

# “Guess Who’s Watching?”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, July 19, 2009

We were driving down the road the other day. It was me, my wife, and my two children (a six-month-old and an eight-year-old.) It was 80 degrees and sunny in Massachusetts, and we were heading for a few relaxing days at the beach. We were talking, laughing, singing, and doing all the things a family does on a four-hour road trip on a summer afternoon. There were three lanes on the highway and we were going 65 miles an hour, when I heard a rumbling noise and the car began to shake. I started to steer toward the apron when one of the back tires blew out, sending us skidding sideways at very high speed toward the guardrail. When I steered away from it the car started spinning out of control. As we spun around and around, I was waiting for the impact of another car to smash into us at 65 miles an hour. If you have been in one of these situations you know how many thoughts go through your mind in a very short amount of time. I thought one or both of my children might die or be paralyzed. Or me, or my wife. The horrifying sounds of my wife and son’s hysterical screams from the backseat will haunt me for a long time.

I was reminded once again, that *everything can change in an instant*. Everything! Fortunately we landed safely, without being hit or going off the road. When the Massachusetts State Policeman finally arrived, his eyes turned immediately to the three black tire tracks that stretched and swirled a few hundred yards down the highway. And he said he was glad to see we were all in one piece. We squeezed our children and started to cry; we were shaken – both physically and emotionally. Suddenly, nothing else mattered very much, except that my family was safe. It caused me to re-evaluate and reassess my life and my priorities. I thought to myself later, “If I had died on the road that day, am I in right relationship with the people I care about most, including you, the members of my congregation?”

To understand the extent of the effect this had on me, it is important to give you a sense of my state of mind before the accident. I had just come from a week at the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists. It is quite a scene with over 4000 UUs from all over North America and around the world. While there, I received a lot of thanks and appreciation directed to all of us, for many of the things we are doing here in Tulsa that are rippling out across the UU universe. The three books we have published through our Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press have sold thousands of copies and are being read and having an impact on churches and people across the country. The video curriculum we created a few years ago called *Our American Roots* is being used in about 500 congregations to introduce Unitarian Universalism to newcomers. Replicas of our

Simple Gifts painting are hanging in a few hundred churches, ministers have developed worship services utilizing it, and at least one religious educator has created a curriculum based on it. One of my mentors in ministry, Rev. John Gibbons, came up to me and explained that he was asked last month to give a presentation to the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, many of whom are not UUs, to explain who and what Unitarian Universalism is. He told me he used the painting to do it, because he could think of no better way to communicate who we are to people who don't know anything about us.

Our theme-based ministry approach, where we have themes for each month used in children's Sunday school and throughout the life of the church, which is something we have developed here at All Souls over the past eight years combining the talents of our ministers, staff and lay leaders, is being taken up by dozens of our strongest churches here in America. Our Soulful Sundown services are being replicated in many congregations. And people are watching our sermons on you-tube, and listening to our pod-casts, even far across the globe. The feature article in the Fall edition of the *UU World Magazine*, which is distributed to a few hundred thousand readers nationally and internationally, will tell the story of our church's experience of coming together with New Dimensions and our creating two distinct worship styles on Sunday morning. One church historian I talked to even said to me, "What you are doing in Tulsa has the potential to be the most significant movement in Unitarian Universalism since Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century."

As you can imagine, this is heady stuff! We are now the largest UU church in the world. And what we are doing, collectively, is having an impressive impact far beyond our walls. So I was feeling really good about myself and this church. That is, until my family and I had a brush with death, and my mind was changed. In the midst of all the attention on a national level there were moments when, I must admit, I started having some of what psychologists call, "delusions of grandeur." Like some other people I know, my ego is susceptible to flights-of-fancy and there is nothing my ego likes more, than to feel like it is in the driver's seat.

One of my favorite stories from General Assembly, came from a young woman who said to me, "Your sermons are reaching people in ways you could never imagine." She said, "I was listening to your recent sermon *Why Atheists Go to Church* while running on the treadmill in the gym the other day. And when it came to the end, I broke out sobbing, because I am a humanist, and I had never heard anyone describe a humanistic perspective in such a freeing way that erased the usual battle lines and made room for so many people to feel included." She said when she burst out crying, the man on the treadmill next to her, whom she had never met, turned to her and asked if she was okay. So she proceeded to tell him about what she was listening to,

and the man asked if he could hear it. She passed him her IPOD, and when it was over, he reached his sweaty hand into his bag to get a pen to write down the name and website of our church! (It still amazes me that anyone would workout to one of my sermons... I figured they're better used to help people fall asleep.)

Nevertheless, when our ego gets into the driver's seat, our lives and relationships are likely to spin out of control, just like that Subaru I was driving to the beach. My point is, after my experience on the road of realizing how quickly everything can change, and how suddenly and unexpectedly death can come, like a thief in the night, I began to re-evaluate my priorities and relationships and what I want to do and who I want to serve. It is a good exercise for all of us to do once in awhile, preferably before an accident or a diagnosis prompts us. Here are a couple of the questions I realized are important. If I had died that day...

Have I said what I need to say to the people I care about most?

