

Sermon: "A Calling For US " Marlin Lavanhar

When I say I love you, I mean I love you!

I love this faith and this soulful journey we are on.

Two years ago my daughter Sienna died suddenly and unexpectedly in my arms in the middle of the night, 3 days after her third birthday.

When it happened, I couldn't talk, couldn't eat, I could barely stand on my own two feet, all I could do was weep.

But my church, and my colleagues held me up and gave me strength and courage to face my shattered heart.

And, healing came from UU's around the country in the form of cards and prayers and prayer shawls.

A number of colleagues came to be with us, including Bill Sinkford.

As our president, I knew that he was standing in for a lot of others that couldn't be there.

Bill's taken a lot of important stands during his presidency, but for me the most important stand he ever took was on his knees.

Only minutes after arriving in Tulsa to be with me and my family he got down on his knees and made chalk drawings on the sidewalk in front of my house with a frightened and confused little boy who had just lost his baby sister.

Even on his knees, Bill knows what he stands for and what our faith stands for.

This community, it's people and its love has helped save my life
-- at the time of my deepest despair.

And I am profoundly grateful.

At our best, we are not an activist organization,

We are not a social club,

We are a religious community in the greatest sense of the word.

And a religious community knows something about broken hearts and about standing
up.

It knows something about what to do when your world has been turned completely
upside down.

And a true religious community shows us how to take our heartbreak and transform it
into a sacred fire for change.

When a young man named Will came to see me,

and an elderly woman Barbara, and a youth named Steve and each said in their own
way that they weren't sure what they were called to do in this life, I asked,

"Tell me where your heart has been broken."

Because there is where your passion lies.

Has your heart been broken by racism, homophobia, by abuse, by addiction, by
experimentation on animals?

Whatever it is, the church's role is to help us take our heart break and turn it into a sacred fire to use to transform the world.

We need to be able to transfigure our pain, anger, and fear into a fearless passion.

One mistake we often make is trying to lead with our strengths rather than our heartbreak.

A man once told me,

“each person has two walls in the house they build around themselves.”

On one wall, we place all of the trophies of our success and achievements. That's the wall we like to show people who we meet.

We say, “Look at what I've done, what I've won, what I own.”

But on the other wall, hangs all of our fears, hurts and vulnerabilities.

And though we often try to connect to others by showing off our trophies, it's actually the stuff on the second wall that connects us with one another.

We're all bonded at a deep level by the common human experience of heartbreak and vulnerability.

And we live in a time when one of the looming questions is:

whether religion will continue to be one of the greatest sources of human division and conflict, or will it become the primary source of peace and justice and understanding among the human family?

It's a question so large and so jarring and so perilous
that it should trouble the hearts of every faithful man and woman on this planet.

We live in a time of conflict and terror and the proliferation of weapons of mass
destruction.

We also live in a time of growing extremisms of all kinds
that are dividing the human family.

It is a time when the population of the world is exploding
to what may soon become unmanageable levels.

The environment is in serious danger.

And people in this country, continue to be distracted from the major issues of our times
by a violent, materialistic and pornographic popular culture.

At a time like this, we need passionate, free-thinking people and institutions that willing
to take stands that will give birth to a new era.

An era in which religion becomes a source of peace and unity and liberation
and not war and division and oppression.

An era in which we will not rest until our rivers are clean.

Until our schools are adequate,

Until all our children and elderly have access to adequate health care.

Until the color of a person's skin is of no more social or economic significance than the color of their hair or their eyes.

It's going to take a new kind of leadership like we've never seen before.

It's going to take leaders who know where their hearts have been broken and know how to help the rest of us turn our passion into compassion and our anger into a transforming fire.

It's going to take people who can honestly name the subversions and the perversions of our nation's history and values without being branded unpatriotic.

I can remember being a teenager and my older brother was going through his punk rock phase.

He'd sit in school drawing anarchy symbols on all his books.

For a while he sported a bright red Mohawk, -- bright red, and wore combat boots beneath his torn-up and graffiti covered blue jeans.

