

“Life is Good”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church on Sunday, February 6, 2011

What a week it's been. Life is full of tests and limitations for everyone. Some are cultural, and others we put upon ourselves. Tests such as:

How far will I go to make money?

What am I willing to do to save my marriage?

What will I do to get a job? To get elected? To stay healthy?

Am I capable of getting a date?

Am I able to be a good friend?

Can I truly love anybody?

Can I raise a child? Really do it well?

Can I face this disease? This operation? This loss?

Can I take responsibility for this mistake I made, or this decision?

Can I accept my children for who they are?

Am I good looking enough, tall enough, free-spirited enough?

Can I live a few more years?

Can I die – I mean, do it well – with some dignity left?

We all grapple with some of these questions. We all wrestle with our limitations and try to decide which ones are real, and which ones we can overcome.

This week I've been thinking a lot about limitations and overcoming obstacles, as I sat at home all week due to snow. Fourteen inches of snow is significant, but in Chicago (where I grew up) it would not shut down the entire city for a week, and maybe two weeks, as it has in Tulsa! A limitation and obstacle in one place is only a minor inconvenience in another, just as a limitation or obstacle for one person may be easily overcome by someone else. Of course, sitting at home, feeling challenged by snow, most of us have been watching the revolution taking place in Egypt. There've been incredible scenes of protesters defying tear gas attacks to mount a bridge for freedom in Cairo. Christians created a wall of safety to protect their Muslim countrymen and women as they did their daily prayers in Liberty Square. There've been scenes of violent counter-protesters riding into the crowds on camels and horses with whips and bats and knives. And others throwing rocks and throwing flaming gasoline bombs from the roofs of buildings onto the crowds of protesters. American and other countries' reporters were beaten and arrested in the streets.

And this time, it is Egyptians – not Jews – and it is Hosni Mubarak, the dictator, rather than the Pharaoh of Exodus, but it's a chant of the same flavor to the leader of Egypt: "Let my people go." But in this case, it's "Let *your* people go!" It's an age-old story of ordinary people breaking free of tyranny and oppression and rising up to overcome obstacles and limits that seem insurmountable.

The week before started on a somber note as Ugandan activist David Kato was murdered in his home, for the simple reason that he is gay and he chose not to settle for the culture of oppression and violence in his country. His name and photo, along with one hundred other Ugandans suspected of being gay, were published in a Ugandan newspaper under the headline, "Hang Them!" Instead of cowering and running away, David Kato sued the newspaper to stop invading people's privacy and inciting violence. The newspaper publisher said (after Kato was killed) he did not mean for neighbors to beat and kill neighbors, he was advocating that the government do it. You may remember, it was on the first Sunday in February exactly a year ago that I delivered a sermon telling this congregation that I would be going to Uganda to stand with our partner church and the gay community there as they fought governmental persecution. In fact, I used excerpts from that sermon for the article I wrote for the Huffington Post that was featured this week in memory of David Kato.

All of these events have me thinking about overcoming limitations and obstacles. This morning I want to share stories of two people whose lives provide lessons for us all.

Do you remember George Dawson? At the age of ninety-eight, he began learning to read. Dawson was African American and he always wanted to read, but at the age of sixteen he figured he'd probably missed his chance. He started working on his family's farm at the age of eight. His grandparents were former slaves who were among the fortunate ones that actually received forty acres and a mule. By his twelfth birthday, his parents needed to rent him out to a white family for \$1.50 per month in order to put food on the table for the rest of George's siblings. It was at a time when one less mouth to feed and a little extra income really helped. It also meant that he was born shortly after the 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legitimized Jim Crow segregation. The realities of race were taught to him early, when at the age of ten he watched a white mob lynch his seventeen-year-old friend in the center of town on trumped up charges of rape. On the way home, his father tried to wipe away George's tears, as well as the hate he saw welling up inside him. This was the first of many talks they would have about how to get along as a black person in America. George learned which drinking fountains and bathrooms he could use, and which he could not. He learned what tone to use when addressing white folks, and where to sit on the back of the train.

For more than eighty years, George Dawson worked in a sawmill, built levees on the Mississippi River, drove spikes for the first railroads in East Texas, broke wild horses, and – for twenty-five years – ran the machines that pasteurized milk at a dairy farm. He once lost a chance at a promotion at the dairy farm because he didn't know how to sign his name on the application. At one point, he played semi-pro baseball in the Negro League, and he spent ten years travelling throughout North America by rail; sometimes he had a ticket, and other times he just jumped on boxcars. He fathered seven children, but he never learned to read.

Until one day, at the age of ninety-eight, when a young man came to his door recruiting people for the Adult Basic Education classes at the local high school. According to an article in the Seattle Star-Telegram, when the young man came to the door, George said: "I've been alone for ten years. I'm tired of fishing. It's time to learn to read." [A few days later, George] waited outside Classroom 103, and the teacher looked at him: he stood barely five feet tall, his skin was wrinkled, his hair was white, his blue eyes said he was serious.

"You ever go to school?" [the teacher asked]

"Not a day."

"Not a day?"

"Never had a chance."

"Know the alphabet?"

"No, son."

The teacher began with six letters, but the old man interrupted.

"No, son. I want to see all of them. I want to put 'em together."

[George] learned his ABCs in a day and a half. The teacher moved on to phonics, breaking words into pieces and sounding out the parts.

