

# Armorless in a Jurassic World

June 21, 2015

1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

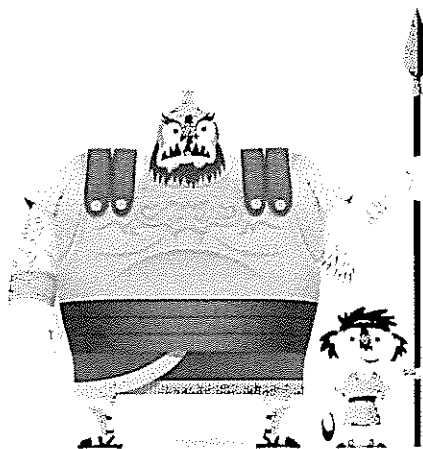
1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

Job 38:1-11

Psalms 9:9-20

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41



Barbara was out walking with her 4 year old daughter, Sarah. As her personality was becoming more pronounced the name Sarah was being replaced on a common daily basis with Sally. Sally picked up something off the ground and started to put it into her mouth. Barbara took it away and said “Don’t do that!”

“Why not?” asked Sally.

“Because it’s on the ground. You don’t know where it’s been. It’s dirty, and it’s probably loaded with germs that could make you sick.”

Sally looked at her mom with total admiration and said, “Mommy, how do you know all this stuff? You’re so smart.”

The mother said, “All Moms know this stuff. It’s on the Mom’s Test. You have to know it or they don’t let you be a Mom.”

There was silence for a minute or so as Sally ruminated on this. Then she broke the silence and offered, “Oh, I get it, and if you don’t pass the test you have to be the Daddy?”<sup>1</sup>

Welcome on this Father’s Day, 2015. Someone made a short editorial note in the paper that reads, “Father’s Day is like Mother’s Day, except the gift is cheaper.” Well, we could spend our time looking at Fathers that are needed in our world today, but we’ve got lots of things in front of us. We have this marvelous story about David and Goliath, the New

Testament scene of Jesus asleep in the stern of a boat – both stories carrying seeds for ways we might handle fear, we’ve got high school students receiving Bibles today and looking forward to their graduation ceremonies next Saturday and as always we have world events swirling that demand some kind of response from people of faith.

If there is any story in the Bible that seems as if it is a male-bonding type of narrative it seems to me that we’d have to go a long way before finding one better than the account of David and Goliath. After all, it’s got a lot of those things in it that guys are traditionally supposed to like - competition, violence, heroism.

We might summarize what we see in the story of David and Goliath by saying. **David can beat Goliath by substituting effort for ability—and substituting effort for ability turns out to be a winning formula for underdogs in all walks of life. We might also say that relying on the tools that God provides us and trusting in God will go a long way to helping us overcoming our fears and being successful.**

“The Lord who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine,” David said. David had something to teach Saul and his army. He called on the name of the Lord “something no one else in camp had apparently thought to do.

<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado. *In The Eye Of The Storm*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), pp. 201-202.

## **DAVID WOULD NOT GO INTO BATTLE ALONE, BECAUSE GOD WOULD BE WITH HIM.**

It's like a certain father who listened as his son told him about his first serious conflict at school. He had been picked on by three bullies who punched him and knocked him off his bike as he was riding home. These bullies had made life difficult for the boy, and he told his father that they threatened to do more harm the next morning and as he told his Dad about it, he was afraid for the next morning and he didn't know what to do.

That evening the father taught his son some basic techniques on how to defend himself. Together they explored all the possibilities, including the possibility that he might try to win them over as friends. The father worked hard to build up his son's self-confidence. The next morning the father and son prayed together. And with a reassuring embrace and a handshake, the father smiled confidently and said, "You can do it, son. I know you'll make out all right."

With that assurance the boy got on his bike and rode off to school. What the son did not know was that his father followed him in the car that day. He stayed just far enough behind to remain out of sight, but close enough to come to his son's assistance if needed. If there was trouble the father would be there. The son might have thought he was all alone, but his father was behind him all the way.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that God is with us, like that father was with his boy, is a great comfort. People are able to face all sorts of giants when they know that God is with them. And it is a good lesson for Fathers who want to give confidence to their children, not false and abusive bravado, but enough nudging so that our children will learn how to become independent.