But what made a lasting impression on me was when I saw him send a letter and I noticed that he always placed the American flag stamp upside down.

Back then, I thought of it as just one more part of his angst-ridden youthful rebellion.

Yet, for my brother, there was something much more significant going on.

We were growing up in a suburb of Chicago in the 70's,
two mid-western boys being taught all about...

America being the greatest country in the world.

The land of freedom for all and equal opportunity.

The land where Europeans and Native Americans feasted together
and built a righteous nation.

At some stage, most of us figure out that the history we're taught is not the full story and
in some cases not even the real story.

A similar thing happens to many of us when it comes to the religion we grew up with.

Many of us grow up and discover that we no longer believe that God and humanity are
what they've been portrayed to be.

And at the moment when it hits us that what we believed in, what we've been taught, is
no longer something we can accept or have faith in... it can feel like a betrayal and like
our entire world's been flipped on it's head.

If you're 17, and have an American flag stamp you might decide to stick it upside down
so that it's flying in the same direction as the rest of your world which has just been
inverted.

But, what are we to do when our world gets turned upside down?

We know what we were told to do after the tragic events of Sept. 11th 2001.

We were told to “go back to normal.”

“Back to Normal?”

Meaning: “keep the status quo the way it is, don’t change anything.

At one of the most significant moments in recent American history, at a time of our collective heartbreak, our highest national leaders told us that

“The best thing we could do is go shopping!” Remember that?

At a critical moment in time, that was pregnant with possibility, when there was a will and an opportunity for our nation to become more introspective, when people were realizing that something was not as it had seemed and something new might need to be tried or created, our nation was lulled back to sleep.

Our hearts were broken-open, but our collective grief and anger and fear was not transfigured into something sacred or life-affirming.

Quite the opposite, it was channeled into two wars, and thousands of deaths and countless distractions.

When we look around, we can see a lot of people in our country who could be considered the walking dead.

More and more people use drugs and alcohol to escape and cover over the break in their hearts.

Gambling and sex addiction, consumer-o-holism, work-o-holism....

Are all on the rise.

As a person who travels by airplane a lot, I meet many people.

And any UU minister can probably tell you that, on a plane trip, it's usually a little awkward when the person sitting next to you finally gets around to asking what you do for a living.

I know once I say "I'm a minister," it either completely shuts down the conversation, as the person starts to go over in their mind, whether they'd said anything embarrassing or irreverent in front of a man of the cloth.

Or even worse, for the rest of the flight people try to proselytize to me.

I've often wanted to have a different answer.

And someday, I'm going to try what one colleague does.

One of these days when someone asks me what I do for a living I'm going to look them in the eyes and say,

"I'm in the business of resurrecting the dead."

That ought to shut down the conversation pretty fast.

But you know what, in some ways that is my business.

There are a lot of people in this world who are part of the living dead.

They're alive, but due to the state of their relationships, their job, their addictions, they're the walking dead.

And if we're going to help resurrect such people,
we're going to have to stand up and speak truth to power!

Who says UU's don't believe in resurrecting the dead?

In fact, it's probably one of our most important jobs.

Besides the popular addictions, many people use religion and spirituality as an escape.

There are some religions that tell us that... this life is an illusion or this life is not what really matters, but it is the next life where our reward and justice will be found.

There are many who look at all the scary stuff happening in our world and they see an apocalyptic vision that the end is near...

Apocalypse is an interesting word because at its root it means: "lifting the veil, or to uncover."

And in that sense of the word, maybe this is an apocalyptic time, because over the past 10 years we've been seeing under some of the veils of our society.

I've heard author Michael Meade talking about this and he refers to such things as:

The 2000 presidential elections and the way the supreme court elected the president.
And the voting irregularities in states like Ohio and Florida.

That was a lifting of the veil of our democracy.

Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans – (whew!) -- that was a lifting of the veil!

The Enron scandal and now the sub-prime mortgage scandal has been a lifting of the veil uncovering types of corruption in business for all to see.

The Catholic Church scandal was a lifting of the veil which exposed a frightening corruption that's pervaded that institution probably for a long long time.

