

## "Inner Fire"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, October 16, 2011

We are not here to be nice. We're not here to be nice, we are here to come alive...to have our lives set on fire! We're not here to be nice. Don't get me wrong, being nice is a good thing. I hope you're nice – it beats the alternative. But when we come to die, is that what people will say about us? "He was nice," "She was a nice person," is that enough? That's not why we're here. We are here to come alive, like a blazing fire! And there are only two ways. Isn't that great, when there are only two ways? Most of us can handle two, right? We come alive either by *paying attention*, or by *accident*.

I have to say here, that one of the great Zen Buddhist masters said that "the only way we become enlightened is by accident. The reason for meditating," he said, "is that it helps make us more accident-prone." The only way for our lives to be set on fire with passion and purpose is by accident, or by paying attention.

But here's the catch: there are enormous consequences to paying attention. When we pay attention we cannot escape the pain, and tragedy, and injustices of this world. When we tune-in to what's real, all assurances are gone; we are naked before the incredible uncertainty of our lives and our deaths. When you start to pay attention, you can lose your religion. You may have come to All Souls from another faith or denomination. If so, it's because you began to pay attention, and started to question the faith that was taught to you as Truth. You can become an exile from your own culture, from your own family culture; that's why the fire of inspiration is so closely connected to grief. Until we know how to grieve, we cannot know how to come fully alive. There's a deep connection between grief and aliveness, between our wounds and our gifts.

When Steve Jobs (the founder of Apple Computers) died recently, the speech he gave several years ago at Stanford University went viral on the internet. What he said was:

*When I was seventeen, I read a quote that went something like, "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, [he said] and since then, for the*

*past thirty-three years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something. Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything [he continues] – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things all fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.*

He goes on, "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." Listen to this, this is sage wisdom. Here it is again: "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." He goes on to say:

*About a year ago I was diagnosed with cancer. I had a scan at 7:30 in the morning, and it clearly showed a tumor on my pancreas. I didn't even know what a pancreas was. The doctors told me this was almost certainly a type of cancer that is incurable, and that I should expect to live no longer than three to six months. My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor's code for "Prepare to die." It means to try to tell your kids everything you thought you'd have the next ten years to tell them in just a few months. It means to make sure everything is buttoned up so that it will be as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes.*

Then, within 24 hours, he learned that he, in fact, had the rarest form of pancreatic cancer – the one that is curable by surgery. He said of that experience:

*This was the closest I've been to facing death, and I hope it's the closest I get for a few more decades. Having lived through it, I can now*

*say this to you with a bit more certainty: no one wants to die. Even people who want to go to Heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is how it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Live [right after the iPod.] Death is Life's change agent; it clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you [he said to that year's graduating class], but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true.*

Steve Jobs looked out at these young students, as I look at you know, and said:

*Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.*

Steve Jobs came alive before he died; he let his life catch fire and he changed the world. We cannot all be Steve Jobs, we're not all meant to be Steve Jobs. We're meant to discover the unique shape and pattern of our own lives. He says, "Most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become."

So how do we follow our heart and intuition? Especially those of us who have spent so much of our lives numbing ourselves, so that we can barely feel what our heart is trying to tell? I spent a period of my young adulthood – maybe I should call it my late adolescence – numbing myself. I left suburban Illinois for college at the age of seventeen, not because I had a fire in my belly to learn, but because it was "what kids like me' were supposed to do. Instead of a fire, I was in a fog. The sacred spark of life inside was smoldering under a cloud of smoke. I don't know if all the drinking and drugs I took back then was the *cause* of the fog or the *result* of the fog. What I do know is that

my life lacked substance, and so (like so many others whose lives lack substance) I found substances that I could abuse, that would fill the hole in my life. That's what drugs and heavy drinking are; they are substances we abuse because our lives lack real substance. They are poor substitutes for truly coming alive.

What messes people up is that, when they take drugs, they have an experience of feeling connected, whole, joyous, at peace despite the craziness of their lives. And the reason that it's so compelling is because that's how it feels to come alive; that's how it feels when our life catches fire. And what's confusing is that those of us who go down this path often confuse that feeling with the drug. In other words, what the drug is doing – albeit in an unhealthy and short-cuttred way – is it is giving us a glimpse of our own capacity for wholeness, joy, and connection. It is giving us a taste of that it's like to live in the world with a profound peace, in the midst of the reality of life's insanity. The *drug* is not actually doing it.

