



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***Moved by The Spirit***

*By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

*Sunday, September 20, 2020*

Sometime ago I shared with you how I was moved to suddenly stop the car in Yellowstone National Park and jump into the glacier lake at about the same time as my father was having a heart attack swimming in a pond in MA. I haven't tried to make a connection between these events other than to mention the synchronicity of the moment. I felt compelled, deeply moved, to jump into an ice-cold lake – I am not normally an impulsive man – at the same moment my father was drawing his last breath, 2000 miles away swimming in a pond. Was it his spirit reaching out to me? Was it some sort of atomic kinetic connection? Or just a coincidence? Part of the mystic in me wants to say “who cares?” the point is we were connected somehow in ways that will likely always be a mystery until such a time as I pierce the veil of knowing between this world and the next. The point for me was that I was being moved by a spirit far greater than my own, and strangely, even though that was the moment my father died, I felt a cleansing rising from that lake, a renewal in myself, I haven't felt in years.

What moves any of us to brave the elements, relationships or the unknown for a cause we can't fully explain? What moves us to keep on going even in such dire times as these? Catherine Keller in marvelous book On the Mystery talks about being “lured to the Divine” (a take on Alfred North Whitehead's phrase). She writes that God has in mind for us a “cosmic appetite for becoming”, lured by the possibility that there is something more to life than just getting by, we respond with prayer, tears, even anger. And in that response, just that passionate response asking “why!?” we are participating in the spirit, in com-passion. To walk with passion, even in midst of this apocalypse perhaps especially because of the apocalypse. I can't tell you why I jumped into that lake, but I can tell you I am very happy I did, even if it was somehow connected to my father's dying.

I like to think my decision to suddenly jump into that lake was a luring, seductive and passionate in a deeply spiritual sense into a connection that I didn't imagine existed before. I can tell you this: that swimming moment has created a bond between my father and I which is surprising me still. We weren't very close towards the end of his life; suddenly I find myself remembering him with more passion and love than I thought

possible. Is there a spirit at work deep within me, deep within any of us, the lures us out of our mediocrity and asks us to consider possibilities beyond the obvious?

I believe there is. I believe that we can imagine more purpose and meaning to the so-called coincidences of our lives; you think of someone and the phone rings and it is her. You talk with someone who has been lonely and not able to make a change, and suddenly they meet that certain someone.

Are you moved by the Spirit? The beauty and mystery of our lives as UU's is that we have the power to find meaning in our lives free of the normal strictures of dogma and creed. For some that meaning may be that there are many paths to the Holy, which beneath our diversity is there, is a unity that makes us, in spite of time and death and the space between the stars. For many of us we are moved by the knowledge that there is no wrong way to love, and no wrong way to discover what is holy in your life, like so many spokes on a wheel. What truly moves us is the experience of the transcendent. Soaring music, brilliant words, a glorious green leaping of a day. The acts of compassion and hope. And here is the kicker: The transcendent doesn't need to involve a God. Mystery yes, but God is optional. It's our experience not the proof of our experience.

Why is it that we feel the need to disprove the possibility that we can be moved by something as ethereal as the spirit? I have been preaching about why it is so important to go through the storms of our lives to achieve spiritual strength and renewal. There is something deeply cleansing and renewing about having passed through our troubles. Like rain falling on a wildfire, the clear sky after a storm, even the dream of a new day in America and our broken world.

As I explained we gathered as a large family on the shores of our island home and bade farewell to my father's spirit as we spread his ashes upon the sea. After the ceremony, my brother and I sat on stones near the shore. We were never very close; he values a certain rationality and tidiness to life; I tend to be more emotive and free ranging. But at the moment we were sharing the power of having left our childhood issues behind and we were moving in the same wind. It hadn't been easy for us.