And we've received test results demonstrating huge failings and disparities in public education in our country.

We have seen the veil lifted on some of the major institutions that our country is founded on: Democracy, business, religion, education...

But it seems we are so easily distracted that the veil gets lifted and then we seem to quickly pull it back down and go on with our lives.

It's not that the world is coming to an end, it is that the world as we've known it is coming to an end and we need conscious, progressive, open-minded, broken-hearted people who will stand up and help re-imagine what will come next.

With the breakdown of trust in some of the major institutions of our culture,

you and I must become serious about the re-imagining of culture and religion and education and politics and our relationship with the natural world...

It's a calling for us.

We must be on the cutting edge of free discussion and debate on issues of religion and culture and nature.

Keep in mind that throughout many of the major transitions in the history of this country, Unitarians and Universalists have taken important stands and played significant roles.

And often our influence has been disproportionate to our numbers.

From the abolition of slavery, to the civil-rights era and the woman's rights eras and the gay rights era significant leaders and ideas have come out of our tradition and our churches.

and one reason is, because time and time again, when we've discovered our world is upside down we have refused to simply "go back to normal."

We are determined to stand for freedom.

And standing for religious freedom means taken on religious literalism.

And imagine if religious liberty replaced religious literalism.

Consider Jerusalem.

If we keep thinking of Jerusalem as a literal place,

the world may never know peace.

Sure, Jerusalem today may also be a literal place,
but what Jerusalem truly stands for is a vision of something much bigger than any one
piece of land.

With a mythic and poetic understanding of scripture we can see Jerusalem as a
reference to the ideal of human community with justice.

In this sense, Jerusalem is an archetypal reference, not a geographical reference, to the
soul of the world.

Or as author Michael Meade puts it,

“Jerusalem is that Holy place that is always trying to occur.”

Everywhere, in every time among every person and community.

And so what humanity is about is creating such a Jerusalem wherever we are.

Because if we possess a connection to the holy center of our soul,
if we have a community built on compassion and justice and freedom and love, if we
have Jerusalem – then we do not have to fight over Jerusalem.

What needs to happen is a re-imagining of religion
so that literalism which is narrow, and rigid and often deadly,
makes way for the mythic and poetic which is imaginative, liberating and life-affirming.

That is to say, we cannot “return to normal” and survive.

We must get serious about the task of re-imagining religion in compelling ways that are not exclusive, oppressive, tribal and deadly...

And re-imagining culture in ways that are not standardized... franchised and disposable...

And a part of this work is to re-imagine our sense of who we are and what we stand for – and what we are called to do with our lives and our churches and our Association.

Something is dying my friends and something new is trying to be born to replace it – the question is whether we see a role for ourselves and our faith in this re-imagining of religion and society.

I'll tell you, we're not going to do it by turning the flag upside down...

First of all, that doesn't really change anything,
second of all, the flag and what it stands for may be one of our greatest allies and tools in the struggle.

The United States flag is a symbol, that has such a powerful hold over the American psyche that when left in the wrong hands is incredibly dangerous.

For many people the flag represents a powerful vision of what our nation could and I'd say must become.

In other words, those of us trying to re-imagine our society should not be the one's flipping the American flag upside down to reflect societies inversions, we need to be about flipping the society back around... towards its highest ideals and possibilities.

Our forbearers, as flawed and human as they were took their stand to try and leave us with the vision of a new and different kind of nation.

A nation based on the ideals of human rights.

A nation that has been drawn from all the peoples of the earth.

A nation drawn from all nations.

We are not a country bound together by "blood and soil", but rather by faith in liberty, equality and justice.

It is the pursuit of these noble principles that must unite us as one family.

In fact, our faith in these human rights are so strong that we believe they belong to people of every tribe, tongue, territory and tradition on earth.

In that way, America, much like Jerusalem, is not so much a place as it is a faith in the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind.

A faith that transcends nations and creeds and unites all people upon this earth in a mutual longing for a world of harmony and peace where no one is defiled,

where no one goes to bed hungry

and wherein all God's children come to know and to cherish one another.

