

# Birmingham Lecture

## Living Our Mission Daring Adventure

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"Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." -Helen Keller

"There is a guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which flows into your life. Then, without effort, you are impelled to truth and to perfect contentment."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Did you watch the Olympics? I found them very inspiring. Can you imagine staring down the Super G and, while rocking back and forth, back and forth on your skis in anticipation and preparation, hearing the count down for take off and then plunging down the hill? Can you feel the swooshing of the snow as you race down the hill at break neck speeds? Can you see yourself crossing the finish line, sliding to a stop and checking out your rating on the scoreboard? Boy, I can't. No, I wouldn't even get up the hill. But, if I did, I can imagine hearing the count down, four, three, two one. Go Go Go. I think I'd stop and say, "You know, I'd really rather not." If I did, I think I would end up more like the Gateway cow doing the long ski jump, plunging deep into the soft powdery snow with only a silhouette left above to indicate where the rescue team could start digging me out.

No, I wouldn't look like one of the hotdog skiers finishing triumphant. Sure, I want to be fit and have a body like those Olympic champions strong, flexible, confident, but once again, the commercials like Bank of America and Valvoline with people sliding, careening and falling face down in the snow are more similar to my abilities.

Two of my favorite athletes this year are Olympic Bronze medallist Bode Miller, who came down the hill, as I think I might, without the sleek, smooth look of the Austrians, Norwegian and Germans. He was flailing around out there, limbs going in all directions like a newborn colt or an awkward teenage boy, not caring about what he looked like only that he got the job done.

The other is Bill Bryson, author of *A Walk in the Woods*. Not an athlete really, but someone who took the plunge in his own way and walked a significant part of the Appalachian Trail. His writing made me laugh out loud. He took a daring adventure with an old friend. Now that one I can imagine because I've backpacked myself and at a low point, worked retail at a camping store. Overweight, out of shape and inexperienced, they strapped their packs on their backs and tackled the Appalachian Trail, taking us on an adventure, laughing at their mishaps, grieving for our environment, and celebrating their spirit.

I'm not that likely to make physical challenges my daring adventure. Though, come to think of it, I have successfully traversed a high ropes course, gone white water rafting and, before I turned forty, though I

never did it, I wanted to skydive. Rather, I'm more likely to jump into spiritual quests.

Probably most of us won't be faced with the challenges of Olympic Gold and representing our country to the world, but we face our own challenges of leading lives of commitment and authenticity. And while the nation may not be watching, our children, families, and community are. They are cheering for us to go for the goal of a fulfilling and meaningful life. One that when we get to the end of, we can say we pushed ourselves to the limit, went for the gold. It is not for us to measure our success against others or against our own expectations really, but to know that we did our personal best.

Those Olympic athletes didn't just wake up one morning and take off down the hill and win the gold. They had been training and developing for a decade or more and had an aptitude for it to begin with. In one of the Olympic biographies, a mother told us that her son had been jumping off things since he was a toddler. When his parents finally realized they couldn't keep him from doing it, they started supporting him in doing it well and safely. What if we recognized the spiritual, moral, and social justice leanings of our young people and helped them by supporting and developing those aptitudes? What if there was an Olympic development program for contributing to the common good?

I just finished reading *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*. The authors studied people who devoted their lives to the common good. They identified various aspects that go into the make up of such a person. There were many common threads, as you might imagine, but it all seemed so random and haphazard as to be miraculous that anyone ever devotes their life to the good of humankind.

I don't think our world can afford to depend on random development of people choosing to help make the world a better place. The chaos of that method just isn't enough.

The authors Daloz, Keen, Keen and Parks, say there is no "Gandhi pill" but a combination of complex experiences increase the likelihood that people will devote their lives to the common good. Growing up in a loving home, at least one parent who works actively for the public good, opportunities for service during adolescence, cross-cultural experience, and a good mentoring experience in young adulthood can significantly influence a commitment to the common good. They also said that they found *constructive engagement with otherness* to be the single most critical element. That is, important encounters with others significantly different from themselves. Not surface interaction but meaningful encounters.