King Saul reluctantly agreed to allow David to fight Goliath. And Saul wanting to protect this young boy called for his own armor. The bronze helmet was much too large. The coat of mail weighed David down considerably. The sheer weight of the sword seemed to knock him down. He was encumbered by all of this armor plate and complained, "I cannot

walk with these; for I am not used to them." Here is a lesson for new high school graduates. Be careful going forward with armor that you cannot use. God has given you gifts that are unique to you. Uncover those and use them for some of the things the world wants you to have will only weigh you down.

Instead, he went to the stream and chose five smooth stones. His only weapon was a sling shot. It was the only weapon he needed. And despite his apparent lack of readiness "no armor, and only a peasant's weapon "David was ready for his confrontation with the giant Goliath because he believed that God was on his side.

A minor side note: Why does David pick up five stones? The first seems to do the job, but perhaps David's experience taught him to be prepared to try again if it doesn't work out the first time. If he was a character in the gospels he would most likely be told off for not having enough faith. But perhaps faith is not as straightforward as it seems – perhaps it is more like a cautious hope than the brave pretense of the overconfident. Still, if your first shot at a giant doesn't work, take a second.....

When Goliath saw David approaching and having that confidence that gave evidence that he didn't understand the situation he ridiculed and sneered, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?"

David responded, "You come to me with sword and spear and shield; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." David knew that more was at stake here than a fight to the finish between David and Goliath, man against man. What was really at stake was a battle between the one True God and the false gods of the Philistines. Please note the significance of this: the emphasis here is not on the heroic David, but on the faithfulness of God. I think that if David were here this morning, he would be the first to tell us that.

Unless you've read the rest of the story, you may have assumed Goliath was the only giant David ever faced. But not so. 2 Samuel 21:15-22 reports that in David's later years, he had to deal with some

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<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll. *Stress Fractures*. (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1990), p. 128.

other gigantic opponents. One incident took place when David was king, and Israel and the Philistines were again at war. A Philistine giant named Ishbi-benob, whose spear tip alone weighed more than 12 pounds, sought to kill David. But Abishai, one of David's soldiers, stepped in and slew that giant. After this, David's men began to worry about their king's safety, telling him, "You shall not go out with us to battle any longer, so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel" (2 Samuel 21:17).

But that did not put an end to the wars with the Philistines, and over the course of the next battles, David's men faced and killed Goliath's giant brother (2 Samuel 21:19, cf. 1 Chronicles 20:5), and two other super-sized men.

With David, the giants kept coming. And that is a reminder that slaying one giant doesn't mean that we won't have to face others. No matter how massive or vicious or powerful the giants we faced earlier proved to be, and no matter how soundly we defeated them, almost nobody goes through life with just one giant to face.

Perhaps your first giant was a temptation of some kind, one of those yearnings for something forbidden that was so strong that it captivated your attention and overpowered your will. Certainly David faced this particular giant himself in the person of Bathsheba. Maybe you lost some battles against temptation, but you eventually emerged, if not unscarred, at least having escaped its clutches.

It seems reasonable that one such struggle in life ought to be enough, but it almost never is. That particular giant may not return, but there will likely be others. And we have to take all giants seriously because the goal of each seems to be our destruction.

If, early on, we battle a giant called *temptation*, we may, in midlife, battle one called *discouragement*, and later on, one called *bitterness or loneliness*. Or, we may face the soul-crushing *depression* that follows a marital breakup or the death of a loved one or the self-destructive behavior of one of our children. We may face the *terror of life-threatening illness*.

□ We may not realize it at first, but words

like circumstances, sickness, accident, abuse, misfortune, setback, trouble, problems and hurt are family names for giants.

□ What's more, giants often come against us when we are least able to defend against them. (David faced these oversized adversaries later as an old man, when his days of military prowess were over.)

□ And don't expect giants to fight fair; they might even come in pairs or more. Do expect to fight them when you are weak and down.

Still, if there is one thing David's story teaches us, it is that we should not assume that giants have the last word. Sometimes all it takes to bring them down *is the right stone from the right slingshot*. In some cases, that stone may come from the brook of medicine or counseling or friendship or courage or hard work or prayer.

