

“What the Bleep Do We Do?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
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At All Souls Unitarian Church

If there were a child trapped in a well, as in Rachel Naomi Remen’s story from our second reading, and you could help, I know you would. I have no doubt that you’d help. You wouldn’t ask: “What race is the child?” or, “Who are the parents of the child?” The reason is that when a child is trapped in a well, we all know the importance of his or her life. You and I also know that if we were to become trapped in a well, others would be there for us. They wouldn’t ask first, “What religion is he or she?” They wouldn’t ask if we qualified for their assistance. The reality of all of this speaks to something significant about our lives and about our deep connection with all people.

However, as we expand the circumstances of need out from the well... Well, it begins to get more complicated. Questions arise like “How can we really help?” “What true difference can we really make?” Poet Mike Blumenthal has said:

*There is a voice inside the body.
There is a voice and a music,
A throbbing, four chambered pear that wants to be heard.
That sits alone by the river with its mandolin and its torn coat,
And sings for whomever will listen
A song that no one wants to hear.
But sometimes, lost, on his way to somewhere significant,
A man in a long coat, carrying a briefcase, wanders into the forest.
He hears the voice and the mandolin,
He sees the thrush and the dandelion,
And he feels the mist rise over the river.
And his life is never the same,
For this having been lost –
For having strayed from the path of his routine, for no good reason.*

I share this poem because today I’m taking you into the forest. And if you listen, really listen, your life may never be the same.

Taking this path into the forest requires an introduction. I need you to become acquainted with Horace. Horace is a really inspiring person, even if he was born almost 200 years ago. I'm not sure what religion he was brought up, but as a young adult Horace became a Unitarian. It was the early 19th Century in Boston and he was captivated by the theology of Unitarian Minister William Ellery Channing. Channing's sermons focused on the possibility for goodness that exists in all people. Horace believed in the potential of all people and he went on to become the founder of public education in America. Horace Mann knew that education was essential to a healthy democracy.

In the mid-19th Century, public education as we know it did not exist. Churches provided some education and parents who could afford it sent their children to private academies. In cities, like Boston, many children were growing up in poorhouses or tenements or shacks with no schooling at all. With the help of the Massachusetts legislature, Horace Mann was able to establish schools that were paid for by the taxes of the citizenry.

By the end of the 19th Century, public education had spread to every state in the Union and it became an integral part of the American heritage. Of course, life was different in that era and it required an expanding of the democratic vision before public education became the right of more than just white males of privilege.

But American democracy and its vision have continually expanded. Many of our lives have been shaped in some way by public education. Unitarians have always been supporters of education and a strong democracy.

If I were to share all the ways that members of this church have helped shape public education in Tulsa, it would take up the rest of this morning's service. Some of the highlights would include: the critical role All Souls played in the integration of schools in Tulsa; the help in the development of the magnet school system; and in 1993, we became the first church in the city to become a Partner in Education when we adopted Jackson Elementary School. At the time, Jackson was the poorest performing elementary school in the city. Volunteers from the church were organized by our Children's Advocacy Team, and they quickly realized that low test scores were just a symptom of a much larger set of problems. When children's basic needs are not being

met it's hard for them to learn. So, the Children's Advocacy Team organized assistance on many levels for the school and community.

All Souls members have played a critical role in getting the school off the "At Risk" list and I recently read that the test scores have risen to an impressive 87% passing rate. Isn't that great! That's the good news.

The problem is that these students feed into Hamilton Middle School, and we've recently learned that Hamilton only has a 17% passing rate. Most of the children at Hamilton come from families that are living at what is considered below the poverty line. They include kids from housing projects, many single parent homes, and many of these families are struggling to put food on the table and clothes on their children's backs. Obviously, there's not much extra money for tutoring or extra-curricular activities.

The school is in what is called the "Dawson area", which has been depressed and has fallen through the cracks when it comes to community services. Part of the problem is that it's not on the east side or the north side. It is a pie-shaped district around the airport. I guess you can say it's shaped like a well. Only 17 out of 100 children are passing. It's not so much that the children are failing the system, it's our society and the system that are failing these children. Every one of these children matter and they deserve better opportunities. That's where you and I come in.

As awful and hopeless as this situation may sound, a number of things have happened recently that have created an astonishing convergence of opportunity, necessity and possibility. One of the best things that has happened is that Carla Westbrook has been hired as the new principal. She was recruited from outside the system for her success in turning around inner-city middle schools. When she arrived last fall, she had only a handful of effective teachers and a building filled with 600 angry students, most of whom were failing.

Students are still showing up for school without pens or pencils or paper or notebooks to write in. The school doesn't even have feminine hygiene products for the girls, so teachers like Johnie Curley and Pat Lee are running out on their lunch break to Walgreens to buy them for their students.

They haven't had a school assembly or any enrichment programs in years.

Why does this make you and me so mad? It's because these children are being demeaned. And, to put it in religious language, it's happening due to mismanagement of the resources God has given us. Because we live in a land of abundance, and we have enough pens, paper and tampons in Tulsa to go around. What we lack is the political will and the leadership to give these children what they rightly deserve.

So, good people like you and I try to go about our lives, making a difference where we think we can, but knowing that we live in a society in which children face daily dehumanization due to a failure of management and leadership. But as we go through our days, there's a voice inside our body.