I think our religious education programs contain a significant number of those elements. The week of September 11, our congregation reached out and began developing a relationship with an Islamic Center in our area. We have been visiting each other's congregations. The first weeks the adults did the visiting back and forth. We have been doing the Neighboring Faith curriculum so, in January, our 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders went to visit the Mosque. More recently we invited a multi-age group to visit us for a Peace and Friendship Sunday. This growing friendship has opened and warmed the hearts of the whole congregation creating a space for healing and hope.

Our Coming of Age candidates and Senior Youth Group go on a service field trip to the Youth Service Opportunities Program (YSOP) in New York City. YSOP is run by the Quakers. Our youth from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades go into the City on Friday evening and receive an orientation. On Saturday morning they go to various social support agencies like homeless shelters and soup kitchens. They serve meals and are then encouraged to sit, have lunch with and talk to the people they have just served. It is a program that touches our youth in a deep place. They come home feeling transformed by the experience. They don't look at homeless people the same way and they understand something of what it means to live on the streets and have to depend on fragile systems for daily sustenance. These are two rich examples of constructive engagement with otherness.

I heard it preached recently, that the mission of the church is the salvation of the world. What a challenging charge! But, is it not true that that is what the church has been about since the apostles received the call to go out and evangelize the world. We may have a different understanding of what salvation looks like and how we go about achieving it. But really, do we not develop congregational mission statements that would transform and save the world?

Don't most of them call for stamping out racism, homophobia and all forms of oppression such as sexism, ableism, and ageism, working for world peace, ending hunger, child labor, and the modern day slave trade? That is a tall order. While we can and should laugh at ourselves for setting our sights so high it doesn't mean we should therefore be defeatist and cynical. Margaret Mead wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

I heard a radio report about recent attempts of The Arian Nation, to start a community in Pennsylvania. One man, who used to belong to such a group, and now speaks out against them, told his story. He left when the Clan urged him to save the purity of the race by killing his disabled son. He said that he was recruited into the Clan. People came up to him and asked him if he wanted to be a man and they would make him one. We know it is the same draw gangs have for young people. We have such a huge human need to belong, to be loved that ironically we are willing to destroy others and ourselves in the process of finding that belonging.

Think of it, the Arian Nation, Islamic extremists, criminal gangs are out there actively recruiting young people into their ranks. While we have Coming of Age programs that help our young people find their identity and purpose within our communities, who is out there recruiting young people to be part of the common good? Who is inviting young people into adulthood, to be part of a powerful force for self-esteem, love and belonging? Could that part of our mission too? Is it possible to make the personal and institutional sacrifices for the salvation of the world? It takes a balance of hubris and humility to effect transformation. I used to think that of the two, humility was the virtue, but when you imagine yourself making a difference, living the mission also takes chutzpa.

I have a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King in my office. I wish I could affect the world the way he did. I'm pretty sure I have about as much chance for that as I do for winning the afore mentioned Olympic Gold. That doesn't mean I can't use his life to challenge my own.

Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* a model for social transformation. He starts by asking us to think about an issue to which we have a personal connection, an issue we feel passionate about. What in the world needs attention that we care deeply about? There is a listening to the inside that needs to take place. Then there is a listening on the outside. That is, listening to those directly affected by the issue just identified. This allows we, who are not of that community, to contribute to change without being paternalistic. We must listen and learn. After we are sensitive to the community and understand the issue, we make a plan and go into action. After the action come reflection and evaluation. Finally, it is time to celebrate our efforts successful or not. All these steps are vital and circle back on themselves to keep the transformation moving forward.

I think of our Green Sanctuary Committee. Last year the Board and then the whole congregation, voted to pursue becoming more environmentally sound. First the Committee learned what it meant to become a Green Sanctuary congregation. An issue close to the hearts of those on the Committee, something they are passionate about. They must be because they added yet another meeting to their busy schedules and are doing the work though they may face adversity when they ask the congregation to make some physical and financial sacrifices. They are now doing various assessments. PG&E came in to make an energy assessment. They looked at how we light our building. We just got a report that recommends changing our lighting system. The report tells how much it costs, how much PG&E will contribute to that cost and how

long it will take to recoup the balance. Not long. Then we continue to save electricity and money and reduce our impact on the environment. Such a deal! I think these people deserve a standing ovation.

It is not the salvation of the world, but it is a small group of committed people making their contribution to our community and to the world.