Sometimes *we don't possess the right stone ourselves*. David took care of Goliath by himself, but he needed the help of his troops with subsequent ones. Our troops include friends and family who stand by us, professionals whose services and skill can help, our faith community and even the healing that comes with time away from the giant.

There are also times when the *right stone is our work helping somebody else fight their giant*.

The book *Amish Grace* tells of the importance of the Lord's Prayer for the Amish/Anabaptist community. It is, in fact, the only scripted prayer the Amish pray. Don Kraybill, one of the co-authors, tells about the Amish parents whose children were murdered in the Nickel Mines school slaying. Their understanding of the clause in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," called those grieving parents to forgive the killer immediately, but more than one bereaved parent found that the giant trio -- grief and resentment and anger -- had to be fought afresh every day. Only the strength they gained from their prayer and their community made this possible, at least in word and deed, if not in feeling. We should hope that as the congregation gathers at Emmanuel

AME this morning, their praying of the Lord's Prayer will do for them what it did for the Amish of Nickel Mines and that they will be given the tools they need to manage the giants of grief, resentment and anger.

Our world is filled with storms and giants and they are addressed by God somewhat philosophically and theologically in this narrative. The story of David and Goliath is not a lesson on the power of positive thinking. It is the story of a God who inspires confidence in the important when we trust the weapons and gifts God gives us. It is a story of strategy and one who by faith whispers assurance in the face of overwhelming odds. It is a story that tells us outward appearance does not the heart determine. It is a lesson that shows us that being prepared, taking the lessons of our own small victories and adversities equips us to face the giants of the present. Fighting the giants of terminal illness, joblessness, persecution, or severed relationships can be a frightening, discouraging and lonely battle, but it's on the battlefield that we learn to trust in more than ourselves.

Maybe those graduating from high school will hear the worn out clichés of many a speech both now and in the future. People will say things like, "You've got to believe in yourself." Sometimes my friends, being politically correct leaves us short-sighted. Napoleon may have gone mad, but you certainly can't say that he didn't believe in himself.

I say, you might go further and be more effective if you believe in God. I might also add that people will tell you to follow your dreams, but I say unto you, "dump that idea" and follow your curiosity instead. Follow your questions and pay attention to your heart a bit. Everybody else is too afraid to tell you this, because we keep teaching our children that it is important for them to be happy and successful. We don't tell them that our hope for them is that they be good or kind, faithful or loving. No, we tell them that we want them to be happy and in so doing set them up for failure of many kinds with the concept that the whole world ought to go around doing everything it can to make them happy and

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Jones, "The Children We Mean to Raise," *Huff Post: The Third Metric – Redefining*

that their happiness is the axis on which the world spins.

In a recent study released by Harvard University entitled "The Children We Mean to Raise" the report tells us that a large majority of youth value personal success (achievement and happiness) over caring for others. We asked youth to rank what was most important to them: achieving at a high level, happiness (feeling good most of the time) or caring for others. Almost 80% of youth picked high achievement or happiness as their top choice, while roughly 20% selected caring for others. A root of this troubling finding is the messages that parents are unintentionally sending. According to the various surveys that make up the study, parents say they want children to be caring and respectful and value their children being caring more than their achievements. But according to the youth surveyed, their parents appear to put achievement above caring.<sup>3</sup>

The problem, based on the study's observations and conversations with parents, seems to be that the volume and power of messages that prioritize achievement and happiness are drowning out whatever messages are being sent about the importance of caring and responsibility for others. If we don't get this turned around, we're going to continue to see increases in violence and abuse.

So what should we do? It starts with "me" and ends with "we."

As we point out in our report, it starts with adults' behavior.

Here's what we can do:

**1. Make caring for others a priority.** While it's clearly important for parents to promote doing one's best, it's also important for parents to help children learn to balance their needs with the needs of others. This is more than telling them to pass the ball to a teammate. This is doing a mission trip together, going to a soup kitchen together to feed those who are homeless, going to a flood ravaged area and

*Success Beyond Money & Power*, posted July 16, 2014.

helping a family muck out their home. It is time for us to bag that worn out phrase, “the most important thing is that you’re happy.”

