

# "Wilderness Wisdom"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, March 13, 2011

I have never been a person who enjoys depravation. The idea of religious rituals like fasting and abstaining have never appealed to me. I take great heart that in Judaism there's the idea that when Judgment Day comes, people will not only be judged on the things they did that they should not have done, but we will also be judged on having not done all the wonderful things we could have done and that we passed up for no good reason. I'm the kind of person who tries to never pass up any opportunities I get to enjoy life's pleasures. I like coffee, wine, chocolate, good food, dancing, music, massage...you name it. In fact, I've hardly met a vice I didn't enjoy, at least in moderation. I don't know about you, but I take all my allotted vacation days. So the idea of intentionally going without food or beverages or any physical pleasures has never appealed to me. Life is here to be enjoyed. I figure, we only get one ride on this amazing carousel, we might as well enjoy it, and I'm going to do all I can to grab the brass ring. So, what does a guy like me (and someone like you, if you're like me) do with a holiday like Lent? For most of my life I just ignored it. Heck, I'm a Unitarian, I don't need to do anything I don't want to do. But I've come to realize a few things about religious rituals and the brass ring of life that I feel so compelled to try to possess. And that's what I want to talk about today.

I've learned something John Tarrant talks about, that underneath and inside the life we live every day, is another life. This unseen life runs like a stream underneath our city, our homes, our jobs, our families, beneath our pleasures and ambitions and griefs. Beneath the veils of this world, & below the casings that form around our hearts, there's another reality. And if we fail to find it through love, we often wake up to it, in times of soul-searing loss and wrenching disappointment. These are the moments when our lives are changed forever and there's no going back. And these kinds of wake-up calls usually come unbidden and unwanted. Like an earthquake or a tsunami that breaks into a perfectly normal day, like a station identification warning breaks into the middle of a TV program we're watching ...except this time, it's not a warning. This time it's on, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Earlier this week we held an Ash Wednesday service. I find it one of the most moving services every year, on par with the power of our Good Friday Service which is coming up next month. On Ash Wednesday, we administer ashes to those who come forward and we say, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return." It's a reminder of our mortality, a reminder that we are only here on loan and someday our financing will run out. The difference

between life and a loan is we know when the loan is going to come due. I love the Ash Wednesday service because I find it helpful to be reminded that I will die; it helps me stay connected to the important things and to forgive the trivial stuff.

But I have to tell you, there was a young girl there this time, age nine or ten, and when I placed the ashes upon her and she peered into my stern eyes with her vibrant blue eyes, I almost could not get my lips to say the words, "...to dust you shall return." I don't know about you, but when I look at children, I don't think about them dying. But I could not deny it in that moment. In that instant, I caught a glimpse of the world underneath the world I usually live in. It broke the crust that forms over the heart. There's a casing or a film that develops around that part of us that knows instinctively what is real; it is often called the ego.

Of course, by Friday morning the idea of our mortality became very real when I woke up to the news of the devastating earthquake in Japan that they're now saying has probably taken up to 10,000 men, women, and children, on what was otherwise a pretty normal day. At the time I heard the news, the tsunami was on its way to the US at the speed of 500 miles an hour and we had no idea how devastating it might be when it arrived on our shores. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes like Katrina, tornadoes, bus accidents like the one that killed fourteen people in New York City yesterday, and melt downs at nuclear power plants lift the veil of our illusion and give us a glimpse for a time of how fragile and precious life is.

Author Joan Chittister writes of

...a young man who used to work the pit in the futures market and had planned a big career in international trading, who changed jobs after the collapse of the World Trade Center, where he worked. He [tells of standing] in shock a thousand miles away as television cameras watched the building go down with dozens of his friends in it. All of them young, like he was. All of them bright like he was. All of them on their way up, like he was. But to where? He had lost too many of his hard driving young friends, he said later – all of whom, it had once seemed, were even more successful than he was – [He couldn't]... ignore the meaning of his life any longer. He quit his job in the center of Big Time, [she writes] He went back home to small town USA to hunt his dogs and fish the streams, and buy the average family home in a small cul-da-sac in a local suburb.