It's the America that has never been, but yet must be!

Now some will say, 'but who are we to make any real impact,

we're just a tiny band of liberal religious people in an enormous country and an even larger world?'

Is this message, just one more example of us puffing up our chests and believing we are much more than we really are?

The way I see it...

I'm heartened to remember that Jesus and his followers were just a tiny band of slightly eccentric people.

The American Revolutionaries began as a tiny band of men and women.

I've learned something about tiny bands.

Do you remember a minor rock band named the Boomtown Rats?

Do you remember who the lead singer was?

It was Bob Geldof.

Bob Geldof is remembered a little bit for his musical career, but more importantly for the LIVE AID concerts back in the late 80's and what he's done since then.

Most people don't realize that when Live Aid began, Bob Geldof did not set out to hold a major concert on two continents with many of the world's most famous musicians.

At the time he was the leader of a band that had one popular hit years before.

"I don't like Mondays"

And one day he read about mass starvation of woman and children in Africa and he decided he wanted to try to do something about it.

He and his band were playing concerts in small pubs around the UK.

He knew a pub owner in London and so he asked if his band could play a benefit concert in his pub.

The pub owner said okay and so before the event...

Geldof began putting up flyers about this benefit concert around town.

A few days later, Geldof got a call from a man named, Mick Jaeger.

Who said, he had seen the flyers and wondered if it would be okay if his band joined Geldof's band for the concert.

Geldof thought, "Sure, we'd love to play with the Rolling Stones!"

Before long, this concert had to be moved from the small pub, to a stadium in London.

Word got out about the Rolling Stones being involved in a benefit concert to end hunger in Africa, then Elton John wanted to take part, and Sting, and Eric Clapton.

Pretty soon the concert spread into two stadiums, 1 in London and the other in NY.

Every major rock and roll personality got involved and it was simulcast on most major television stations around the world.

They raised hundreds of millions of dollars and saved millions of children.

And it didn't start because Geldof planned it that way.

It was because he had a concern and he asked himself "What can I do?"

He had a band and knew someone who had a pub.

He worked within his little circle of influence and in so doing he made a huge impact.

Another great example of someone who was clear that he must work within his area of influence was Gandhi.

Author Steven Covey talks about this in his book about Habits of Highly Effective People.

Gandhi had no formal governmental power.

But he was determined to do something about the colonialization and oppression and persecution of his people by the British Empire.

He didn't start out flying to London to meet with the King
or even by going to New Delhi to talk with the Legislators.

He started out by meeting with people in the rice fields.

Those were the people he had influence with.

He built his support with those he could influence and his influence grew.

By doing so, this tiny little man went on to defeat one of the greatest imperial powers the
world has ever known.

As Covey reminds us, people who are effective, those who change the world, and effect
the course of history, are men & women who put their time and energy into areas where
they actually have influence.

There are many issues that we're concerned about.

Many issues that break our hearts.

Like: Domestic Abuse, homelessness, declining public schools...

Turn to the person sitting next to you and tell them: "It breaks my heart that [fill in the
blank]!"

There are a lot of issues out there – there's a lot of heartbreak!

Of course, we've got a limited capacity as individuals,

and even as congregations and as a movement to support all the causes worthy and in need of our help.

And it's not as if we can go around and enlist all the other religious people and organizations and tell them to do their part.

But imagine if every UU church started giving away its Sunday offering to help organizations like Disabled Veterans, Food Pantries, Homeless Shelters, Youth service organizations, and Senior Service organization... and more in their local area.

This trend has already started.

I'm not sure where it began, but undoubtedly it was started in one bold church, that re-imagined what was possible.

The UU congregation that first started doing this, did not say, what can we do to help homelessness, in Tulsa in Tucson in Tuscaloosa and in Boise, Baltimore and Boston.

They asked, "What is within our reach?"

And by doing that, their influence now reaches people from coast to coast.

For example, four years ago my church started giving away our offering and we give away between \$100,000 - \$150,000 a year to such causes.

