one description that we are like those dogs in the dog races that keep chasing the wooden rabbit around the ring. They never catch the rabbit, and even if they did, all it is is a piece of plywood. It would not satisfy them anyway.

It's the same thing with many of us. We're chasing something that even if we catch it, it doesn't satisfy the yearning inside us. Because nothing outside of us can meet the yearning we have inside. What most of us really want is time with our friends and family, clean air and water, a beautiful world, security, and children who have hope in the future. But even if we achieve these for ourselves, we live with a deep sorrow about all those who are suffering so that we can have it. Every ethical system in the world says that it is not right to benefit personally if doing so does harm to someone else. It's the golden rule: "Love you neighbor as yourself."

But when a young mother gets lung cancer in Oklahoma, even though she's never smoked but she lives near a trash incinerator, you and I have a problem (deep inside of us) that no purchase can heal. When deforestation creates mud slides that wipe out entire villages of Mayan Indians in Guatemala, we have a problem. When children are sold into slavery in factories and never have a chance to have a decent childhood or education so that we can buy cheap shirts... we have a problem. And the problem is deep inside whether we feel it or not. We can cover it up with stuff, and forget about it with a fast pace that doesn't allow us to think about it...but deep down... we have a problem. When people living in North Tulsa, which is only three miles from here, have a life expectancy that sees them dying fourteen years younger on average than people in this neighborhood... we have a problem.

All people have the right to live, work, study, and play in an environment free of dangerous air, water and land pollution. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality...tied in a single garment of destiny." Decisions you and I make about what we eat, what we wear, what we drive; decisions you and I make every day will help determine the fate of a multitude of species – including the human species.

But this is not a message about recycling, reusing, and conserving. I hope you're already doing those things... and voting, and advocating for good policies, and that in 2011 you'll look for more ways to do so. There are people much better qualified than me to talk about those solutions. What this message is about is that the cultural and environmental crisis we're in is really an outer manifestation of an inner crisis. It's a spiritual crisis. Spiritual disciplines, practices, and wisdom are meant to wake us up out of our daze. Spiritual practices were created to help us remember what are lives are really about, and to connect us to the source of our true happiness and joy. And that's a happiness that does not come in a can with a pop top. It's a happiness that last much longer than a slogan or a jingle. It's a happiness that can sustain us through loss and tragedy. A cold soda might quench our thirst on a hot

day, but having spiritual depth and maturity will quench our souls longing on the worst day of our lives.

Unfortunately, I know something about this subject. I know something about living through the depths of hell in this life. In those times of trial, none of my solace ever came in a package. But if we want to talk about the incredible depth of confusion in our culture, and how we get lulled back to sleep into the insanity we've confused with integrity... on America's worst day in the past decade – September 11, 2001, when our collective grief and fear of the future were at an all-time high – we were instructed by our national leaders to “go shopping!” In the past two years, as our country has been facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression with hundreds of thousands of people suffering from hunger and homelessness, and with millions unemployed, we are told that more consumer spending is a critical key to the solution.

I want to get real this morning and talk about the deeper yearning in us that's being buried under piles of goods, heaps of trash, and the frenetic pace of our lives. You and I know, our lives and our culture is screwed up in some very fundamental ways. Let's start doing something about it! It begins with awareness, but it also requires discipline and character. These are the qualities of the hero's path. According to the spiritual traditions of the world we are all called to be on the hero's path, because we all have a sacred purpose and potential, and our job is to fight through the countless illusions, and delusions, and temptations that keep us from living into our own holy and heroic birthright. We come from the stars, you and I... We are not irrelevant players in creation, we *are* creation. We are the part of creation that is conscious of itself; the part of creation that can look at itself and create new things. And we are the only part of creation – the only creatures – that seem to have lost track of what we are supposed to be doing.