She makes the point that "no one comes out of struggle, out of suffering, the same kind of person they were when they went in." We are transformed by it.

It's possible to come out worse off, of course. We can turn sour, and become mean-spirited and old before our time. We've all met people like that. But what is not possible, in these situations, is to stay the same. When crisis arrives – when a child falls ill, when a lover or a spouse disappoints us,

or a catastrophe strikes – we are stripped of our everyday illusions. Our fantasy that life is predictable...that it will last forever. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells of a time when he was at a board meeting and he noticed that he kept trying to wipe a smudge off his eyeglasses. Finally he realized it was not on his glasses, it was on his left eye. When it didn't go away, he called an ophthalmologist. He figured it was nothing, since he'd never been in the hospital in his life. But the first doctor he saw told him he needed to go see the only neuro-ophthalmologist in the city. He asked why, and with some prodding the doctor said it could be the early signs of a brain lesion. Kushner says, "So this is how it happens. One minute I'm preoccupied by a thousand daily tasks, and the next, it's as if some hand from out of nowhere had swept everything off the game board and onto the floor, and replaced all my affairs with a medical diagnosis." He couldn't stop thinking about how, when he was growing up, the Rabbi assigned to his youth group one morning noticed that the razor kept slipping from his hand. Within a short time from that morning, he was dead of a brain tumor. And now, Kushner was himself scheduled for a CAT scan in two days. He says, "Suddenly everything I did was suffused with meaning. I couldn't take anything for granted. The most trivial sensations became gifts: the smell of my children's hair, the sound of the dog barking, my wife's kiss, the morning coffee. Each was too precious to let go of.

Fortunately, for Kushner, the CAT scan didn't show anything. After a couple more weeks of tests they said it was probably just an inflamed optic nerve. He got a reprieve and he said, "Life is so sweet! Wouldn't it be nice if there was some way of getting to that heightened gratitude for life without the terror. I suppose, [he goes on], that when organized religion works (which is more often than many of us admit), such an appreciation is given."<sup>i</sup>

And that is the point of Lent. It's the point of all religions, really. Some people consider religion to be *no more than* a form of escape, and it can be. But the true purpose of religion is to be in the right relationship with what's real. The purpose is to break through the ego and its illusions, to help us strip away what is not essential, so that we can have moments of enlightenment, moments of wholeness, moments of Satori (as the Zen masters call it), moments of grace and integrity where our inner life meets our outer life unafraid. Religion does not give us the answers to the unanswerable, inconsolable questions; religion is what we do in the face of life's unanswerable and inconsolable questions. Religion is what we do to bring awareness and give meaning to our experiences. And the rituals of religion attempt to wake us up, and help us break through the noise, so that we can touch the umbilical cord that connects us in love with all of life.

When I went home from the Ash Wednesday service I gave my wife a big hug, and I made a point of kissing my son's head when I tucked him into his bed. And I snuck into my daughter's

room and watched her breathe for a while as she slept. Even the air outside seemed a little more alive. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent in the Christian calendar, which begins forty days of introspection and of seeking forgiveness (it's the work of preparation for our renewal). It's a time to take stock of who we are and what we've done, and what we might need to do to live more fully and with more integrity. Taking stock allows us to make a mid-course correction. It allows us to seek redemption if necessary and to *clean up our act*. It challenges us to give up our fantasies that are just forms of running away from what's real, and helps us to connect with that timeless spot of grace within us that allows us to know ourselves in the midst of all changes. It's a good idea, once a year, to take some time to clean up our act. Otherwise, when our time comes – and our time will eventually come – we may discover we have not really lived. We may discover that we are filled with regrets.