**2. Children and youth need to learn to *zoom in*, listening closely and attending to those in their immediate circle, and to *zoom out*, taking in the big picture and considering multiple perspectives.** It is by zooming out and taking multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are too often invisible (such as the new kid in class, someone who doesn't speak their language or the school custodian) that young people expand their *circle of concern* and become able to consider the justice of their communities and society.

In most everything we say today, we may look back at this week in Charleston, SC with admiration for the victims of that tragic shooting. Yes, they may have known the pinnacle of fear when the gun was taken from its hiding place, but the images we have is of a peaceful Bible Study after a long day of service where faithful servants of Jesus Christ were trying to live out their faith and welcomed an outsider into their fellowship. The young man, Dylann Roof didn't know how to zoom in or out on the very loving perspectives of the people he was determined to kill. He was imprisoned by his racial hatred and had dedicated himself to sacrifice others on the altar of his fear and self-righteousness.

Those whom he killed and the faith community of which they were apart are rooted in the love of Jesus Christ. They did not riot. They did not retaliate. Instead they are now in mourning and even in the face of their incredible loss they are choosing to embrace their master's example where even from the cross he cried, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” They understand that Mr. Roof's behavior warrants consequences of justice but they are seeking today to faithfully find a way to bring people together rather than tear them apart. Mr. Roof didn't understand what it means to make caring for others a priority. He hadn't learned how to zoom in and out and to comprehend multiple perspectives, and he didn't understand that rather than express his hatred with violence, he could accomplish more if he had chosen like those he shot, to

**3. Be a strong moral role model.** Being a role model doesn't mean that we need to be perfect or have all the answers. It means grappling with our flaws, acknowledging our mistakes, listening to our children and students and connecting values to their ways of understanding the world. Unless we learn how make caring a priority, consider multiple perspectives and become strong moral role models our nation will not have enough police to try and keep order and everyone safe.

Know this. When putting these approaches into practice, some values -- especially achievement -- play out quite differently across class, race and culture. For many teens, achievement *is*, for example, about concern for others: it's a means to provide for their family, contribute to their communities and honor their parents' sacrifices for them.

Many places, especially colleges, by the way, try to find the most successful, interesting people to be their commencement speakers believing that they will be inspirational, but seldom considering that they may also be the least realistic. They tend to be far too willing to dish out the craziest, worst advice, simply because it somehow worked for them. “Follow your dreams” and “live your passions” are insanely unhelpful tips when the bills need paying or the rent is almost due.

Unfortunately, most commencement speakers give you bad advice. They will tell you to follow your dreams. And you will be tempted to do just that, to trust them as you always have, that seductive suggestion that the world is your oyster waiting to be harvested. While that may be true for some, the hard truth is that, for most, it won't be.

Follow your dreams could be the worst advice you could ever get upon at graduation. Dreams are no longer what they once were. Today, they are merely clever coverings to clothe naked ambitions. In the pursuit of your dreams that you've likely held for years by the time you graduate, you have already poured yourself into a mold to fit your dreams. You've attended summer camps, maybe even at elite or far-flung institutions. You've tailored extracurricular activities to your specific dreams. You will focus your electives to reflect your interests. You will take trips, shadow professionals,

and perhaps even subscribed to a professional organization as a student to show the seriousness of your dreams.

Without anyone noticing — least of all you and your loved ones — your dream has become a prison. Because that's what happens to a dream when you fashion yourself into the shape of a resume. Instead, I have a different suggestion.

Don't follow your dreams.

Don't even trust them.

They are too fickle. Instead, follow your curiosity.

Follow your questions, not your dreams.

Follow them down any road or path or unmarked trail they might lead.

Follow the questions that burn in you that keep you up at night that lead you not to answers but to deeper questions.

And do not fear those questions or your curiosity. They lie at the heart of our identities, of our deepest souls. Too often we bury them because we fear who we are, we fear looking at ourselves undisguised, without our naked ambition clothing our most profound passions.