The drug is just the agent that brings on the experience. What we experience is our innate capacity for euphoria and peace; we experience what it feels like to come alive. But by missing the distinction (between the artificial experience and the real thing), people keep going back to the drugs, thinking that they are the source of the feeling. And pretty soon, the drug begins to smother the fire rather than set it ablaze. I was fortunate, because when I was nineteen, I had the opportunity to participate in a semester of college on a ship that sailed around the world. Some will call it the sea breeze, and others will call it the breath of God, but something on that voyage blew on the coal that was smoldering in my heard and set it ablaze. It was that trip that first taught me how to *pay attention*.

And remember, there are huge consequences to paying attention. When we really start to pay attention, we're brought face to face with life's uncertainty and cruelty. It came in forms like pirates trying to board the ship and rob us while crossing the Suez Canal. In seeing the breadlines in Communist Russia, and realizing that the ideas of property and ownership that I'd always taken for granted here in the U.S. is only an agreement we have made, and it can be changed/ It was in seeing things like the Museum of American War Atrocities in Vietnam. "American War Atrocities" ... I was taught that we were always the good guys. And the museum to the unfathomable

victims of our country's bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which burned countless little girls and their mommies, on an otherwise beautiful day, while walking to school. It was in seeing things like a suitcase in the concentration camp at Auschwitz that had what appeared to be my family's name on it – that had belonged to someone who had boarded a train by gunpoint and died there. The white fog of a middle-class suburban American childhood started to burn off, and a fire ignited in my belly.

I saw that the rules we think we live by are only agreements, and that these rules can and frequently are changed. I saw that the world was made up of people who make the rules, and people who live by the rules others make. I saw that, as an American with the chance to go to college, I had the opportunity to be one of the people who helps write the rules, rather than just someone who lives by the dogmas and decisions of others. And yet I was wasting my life, getting wasted, while others made the decisions, while yet others starved without food (from Oklahoma to Africa) or died without vaccinations. While children were being exploited in sweatshops, while women were being denied opportunities, while people were being sold into slavery (for work or sex.)

Poet David Whyte writes of such revelations in our lives:

*The moment you start living*

*As if your place in the world matters*

*And [realizing that] the world could neither speak*

*nor hear the fullness of its own bitter and beautiful cry*

*without the deep well of your body resonating in the echo.*

When that fire starts burning, it sets aglow a light with which we begin to see our own capacity and responsibility. It is inspiration, tinged as all inspiration is, with grief. We realize that our life matters, and suddenly we can no longer live as we had before. We die to the life we had because we know that now we can never hide our voice again. It reminds me of Moses before the burning bush. He took off his shoes, he kneeled down, because he knew from that moment on he would die to the life he had; because he knew that in that light, he could never hide his voice again. Have you kneeled down

before such a revelation about your life? Is the coal of your heart smoldering under a white fog, or is it blazing with passion and purpose?

Author Michael Meade says that today, there are two main ways that the light within people in our country are getting overcome. There's the white fog of suburban and rural kids and parents, doing drugs out of boredom, or gambling, or drinking, because they lack a sense of substance in their lives. And there are the kids and parents in the inner cities, whose fire is burning red hot with violence and destruction. Each year, Michael Meade brings men and male teens together in the Redwood forests of California. It includes half lawyers, doctors, social workers, artists, cooks, writers, and ministers, and half gang members and ex-convicts. About one hundred men of all ages and ways of life, out in the woods for a week. He's discovered that bringing those living in a white fog together with those living with red hot fire transforms them all. The red heat of some starts to burn away the white fog of the others, and the white fog helps to cool the red hot heat.

I had the privilege to spend a week with this group a few years ago, and it's one of the reasons that I am so committed to making sure our church brings people together from all walks of life. We need each other to help kindle the inner fires that set our lives ablaze with passion and purpose. Just imagine what our world would be like if more people discovered what brings them alive, and people spent their time and energy doing that! That's the world we are trying to create. Remember, we came from the fire of the supernova – fire is the substance we're made of. And it's our job now to transform that inner fire through the paintbrush, the pen, through our outstretched hands and our embracing hearts.

You are not here to be nice. You are here to realize that your life matters, and the world cannot achieve its fullness without you. Pay attention! Because wherever you are when it happens – and once it happens, it keeps happening over and over for the rest of your life – wherever and whenever it does, remember to take off your shoes, for you are indeed standing on holy ground.