Mostly in \$1, \$5 and \$10 bills.

It's true that you and I cannot go around telling other denominations and other congregations what to do.

But as word gets out what UU's are doing... other churches might just decided to do likewise.

Just imagine what would happen if one day it became the culture of churches all over the country to give away their Sunday collection plates.

Just imagine the exponential impact.

I believe we UU's are called to help spread a culture of generosity throughout the land – from the redwood forests to the gulf stream waters, and it starts in our own local communities.

In Tulsa, thanks to a tiny and tireless little, red-headed retiree in her 80's named Betty Morrow, one of the other things that we've been doing at All Souls is starting micro-credit banks around the world.

To date we've started 32.

And guess what? In the past few years non-UU churches in Tulsa and other UU churches around this country and Canada have asked us to show them how to do it.

It only takes \$5000 to start one of these banks.

And the banks are helping the poorest among the poor around the world w/ small loans to start businesses.

Imagine if every UU church in the US sponsored at least one Micro Credit bank each year.

We'd start over 1000 banks a year, that would change the lives of 10's of thousands of the world's poorest woman and children each year.

Within a decade millions of our poorest brothers and sisters around the globe would be lifting themselves out of poverty.

Then, imagine if someday even $\frac{1}{4}$ of all religious congregations in the US started sponsoring just one bank a year.

It would be a huge step in ending poverty as we know it.

Even our church's Youth Group, with only a few dozen members, raised the money to start a bank, through car washes and bake sales, so I know that even the smallest UU Fellowship could do it.

Of course, it is not just through raising money.

One very small UU community outside of Tulsa, led by Rev. Ron Robinson has only a handful of members.

Yet they can be found all over their urban landscape planting trees, erasing graffiti and they even go to the edge of town and rescue animals that are frequently abandoned and left to die.

Even my brother (who now has a reverse Mohawk – because he's balding down the middle) has teamed up with my dad and the Ridgewood, NJ Unitarian Church to build schools in rural Guatemala in my daughters name.

That's how they have chosen to transform their grief into hope – for scores of Mayan Indian children.

However we do it, when we live our values in our communities – we see our influence grow.

We offer a powerful example of what's possible.

Let us go home from this week not fretting over all that needs to be done,

Let us go back home, determined to do what we can realistically do.

You and I can, and must, help make America, America again.

The country it has never been, but yet can be.

A truly new and different kind of nation.

A non-racialized, non-homophobic culture that respects the feminine and the masculine in all of us, that makes room for the physically challenged and cares for the mentally ill, that is generous with all her people whether they have a government issued ID or not.

Let it truly be a reflection of all of us.

For far too long, we have seen in a mirror dimly, but then we'll see face to face.

For too long our mirror has been obscured by –isms and schisms and false patriotisms,
but we live in the time of the lifting of the veils.

We live in a time when we must remember what the name Jerusalem stands for, so we
can stand up and create Jerusalem wherever we are.

A time when we must remember what America stands for,
so that we can stand up and help make America, America again.

It's not enough to stand up for the pledge of allegiance

It's not enough to stand up for the national anthem.

That means nothing if we don't also stand up for what's right.

Rosa Parks, sat down to stand up for her rights.

Soldiers, freedom fighters and activists are laying down their lives
to stand up for people's rights.

I must remember what I stand for,
and you must remember what you stand for.

Because the place where heaven and earth meet is the place where your feet are
touching the ground.

In this world of ever-challenging social evils...

in a world in which the fangs of injustice and intolerance bite with a venomous sting...

and where precious hearts are broken everyday.

In this fierce and uncertain world, it gives me deep joy, to stand up here today with meaningful work to do, surrounded by fellow pilgrims to do it with.

Surrounded by people, who demonstrate to their core a supreme love of humanity in all its varied manifestations

May you stand by this faith, knowing that this faith will stand by you even in the worst of times. It cannot prevent your heart from breaking, but it can help you transform your pain into a passion for faith, hope and love.

And of course the greatest of these is love.

I love you! Amen.