So, rather than ask yourself about your dreams for your future, don't even dream about where you will be in five years or 10. Ponder instead that burning uncertainty, that creative wonder, that unanswerable question. And wonder, not what you will be doing in five or 10 years, but what questions you might be asking then. Because if we follow our questions, we might just bump into ourselves along the way and also bump into God who is having enormous delight in watching us discover the world that God created.<sup>4</sup>

Well, "follow your dreams" and "we just want you to be happy" are pretty big giants with whom to do battle, are they not? But it is probably quite helpful for us to wrestle with them. We've got a Jurassic World here, where the giants are dinosaur size.

Some of these giants aren't limited to a few special effects and the fear they generate can be very real.

In the gospel of Mark Jesus and his disciples are crossing the sea when a furious squall comes up. The waves are breaking over the boat. It's nearly swamped. While this is going on, Jesus is in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The frightened disciples wake him and say, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Jesus got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Suddenly the wind died down and it became completely calm. Jesus then asked, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Then Mark says something really interesting. He says, "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"

The disciples were more frightened by the fact that Jesus could still the storm than they were of the storm itself. And they should be frightened. Jesus was no ordinary man. Only the power of God can still an angry storm, and Jesus had done just that. Christ is still in the business of stilling storms. Sometimes those storms are in our individual hearts. Sometimes those storms are in our families. Sometimes the storms are in society. But Christ is still in the business of stilling storms. Wherever there are people there are storms.

There was a fascinating but somewhat cruel study done in Russia sometime back. Scientists subjected a group of chimpanzees to an assortment of experiences that made them violently and helplessly jealous. For example, they would take a chimpanzee who had been living happily with his family and suddenly rip him from his family to an adjoining cage from which he could see and hear his family but could not reach them. In full view another chimpanzee was given his place. Screaming with rage, he could only watch as his fury mounted. Within three months he was dead of severe

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Donovan, "Dear Graduates: Don't Follow Your Dreams (A Commencement Speech for the Mediocre)," *Salon*, May 22, 2014.

hardening of the arteries and of high blood pressure. He was killed by his jealousy and rage.<sup>5</sup>

A storm within one's own soul can have tragic circumstances. Jealousy, anger, bitterness, guilt. The list of storms that can rock our individual souls is lengthy indeed. We need a Savior when such storms rage within.

But there are other storms, storms that may rock our relationships.

In the nineteenth century, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer compared the human race to porcupines huddled together on a bitter cold winter night. The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills.

Pastor John Ortberg has a delightful discussion on porcupines in his book, *Everybody's Normal until You Get to Know Them*. It prompted me to "Google" porcupines on the internet and I discovered lots of interesting stuff. Porcupines are members of the rodent family, he says. They have around 30,000 quills attached to their bodies. Each quill can be driven into an enemy, and the enemy's body heat will cause the microscopic barb to expand and become more firmly embedded. The wounds can fester; the more dangerous ones, affecting vital organs, can be fatal.

The porcupine is not generally regarded as a lovable animal. Books and movies celebrate almost every other conceivable animal. Dogs, cats, horses, pigs like Babe or Arnold Ziffel in the old TV show *Green Acres* spiders as in *Charlotte's Web* dolphins like Flipper bears like Gentle Ben and killer whales as in *Free Willy*. Even skunks have Pepe Le Pew. There are no famous porcupines.

"As a general rule, porcupines have two methods for handling relationships: withdrawal and attack. They either head for a tree or stick out their quills. They are generally solitary animals. Wolves run in packs; sheep huddle in flocks; we speak of herds of

elephants and gaggles of geese and even a murder of crows. But there is no special name for a group of porcupines. They travel alone.

"Porcupines don't always want to be alone. In the late autumn, a young porcupine's thoughts turn to love. But love turns out to be a risky business when you're a porcupine. Females are open to dinner and a movie only once a year; the window of opportunity closes quickly. And a girl porcupine's 'no' is the most widely respected turndown in all the animal kingdom. Fear and anger make them dangerous little creatures to be around."<sup>6</sup>

People can be like porcupines, can't they? How often, even in the closest of relationships, we can hurt one another. Even worse, toxic feelings have a way of intensifying if not dealt with at the earliest possible moment. It is not enough to ride out these storms. Someone needs to calm the storm. That someone, of course, is Christ. But how? How does Christ calm these storms?

Christ calms the storm of fear within us. We will not do well in dealing with stormy relationships if we cannot conquer the storms in our own hearts and souls.