A voice and a music pulsating in our hearts

that desperately wants to be heard.

But most days it sits alone by the river with its mandolin and its torn coat,

Singing for whomever will listen, this song that no one wants to hear.

But occasionally we wander into the forest and hear the voice and the mandolin.

Welcome to the forest!

If you listen, your life may be forever changed.

I am about to invite you to join me to do battle with the gods; the false gods that dominate our society and community and culture; the gods that blind us from the reality of hope and possibility that surround us. I'm inviting you to join us in creating an alternative future. I'm inviting you to help us challenge the conventional wisdom of our times. Is that not what Jesus and the prophets have instructed us to do? If it were left to me alone I don't know that I would even try. I'd probably continue to tune out that sad song in my heart. It's too depressing – it's almost debilitating. I'm afraid I'd get lost in the forest all by myself. And that's why I've brought you with me this morning. To this special spot where three rivers have converged. It is here that the river of necessity, the river of opportunity and the river of possibility have all merged. From here we can see those children from Hamilton on the other bank. They have dreams and hopes that are being washed down the river. And you and I have what it takes to build a bridge to get them to the other side.

Here's why I'm so confident that we can do it. Listen to who's already involved from our church. Herb Beattie, who has been the chief fundraiser and major catalyst for our Jackson Elementary school partnership, is one of the chief organizers. Nancy McDonald, the former Tulsa Public School volunteer coordinator, is also one of the key organizers behind this. They have gotten Chip McElroy and McElroy Manufacturing involved, and Chip and his employees have already added a great deal of leadership and have gotten other manufacturing companies in the neighborhood to support it.

John Jacobs, the executive director of Big Brothers and Sisters of Tulsa, is involved and has committed his organization to help train mentors. John Selph, the CEO of Volunteers for America in Oklahoma, has gotten his organization behind this effort. Aneta Wilkinson, the Oklahoma Commissioner of Human Resources, is involved. Jim Walker, the Executive Director of Youth Services of Tulsa, is helping. Phil Dessauer, the head of the Community Service Council, is committed. Laura Hailey Butler is representing the YMCA. And so far I'm just listing the All Souls members. They have joined with experienced leaders like Su Waner and others in our highly successful Children's Advocacy Team and Kathy Keith, All Souls Lifespan Religious Education Director. And they already have the local Neighborhood Association on board. The Tulsa Zoo, Campfire, Planned Parenthood, the libraries, Oklahoma State University, Tulsa Community College and the Police Department are prepared to help. I have also gotten the commitment of the two other Unitarian Churches in Tulsa. As you can see this effort is building and there is already support from corporate partners, non-profits, churches, universities, government agencies and the school and community itself. We've already begun to be a catalyst for change at Tulsa's poorest and lowest-performing middle school.

But if we are going to do this right, it cannot just be delegated to the leaders of our Children's Advocacy Team. I'm asking for your support to make this a church-wide effort. There will be many ways to support this incredibly hopeful project, many ways you can support these beautiful children. The first will be on March 6, which is two Sundays from today. It addresses the first of three tiers of support that we have planned. This first tier includes basic necessities like pens, pencils, paper, folders and other school supplies and personal hygiene products. In that vein, in two weeks (on

March 6th) we will have a special collection as part of the worship service in this sanctuary. I need you to bring in supplies for this unique offering. We will be wheeling some red wagons down the aisle to collect them all. Our children will be in the sanctuary that Sunday and they will also be bringing donations. I want those wagons overflowing.

With this first effort, we're going to show the children at Hamilton that they matter to us and we're going to show our own children something about creating change.

We're going to follow up with enrichment programs and their first all-school assembly in years. And we will soon need people to volunteer to be mentors and tutors. It is going to take all of us to turn around one of Tulsa's toughest schools. But I know we can do it and it will give courage and hope to others to do the same. A list of what is needed will be in the upcoming Parish Notes newsletter and in next week's order of service.

We will also have a form in the orders of service on March 6th for you to check off options of how you'd like to support this life-saving effort.

Today, there's a desperate need in our city for people with open minds, strong values, and compassionate hearts to help create educational environments where all children can flourish. One of Horace Mann's hopes was that public schools would become a counterbalance for the limitations of local opinions and family circumstances. This is the work of prevention. We can help prevent these children from failing and build their self-esteem. As we know, teenagers who feel they have no future look for other avenues to build self-esteem. They often turn to crime, pregnancy and gangs to find it. Let's help them build self-esteem through the classroom and after-school activities, through quality enrichment programs, so that they can identify their unique talents and skills and interests.

As you can see by all the organization, this is not some form of charity. It's about turning a public problem into a catalyst for social solidarity. It's as much about changing our lives as it is about the students and their families. It's about uprooting and replacing a demoralizing status quo that we are a part of. Jesus and the prophets focused on the margins of society. They were particularly concerned with suffering, injustice, and the poor. In the face of dehumanizing structures, I'm asking us not just to have hope, but to

embody hope. Help us demonstrate to Tulsa that creating an alternative future is possible. Let us ensure that Hamilton Middle School is not a well down which unfortunate children fall and lose their lives. Let us join forces to turn it into a nursery for their dreams. And let us redeem their future and our own.
Amen.