"No, son, I want to say something that makes sense."

At the age of 102, George started studying as a full-time student and received his GED. He's hardly missed a class, except for an occasional funeral. When asked if he was going to take a break, he said, "No way, I still got so much ahead of me to learn." Clearly, George did not want to squander the life he was miraculously given. Lord knows he's had many obstacles set in his path. He's lived through inhumanity, and loss, and stolen possibilities without losing his sense of hope and gratitude for life or compromising his personal integrity. He may not have gone to school, but he's been tested by life's inequities, uncertainties, and fears. In a world of heartless discrimination he regularly had to decide between his pride and his life. How far would he go to make money, to protect his family, to

avoid a scene? Life's full of tests and limitations for everyone. Some are cultural, some are biological and some we put upon ourselves.

The second story on this theme is from one of my favorite writers, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a Jewish woman who tells about when she was sixteen. She went to sleep one night in her college dormitory room, and woke up six months later in the hospital¹. She has Crohn's Disease, and massive intestinal bleeding put her in a coma. The doctors said that if she ever did come out of the coma, she'd live as an invalid and be severely limited by a disease that they knew very little about. They did not expect her to live past the age of forty. If she woke up, going back to college was not even considered an option. But, six months later, when she finally woke up and understood what was happening, Rachel had other plans: she wanted to be a doctor. She admits that as a spoiled only child, she was used to getting her way. Rachel and her father had a number of heated arguments in the hospital. When she finally told him she was going to go back to school regardless of what the doctor said, her father said he'd refuse to pay the tuition. That's when her mother (Who, although she was a professional woman, was raised in a different era and did not ever disagree with or challenge her husband) said, "Then I'll pay for it." It turns out Rachel's mother had been saving money in a secret bank account for years, and she told Rachel she'd give the money to her for tuition. Within twenty-four hours, against the doctor's advice, Rachel's mom signed her out of the hospital and flew her back to college.

For six months, her mom stayed with her and cared for her, even pushed her to classes in a wheelchair when she was too weak to walk. The next couple of years were terribly hard, as Rachel was sick and weak. The powerful drugs she was on completely altered the way she looked, and she lost thirty pounds. Eventually, Rachel found an inner strength that she did not know she had. Years later she asked her mom: "Weren't you afraid?" Most parents would not have taken such risks with their child's life. "I was terrified for you," her mom explained, "but I was even more frightened for your dreams. If they died, this disease would have claimed you. If others had made the choices about your life, you would have always wondered whether you could've made it. You may have become bitter. There are so many ways to die," her mother told her. As the tears welled up in Rachel's eyes, she asked her mom what would've happened if she had failed. "Then you would have found out for yourself what was real. Then, perhaps, in time you could accept it, and dream again."

Her story reminds me that sometimes our limits tend to heighten our appreciation of what we do have. Yet some limits are real. I realized back in high school, much to my disappointment, that at five feet eleven inches and 180 pounds, I was never going to play in the NFL – no Super Bowl ring for me. I

have succeeded in breaking through the 180 pound limit, however...but still no NFL contract. But other limits are what one of my mentors, Ken MacLean, calls: “established nonsense.” Many limits that are placed on women and on the physically-challenged, and on gay and lesbian people, and on those who live in poverty are based on established nonsense. The limits placed on George Dawson and other people of color during the days of segregation also fit into this category. In the book Dawson co-wrote at the age of 100, he tells of one train excursion in the 30s that landed him in Tulsa. When he and another black gentleman went looking for a place to eat, George was surprised when the man he was with read the signs here that said ‘No Colored and No Indians.’ No Indians was new to him. His companion explained that there were many Indians in Oklahoma, and “they ain’t white either.”

But there’s one kind of limit that no one can change or escape – and that’s mortality. The awareness that we will not live forever is the foundation of religion, and is our mandate to fully appreciate each day. And to use our precious lives to make an impact for good. At 98 years old, George Dawson started learning to read; for the last four years of his life he was a scholar and author. Even at age 102, people would constantly ask him if he thinks he’ll ever marry again, and he’d say, “I might, I might.” When asked if he likes school he replies: “Every morning I get up and wonder what I might learn that day. You just never know. I am so grateful to have the chance to go to school,” he’d say. George Dawson’s story and Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen’s life are testaments to the fact that a fulfilled life is achievable, even in the face of great adversity and obstacles. They show us how a person can remain hopeful even when life’s circumstances are stacked up against us.

The protesters in Egypt and throughout the Middle East today, and the activists who are daily risking their lives in Uganda, all remind us that change is possible, but not without risks and challenges. But one person dares to dream, and dares to reach for their dream, it inspires others. In this New Year, what are you planning to do differently? I hope you’ll push your limits and possibilities in the face of adversities, because you too will inspire others. What doors will you unlock that might have otherwise remained closed? Take time, even if you’re snowed in, to savor and appreciate this life that’s been miraculously given. Make it a full and worthwhile life, outlined as it is by hardships and limitations. May 2011 find in you a fullness of experience that absorbs both sorrow and joy, winter and spring, living and dying. Take heed of the words of a 102-year-old man named George Dawson: “Life is so good, and it’s only getting better.” I love you. Amen.

ⁱ Remen, Rachel Naomi. My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging. Riverhead Books, New York 2000. (pp. 290-292)