Sometime back the BBC produced a television series called "Walking with Dinosaurs." It seems that dinosaurs had a good trick to improve their own safety. They would always walk in single file, each one following in the footsteps of the one before. That way, any other creature that came across their trail would be unable to tell whether there were only one or two of these huge creatures up ahead, or a large herd.<sup>7</sup>

Christ can calm storms - storms within our own hearts, storms in our homes, storms within our community and world. Sometimes these storms can become so violent that they can tear us apart. They can ravage our integrity, annihilate our relationships and torpedo our future. When they tear things apart, it feels like we have little power to put things back together again.

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<sup>5</sup> Batsell Barrett Baxter, [www.stillvoices.org/sermons/baxter/010966.pdf](http://www.stillvoices.org/sermons/baxter/010966.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>

<http://www.ascensionbalhamhill.org.uk/Resources/sermons/grwth3.htm>.

It's said that surgeons invited to dinner parties are often asked to carve the meat or worse yet, to watch the host carve while commenting on the surgeon's occupation. At one party, one surgeon was watching the carving while his host kept up a running commentary: "How am I doing, doc? How do you like my technique? I'd make a pretty good surgeon, don't you think?"

When the host finished and the slices of meat lay neatly on the serving platter, the surgeon spoke up, "Anybody can take them apart, Harry. Now let's see sew them back together."<sup>8</sup>

What's true of meat is also true of relationships. It is much easier to carve them apart than it is to sew them back together. Christ can heal a severed relationship, but it is better if things do not get that far in the first place. We need to have Christ calm the storms in our individual lives before they destroy us. We need him to calm the storms in our

families and other precious relationships before such connections are permanently damaged. If there is a storm going on in your life, won't you give it to Christ today?

- Follow your curiosity and choose not to be imprisoned by your dreams
- Trust God more in the storms you face
- More than focusing on your happiness and your success – invest more of yourself in God's purpose for your life and uncover the ways you can serve God by serving others. As you set aside the temptation to pursue selfish ambition, you may uncover happiness and success that ultimately brings you more joy and satisfaction than the common standards embraced by the current culture.
- Know that God can help us in our fear and that God seeks to bless us.

## **They Met to Read the Bible**

ST. CHRISTOPHER 7.6.8.6.8.6.8.6 ("Beneath the Cross of Jesus")

They met to read the Bible,  
they gathered for a prayer,  
They worshiped God and shared with friends  
and welcomed strangers there.  
They went to church to speak of love,  
To celebrate God's grace.  
O Lord, we tremble when we hear  
What happened in that place.  
  
O God of love and justice,  
we thank you for the nine.  
They served in their communities  
and made the world more kind.  
They preached and sang and coached and taught,  
And cared for children, too.  
They blessed your church and blessed your world  
With gifts they used for you.

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<sup>8</sup> Bob Phillips, World's Greatest Collection of Clean Jokes (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers).



We grieve a wounded culture  
Where fear and terror thrive,  
Where some hate others for their race  
And guns are glorified.  
We grieve for sons and daughters lost,  
For grandmas who are gone.  
O God, we cry with broken hearts:  
This can't continue on!

God, may we keep on sowing  
The seeds of justice here,  
Till guns are silent, people sing,  
And hope replaces fear.  
May seeds of understanding grow  
And flourish all our days.  
May justice, love and mercy be  
The banner that we raise.<sup>9</sup>

## **SALON**

THURSDAY, MAY 22, 2014 07:00 PM EDT

**Dear graduates: Don't follow your dreams (A commencement speech for the mediocre)  
The brutal truth is that most people can't pay the bills by "living their passion." So what  
can we do instead?**<sup>10</sup>

TIM DONOVAN

A little over a year ago, I was a waiter. For nine years, I toiled in a number of bars and restaurants from Boston to Las Vegas and a lot of places in between. I'd earned my degree (in a manner of speaking) from Emerson College in creative writing, but by the time I graduated, I was already making more money waiting tables than I could ever hope to earn as an entry-level drone at a publishing house, or marketing firm, or somewhere else I'd surely hate. I didn't particularly *love* working in restaurants, mind you, but I did like the people, and I *really* liked the money, and I was happy to have a lot of time to myself to pursue the subjects that interested me: politics, graphic novels, art, board games with good friends, wine and women.