My brother almost drowned when I was eight years old and I thought it was my fault because my mother had told me to keep an eye on him. It kept me distant from him for thirty years until I realized that my mother had no right putting an eight-year-old playing with his friends in charge of a toddler near a pond. We had come a long way from that guilt. We were both alive for one thing. On that rock God was between us. "We should talk more bro" my brother said to me. I wanted to say, you are the one that never returns my phone calls, but the spirit held my tongue. "Yes, at least once a week" I said, "I will try

to call you but if I forget you call me, ok?” He stared out over the ocean for a minute, “yeah, yeah, we can do that.” I don’t know if we ever will to tell you the truth. My life, like your lives, is so full to the top and spilling over most days, I can’t remember to pick up the phone and ring him up. But I have twice in the last month. Was it the death of our parents or something else that drives us to re-connect? What moves us to re-connect? The path to a renewal of the spirit always involves pain. Follow the Pain, a Trappist monk told me recently on retreat. Follow the pain, of the loss of the ones I loved, follow the pain of the breakdown in families, follow the pain of this pandemic, this election, this recession this burning world. Follow the pain out to the other side.

I have realized over these last several months is that part of what moves us is the discipline of practice. It’s not always passion which carries us through the day; more often than not it’s a practice, a spiritual practice that helps us find greater meaning, which provides the room for passion to take hold. You go to a worship service you had longed rejected and find yourself suddenly crying at the old hymns and the rote prayers. Why? Because the only path beyond our troubles is through them and sometimes we need to go backwards in order to go forwards.

As the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield puts it “after the ecstasy the laundry.” We are moved initially by passions and the need to get through our struggles, but we have to re-enforce that movement with practice. Calling my brother once a week is a spiritual practice. Writing every day is a spiritual practice. Walking, cooking, loving, and singing, are all spiritual practices that in the sureness of their occurrence can create moments when the spirit actually moves you. And you may be surprised when it happens. You may not even know you are through the storm, moved by the spirit until you look up.

One day a young Buddhist on his journey home came to the banks of a wide river. Staring hopelessly at the great obstacle in front of him, he pondered for hours on just how to cross such a wide barrier. Just as he was about to give up his pursuit to continue his journey he saw a great teacher on the other side of the river. The young Buddhist yells over to the teacher, “Oh wise one, can you tell me how to get to the other side of this river?” The teacher ponders for a moment looks up and down the river and yells back, “My son, you are on the other side.” When I held my brother at our goodbye, and told him I would see him soon, I realized how much we both had moved in the wake of our storm. We were already on the other side.

I have been an atheist, a Buddhist, a Christian, a mystic, an enchanted agnostic, and as I moved from one perspective in my faith journey to the next I realized that they are really all pretty much the same. The spirit moves me to be compassionate, just and honest. I

have left behind the worry I am going to hell; life is hell enough. I have left behind the worry I am going to heaven; life can be heaven enough as well. Gone, really for me, is the need to argue about the existence of God or even the validity of the Trinity. I have decided that at the end of the day what matters most, is love and other people. That is where the spirit moves me. In short, the Spirit moves me towards a unity that binds us all. The principle we live by that all life is interconnected. That is what matters most to me. All the rest is just the means to an end. I know that prayer moves many to a place of solace and peace. I know that for many the personal relationship with Jesus as a son of God, makes the divine accessible in their lives. I know the bible contains both wonderful truths and horrible prescriptions. The kind of beliefs we have are really only useful if they move you to becoming a whole person, capable of loving and being loved. This is what I have learned from going through so many storms and from living the religious life. As Bill Schultz, my colleague, friend, past president of the UUA and recent past Director of Amnesty International put it: "The (spirit) yearns to be felt and it begs to be lived. This is the supreme paradox of spirituality: it can almost never be captured but it can always be seen." This from a man who has personally witnessed hundreds of cases of torture the world over.

"There is a unity that binds us together, a unity that binds us" (David Bumbaugh) and yet moves each of us slightly differently. The paradox of being one and many. Above all else, may the spirit move us to stay together, in this church, to use it as a launching pad out into the world, to where the spirit needs us most. Blessed be!