That's why the Jews fast and take time each year at Yom Kippur to take stock and seek forgiveness; Muslims fast and seek forgiveness during Ramadan, and Christians at Lent. It is a way of clearing one's mind and heart so that we can be renewed. For Christians it is preparation for the renewal represented by Easter. It is the spiritual intercourse that allows for the conception of new life to be born in us and through us. It's the preparation of the womb for rebirth. The forty days mirrors the forty days that the Bible says Jesus fasted in the wilderness. Jesus needed this fast to test him, to strengthen him & to prepare him for his life and his death. The reason all leaders need to be tested is because they will face trials and temptations, and the testing allows them to build character, courage, and compassion. The purpose of rituals and religious practices is that they give us opportunities to strip away our illusions and build the character, courage, and compassion we need to survive and thrive.

This year at New Year's, a mentor of mine encouraged me to try fasting. I decided to fast, drinking only vegetable juices, for the first eight days of the year. It was unlike me, but it was an incredibly meaningful experience. Let me read you an excerpt from my journal during the fast:

Fasting feels like waking up from a sleep. My life usually goes at such a fast pace. I feel like I have stepped off the "hamster wheel" of my life that goes around and around day after day in a very similar pattern. Usually I have so many distractions including caffeine, alcohol, sweets, food, and music that can keep me from dropping down into my center and depth. Doing this is a radical change in my daily routine, while I am also maintaining much of my routine. So that I am seeing my life from a new perspective. It reminds me of a Hollywood movie where the person becomes like a ghost and gets to float above and watch himself going through his daily routine. After a few days of fasting, I am so much more aware of my body sensations (my desires, hungers, moods, etc). My energy feels like it's shifted into a different gear... slower, calmer, more reflective. It's like being in the world and outside it at the same time. It reminds me of when I've gone scuba diving. In the boat on top of the water the waves are choppy and the boat rocks up and down and the gear is heavy and tight and uncomfortable and the sun is bright in my eyes, then

suddenly I drop into the water into the quiet of a complete different world. It's a world that has been there all along, right under the surface, I just couldn't see it. In scuba diving, once underneath the surface of the waves, I move more slowly and deliberately as an observer with keen interest in everything. Fasting takes me to such a place...It's like sinking into a diff. world that's just below the surface of my life in every moment. It's been there the whole time, but I had not taken the time to become aware of it. [My journal continues]: Now that I am fasting, I see that the body can be a passage way to the spirit. Fasting has become a doorway to awareness.

I share this with you, because I realize fasting and rituals like Lent not only build discipline, and patience, and will power, but by changing something that we normally do everyday, it disrupts our routine and forces us to pay more attention. Even giving up desserts or some other daily delight can seem trite until you realize that with each temptation, we are reminded that this is a time of introspection, and we are choosing to live with more integrity. It's not a denial of life's richness, but a mining of life's treasures. It's a way to break through denial, and to discover that timeless spot of grace within.

If you're not ready, or not interested in giving something up, I understand completely. Another idea is to take up something new for Lent. In our Simple Gifts newsletter, Tamara has written wonderful daily Lenten reflections. You could commit to reading and following one each day. My Lenten practice this year involves writing a letter a day to people I have failed to stay connected to, or people who I own an apology to, or to whom I owe thanks. It is a daily reflection and discipline. I know I'll be tempted some days not to write, or to avoid saying what is most important. My discipline will be to keep it real, and to make the time to reflect on these relationships and to write.

My point today is that when crisis and struggle and catastrophe happen, they require us to rethink the meaning and shape of our lives. It's a crossroads, and we are forced to go one of two ways, but we can no longer keep going on the path we were on. One of the roads is the road that traps us in the past – we all know people whose past struggles have become the story of their present grief. They've taken the road of anger, regret, resentment, and fear. These are the people who have never been able to complete the cycle of liberation into new life and new hope. Whether through love or suffering, life is all about unlearning our way back to God.

---

<sup>i</sup> Kushner, Lawrence. Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary. Jewish Lights Publishing, NY 2004. Pp 39-41.