One reason is that we are looking outside of ourselves for the meaning *of* life, when we should be looking inside ourselves for the meaning *in* life. Inside of everyone there is a deep, deep well of meaning and wisdom, but we never touch our depth if we spend all of our time on the surface of things. It requires a conscious effort to be on a journey of awareness. You might call it Christ-Consciousness, or Sat-Chit-Ananda, or Buddha Nature, or by some other name, but there is an experience when our mind clears and we realize that we are connected to all people and all things. We can experience non-duality and a deep conviction that all is truly one. That I am you, and you are me. It can come through meditation, yoga, fasting, singing, praying, in church and out of church and in a multitude of other ways. And there are spiritual teachers and ancient practices that offer us maps

and guides ; they can lead us to experience a profound communion with all that is, and it's already in each of us...and it's just waiting to be awakened.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, who is an award-winning writer, tells a story that illustrates this idea in his book *Open Secrets*. He writes:

It rained heavily during the night, and the street is thick with mud. I walked to the Bet Midrash [House of Learning] this morning and stopped to watch a group of little children playing with the mud. Oblivious to the damp, they made dozens of mud figures: houses, animals, towers. From the talk, it was clear that they imagined an identity for each. They gave the figures names and told their stories. For a while, the mud figures took on an independent existence. But they were all just mud. Mud was their source and mud was their substance. From the perspective of the children, their mud creations had separate selves. From the mud's point of view, it is clear such independence was an illusion – the creations were all just mud. It is the same with us and God [he says]. In the Bible it's written in Deut. 4:39: “[God] alone is in heaven above and on earth below, there is none else.” Meaning there is nothing else on heaven and earth but God. [He goes on]: Can this be? When I look at the world, I do not see God. I see trees of various kinds, people of all types, houses, fields, lakes, cows, horses, chickens, and on and on. In this I'm like the children at play, seeing real figures and not simply mud. Where in all this is God? The question itself is misleading. God is not “in” this; God is this.

Isn't that a great image of the mud figures? Now, from a scientific point of view, we can also say that we are all made of star dust. All the DNA that exists in us existed at the very beginning of time. As Forrest Church used to say: the world was pregnant with us from the moment it all began, and all this star-stuff has all been creating and recreating itself for billions of years – we are merely the latest creations in billions of years of cycling and recycling atoms. The atoms in us were actually once in stars and in dinosaurs. Today, even the scientists agree with the ancient sages that we are all of one substance with everything.

No matter what direction you come to this realization, we end up with two main principles. The first is that it's possible to touch the reality of our eternal nature; we could call this finding communion with the infinite. And the second principle is the ethical imperative born of the first: we are called to love and to uphold the common good. We are called to hold the whole of existence above our own self-interest. And there are rituals and practices that help us to channel our energy and emotions toward such oneness and love. It's not that we need to acquire this depth – we all have it at our core – it is simply a matter of becoming aware of it. And when we do, that depth and love become for us like the hub of a wheel. While the rest of our lives goes up and down and spins around, it remains solid at the center of who we are. And that's why even at the midst of our most intense pain and loss and

suffering, we can still feel love and joy. Spiritual teacher and writer Bo Lozoff says that one of the ways we can tell the difference between artificial happiness and authentic happiness is that authentic happiness can co-exist with sorrow.

So let me be clear about what I'm suggesting for you to do: if you don't have a spiritual practice, or discipline, or way of communing with the infinite, I want to highly encourage you to take one up in 2011. Wednesday nights at the church we have many opportunities for you to explore doing so. And I realize that until you experience what I'm talking about directly for yourself, you'll need to have faith in something... a teaching or teacher, a sacred text or practice. Find something that you consider right and hopeful, that can lead you toward the spiritual realities and depth that you have not yet experienced, and make a commitment to yourself to explore that path. I'd suggest that whatever you try, commit to doing it for one month before you decide whether or not it's right for you.

And for those of us who already have a spiritual practice but who want to deepen our commitment to sustainability and earth consciousness, I recommend that this year you commit to learning two things. First, learn the entire path the water you drink takes to get to you. Follow it back all the way to its source on this continent. Learn the rivers and waterways and processes it goes through to arrive in your home. And secondly, learn exactly what happens to the trash you throw away. Where does it go? How is it disposed of, buried, incinerated, exported? If you learn these two things, you will become more connected to this world in a way that will likely change how you live your life.

In this new year, let us hold sacred the wonders of creation. Let us not just save, but let us savor the natural beauty all around us. Let us treat everyone we see as a part of ourselves, and as a manifestation of the living God. Turn to the person next to you and say, "I am you & you are me."

I am you and you are me; and from this toxic culture we must break free. The Good Life is not good, unless we can see its goodness even at the worst of times. When the diagnosis comes, or the pink slip, or the divorce papers, or the intervention, or the eviction notice, or when the towers come tumbling down...the *real* good life becomes even more real in these times, because it includes community, connection, and a commitment to the common good.

All the rest is ... well... garbage.