I had a lot of interests.

But I also had absolutely no idea what I wanted to "do" with my life, in the sense of earning a living while pursuing a career that I might not completely hate. Restaurants were an easy default to fall back on, with the

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<sup>9</sup> Tune: Frederick Charles Maker, 1881 ("Beneath the Cross of Jesus")

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Donovan, "Dear Graduates: Don't Follow Your Dreams (A Commencement Speech for the Mediocre), *Salon*, May 22, 2014.

added benefit of building a résumé, references and the experience in the industry that people look for when hiring someone for a job.

Years passed, and I worked at one restaurant after the next. At one point I took up painting, and for a while, I thought maybe I'd found a meaningful, serious passion that I could pursue outside my life as a waiter. It didn't last. For the most part, I was very happy but completely unfulfilled. I craved something bigger, even if I hadn't the faintest clue what that "thing" might be. In short, I lived the life that many of you will surely experience in the coming years, despite the fact that most commencement speakers don't want to address this difficult, unfortunate reality.

See, commencement speakers are the outliers — the most successful, interesting people that colleges can find — and their experiences are the most inspirational but also the least realistic. Even worse, they tend to be far too willing to dish out the craziest, worst advice, simply because it somehow worked for them. "Follow your dreams" and "live your passions" are insanely unhelpful tips when the bills need paying or the rent is almost due. Invariably, commencement speakers tend to be the lucky few, the ones who followed their dreams and still managed to land on their feet: Most of us won't become Steve Jobs or Neil Gaiman, regardless of how hard we try or how much passion we might hold. It's far more likely to get stuck working as a waiter or bartender, or on some other dead-end career path. Most people will have to choose between "doing what they love," and pursuing the more mundane promise of a stable paycheck and a promising career path. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with making the latter choice; in fact, I'd usually recommend it.

But for all of those young graduates who look out today and see a limitless horizon of excitement and opportunity, I hate to be the one to say it, but you probably won't get there. And I've often wondered if, perhaps, those of us who ended up waiting tables or working the dead-end office jobs would be better suited to offering real advice to new graduates, advice tailored toward the majority, those who won't attain the loftiest heights of their dreams — but still must find meaning and value in our imperfect world. And for those people, the rest of us, my advice is quite simple: Stay curious and keep learning.

Your job might be terrible, it might be horribly boring and physically draining like mine was. You might work in a terrifying corporate culture that stifles creativity and punishes independent thinking. You might be forced to watch round after round of layoffs and budget cuts, wondering if and when the ax will fall on you. And of course, there are plenty of other terrible ways that your life can turn sideways, too.

Stay curious. Keep learning.

Boredom is a sickness. The complacency of sitting still is a crime against yourself, against your own ability to find meaning and happiness in our often-dreary world. We live in a hyper-connected culture that offers more opportunities than ever before to find new information, to keep learning and growing as a person. (And you can choose to absorb whatever kind of culture that interests you: Binge-watching "Breaking Bad," "learning" about fine wine and craft beers, or even reading graphic novels by the likes of Brian K. Vaughn, Alan Moore and Grant Morrison totally counts.)

You can never really know where your journey will take you. When my own journey started, I was still waiting tables full-time. Fast-forward one short, incredible year, and I've left the industry behind, creating a career for myself that pays me to write for a massive audience about the issues and ideas that I care about, and that don't get nearly enough attention in our media. I've gone on TV and radio interviews, I've been profiled by a Dutch newspaper, and soon I'll be in a major documentary. Pretty good for a lowly waiter, right?

In those long, listless years, I also found the love of my life — soon after meeting her, I moved to New York City to be with her, and years later, to Las Vegas for her job. A "career" in restaurants meant that I could move anywhere in the world, and the longer I stayed in the industry, the more contacts I accumulated. I left family

and friends behind to be with my then-girlfriend (now wife) and that's an important lesson, too. She provided me with mental stability, so that I could focus on my passions. She made me accountable. And she made it a whole lot easier to move away from the lazy, comfortable cocoon of friends and family. Familiarity and social circles are great, but if your life is stuck on neutral, complacency can become a terrible trap. Sometimes, changing your life means leaving your comfort zone. And it helps to have someone at your side when you make that change.