It is critical to celebrate our success. It lets the church community know they are making progress on things they have decided to act upon, the community is conscious of living up to its mission and it helps the congregation build an identity as a people who care about and work to save our planet.

Let's be honest and realistic. We cannot long sustain the effort without enjoying the work, the people, and the satisfaction of a job well done.

Frederick Buechner has written, "The place God calls you to is the place where your heart's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The heart's deep gladness, the heart's deep gladness. We need to find that place. The heart's deep gladness is similar to Freire's point of personal passion just nuanced a little differently. We know that the world is hungry. There is so much need, an overwhelming amount of need really. But to find that sweet spot where the gladness and the hunger meet, that's the good stuff. As Emerson said, listen lowly to find that place. It takes spiritual practice and encouragement from those who love us, to find it. It takes courage, spiritual discipline, and Sabbath to maintain it.

Spiritual practice is vital to capturing the source of inner guidance, of listening lowly, to find what exists for us all. The call to life, to love, to the Source. Prayer, meditation, art, dance, poetry are not self-indulgent navel gazing, but disciplines that can be as rigorous as any physical training program. They seek to diminish the distance between the spiritual and physical; the inner knowledge of the good and our ability to follow through and act on that knowledge. The practice becomes the resource we draw upon to help us live up to our highest selves.

While contributing to the common good needs to be part of a well-balanced life for us all, most people will not make the salvation of the world their life's work. What then does the daring adventure mean? I'm convinced it means being the author of our own lives. That we once we find the inner knowledge of the good, we then find the freedom and courage to live a life based on our convictions. Many people talk about writing a great novel. What about becoming the author of our own lives. That is the greatest story we will ever write. The methods we have already identified will serve us here too. Listening lowly, finding the personal passion, the deep gladness. Then finding a community of people who nurture and challenge us to act on our convictions and forgive us when we don't. A community that celebrates with us, our successes.

For eight years my spiritual life was nurtured by being part of a dream group. I attended a weeklong UU summer camp in 1992. The theme speaker was dreamworker and Unitarian Universalist minister, Jeremy Taylor. It wasn't the first time I'd heard him speak about his life and how dreamwork integrated his spiritual life, his work and his politics.

As I prepared for ministry, I felt I need some form of spiritual practice. So, I called my friends together and asked if they wanted to pursue this work.

They agreed, and over the years this group became my spiritual home. Something like the covenant groups we have begun in our congregations. We shared our most intimate thoughts and feelings, held our lives up to each other for scrutiny. We gave each other the power to hold one another accountable to the insights that came from the work. We supported each other through numerous tragedies, failures and disappointments and cheered and celebrated each other's triumphs. We were aunts and uncles to each other's children. We could laugh and cry, pray and hug. That sense of community and spirituality fed us, grew us and prepared us for going out into the world to do our work.

Do we always listen lowly, find the deep gladness, and respond accordingly? Of course not. Gandhi says, "My imperfections and failures are as much a blessing from God as my successes and my talents and I lay them both at (God's) feet"

When self-doubt consumes my mind I think about Nelson Mandel's inaugural speech in which he stated, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually who are you not to be? You are a child of God! Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that the other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us: It's in everyone. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

What is the outcome of taking the daring adventure and living our personal and collective missions? Unfortunately there are no guarantees of security. It may be scary, we may be fearful, but we have to do it anyway. We cannot not do it. Not to live the mission is certain spiritual and planetary death. Do we get it right all the time because we listen lowly, have a spiritual practice, and pure motives? No, but ironically, many gifts come through our inadequacies. We certainly receive the gift of compassion when we measure our lives against some standard of perfection. And from compassion come forgiveness and love, the greatest forces in the universe.

I guess I do promise excitement, challenge, a thrill a minute, good company, a full heart, and a fulfilled soul. And that's not a bad guarantee.

The judge has begun the count down. The skies are sliding back and forth, back and forth over the hard, icy snow. When the moment of decision comes will you, will we, go through the gate and start tearing down the hill? What is holding you back? Get rid of it. This is our chance to make a difference, to be a link, a strong link in the fabric of wholeness.

When our deep gladness meets the world deep hunger, the mind and soul catch fire.

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