Have I heard from those people, the things they want me to know and understand about them?

We live in the illusion that we have time to make amends, to say *I'm sorry* or *I love you*, or to ask for, or grant someone, forgiveness. But as the spiritual says, "Nobody knows at sunrise, how this day is going to end. Nobody knows at sunset if the next day will begin." That is why we need to do our best everyday to be sure we do not have unfinished business. We will always have ongoing projects, but we should not have unfinished business with those we love. The other question is: are you living your life in a way that if you died today you would feel proud of who you are and who you have been?

In the kind of religion that most of us left behind, there was this idea that God was like Santa Claus. (He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.) But once we have given up that idea of God as some cosmic peeping Tom, then to whom do we hold ourselves accountable? To whom or what do you hold yourself accountable? If you think no one is watching, and you think that you cannot get caught, are there things you are doing that you would never do if you knew others would find out?

When someone dies and their survivors go through their affects, they sometimes discover things about their loved one they didn't know. Sometimes they learn that the person who died won a medal for bravery in WWII but never told anyone. But other times, families discover a secret life of promiscuity, or financial mismanagement, or addiction. Sometimes when a person dies suddenly, they don't have time to delete all the raunchy porn files off their computer, or take the bottle of booze out of its hiding place in the closet.

Occasionally I teach a seminary course at Meadville Lombard Theological School. One of the points I make to aspiring ministers is, that if they have any secret behaviors that no one else (whom they respect) knows about, it is a problem they need to address before taking on a role of leadership. But it is not just true for ministers, it applies to everyone. It usually starts with one secret and turns into a web of lies and a shroud of shame. A housewife decides one day to try one of her son's stimulants that he takes for ADD to give her a little extra boost to get thru a day of house-cleaning, and eventually it becomes a secret habit. Or someone decides to keep taking the painkillers they got after having shoulder surgery and they realize that with a little wine it feels pretty good and soon they are hooked. Someone else begins to gamble their children's college fund, and loses a little, and then starts to try to win it back by using a little more of the fund, and we know where that leads. Or a husband decides to go to a dance club or a strip club, on his own. one time when he's on a business trip, and after a few more trips he find himself hiring prostitutes.

This is not the problem of a few weak unfortunate people; it is also the downfall of the best and the brightest. It has affected presidents and prime ministers and professors, politicians and priests, judges and psychologists. It cuts across class and race and religion and ruins people's lives, families and reputations. If you have any secret behaviors that you do, and that no one else you respect knows you do, then I suggest you tell someone and get some help before it is too late. There is plenty of love and help and grace available, but only if we reach for it in time.

Can your life stand the test of transparency? One of the ways that I have learned to maintain accountability, is that ever since I was in seminary I have created wherever I have lived, a small group of people (in my case men) who meet regularly and with whom I can (and do) share everything. I encourage all interns, seminarians and ministers to do the same. I think it is good for everyone to have someone (or a group) with whom we can share our deepest thoughts, desires, worries and shame. Someone said to me just recently that his dad told him, "When you get married, it's not as if other women suddenly stop looking pretty to you... in fact, sometimes they start looking prettier..." The politicians and judges and others we keep reading about lately, with their affairs, and their addictions, would have been a lot better off if they had such a group to support them to make better choices before they disgraced themselves and their families. In my roadside reflection about sudden death, I was glad I could feel good that if I died at least I have been living my life in a way that I can be proud of. It is a worthy goal for all of us, and it is a journey upon which we need others to join us.

Now, the title of this message is: *Guess Who's Watching*. And the point of this sermon is: *it should not matter*. It should not matter whether there is a God spying on us and judging us at

every moment. We need to live our lives in such a way that we can look our children and other loved ones in the eyes, at any time, and feel good that we have integrity. We need to live in ways that are consistent with what we hold most dear. That does not mean we are perfect. Nor are we beyond the trappings and temptations that have been the downfall of humans from time immemorial. It means that we strive together, to prop each other up when we are down. And we love each other enough to be honest and to be forgiving.

Regarding the church, it does not matter who is watching us, around the country and throughout the world. We need to do what is right regardless of what others might think or say. Our job as individuals is to be the best person we can be in private and in public. And our job as a church is to be the best church we can be, right here in Tulsa. Let us give thanks that we have children to raise and elders to care for and who care for us. My friends, this is the day we have been given, let us rejoice and be glad in it! As Rev. Forrest Church says in his book *Love and Death*, "Death may come as a thief in the night, but it cannot steal from you the love you've given away." Because love that is given can never die, it goes on eternally. And indeed, "Love is the spirit of this church."

Here is what I want you to know. After re-evaluating my life and who I want to serve, I hope and pray that I will serve this church, with this incredible ministry team, for a long, long time to come. It is the most fun and meaningful work I have ever done. All Souls is a true community, in a world where real communities are dying out. We are people of many generations, living generative lives, who are making a positive difference. There is no place like home... and All Souls in Tulsa is my home. And after all we have been through in our years together, there are no people I care about more than those of you who have chosen to mingle with mine, your lives and your families and your ministries. So, no matter how or when I die, I want you to know how much I love you.

It is great to be home!