A year ago, the night my first article was published on Salon — the first piece I ever submitted anywhere — I had to go into work at my job on the Las Vegas strip, serving cheeseburgers and steak and eggs to drunk tourists from midnight until 8 a.m. And though I knew that my life had changed forever, I had no idea *how* it had changed — no idea what to do next, or how to leverage this opportunity into something bigger. Knowing where I wanted to go didn't mean that I had the faintest idea of how to get there. But my decade of always staying curious, of constant reading and learning, had unintentionally provided me with the necessary foundation to pursue this newfound dream, to get paid for the act of writing and thinking.

Of course, I was still tremendously lucky throughout, and much like other commencement speakers you might hear, if you try to follow the path that I took, you're likely to fail. Not many bartenders become political commentators, after all, and if success were as simple as wishing for it, the 19 million people who've read the bestselling self-help tome "The Secret" would be fabulously wealthy and married to beautiful people.

I've always valued learning intrinsically, as an end unto itself. And more and more, that seems like the key. Curiosity provides life with wonder and excitement beyond our crummy, quotidian routines. A passion for learning, an unqualified commitment to pursuing your interests — and seeking new ones — will carry you through the good times and bad times, the rich times and poor times, the miserable times and happy ones.

*So stay curious. Keep learning.* Never stop enjoying the wonder of the world, and never lose the curiosity that got you here today, through four years (or more) of long papers and difficult tests, heated discussions and late-night confusions. Your education shouldn't end with the turn of a tassel, or the reception of a degree.

Good luck, Class of 2014: You're gonna need it.

## THE POST **The Third Metric**

Redefining Success Beyond Money & Power

**Stephanie Jones**

# **The Children We Mean to Raise**

THE CHILDREN WE MEAN TO RAISE

We recently released a report entitled "The Children We Mean to Raise" which suggests that a large majority of youth value personal success (achievement and happiness) over caring for others. We asked youth to rank what was most important to them: achieving at a high level, happiness (feeling good most of the time) or caring for others. Almost 80% of youth picked high achievement or happiness as their top choice, while roughly 20% selected caring for others. A root of this troubling finding may be the messages that parents are unintentionally sending. According to various surveys,

parents say they want children to be caring and respectful and value their children being caring more than their achievements. But according to the youth we surveyed, their parents appear to put achievement above caring.

The problem, based on our observations of and conversations with parents, seems to be that the volume and power of messages that prioritize achievement and happiness are drowning out whatever messages we send about the importance of caring and responsibility for others.<sup>11</sup>

The good news about all this is that our findings seem to have struck a chord with a wide variety of audiences and people are talking about our findings. But while awareness is good, we need to act.

So what should we do? It starts with "me" and ends with "we."

As we point out in our report, it starts with adults' behavior.

Here's what we can do:

- 1. Make caring for others a priority.** While it's clearly important for parents to promote children's achievement and happiness, it's also important for parents to help children learn to balance their needs with the needs of others, whether it's passing the ball to a teammate, helping a friend with homework or deciding to stand up for a friend who is being bullied. One simple way to do this is, instead of saying "the most important thing is that you're happy," saying the "most important thing is that you're kind and happy."
- 2. Provide ongoing opportunities for children and youth to *practice* caring and helpfulness, sometimes with guidance from adults.** Children are not simply born good or bad and we should never give up on them. A good person is something one can always become, and throughout life we can develop our ethical capacities. Learning to be caring and to lead an ethical life is like learning to play an instrument or hone a craft. Daily repetition -- whether it's helping a friend with homework, pitching in around the house, having a classroom job, or working on a project to reduce homelessness -- and increasing challenges make caring second nature and develop and hone children's caregiving capacities. With guidance from adults and with practice, children can also develop the skills and courage to know when and how to intervene in situations when they and others are imperiled. They can become effective upstanders or first responders.
- 3. Children and youth need to learn to *zoom in*, listening closely and attending to those in their immediate circle, and to *zoom out*, taking in the big picture and considering multiple perspectives.** It is by zooming out and taking multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are too often invisible (such as the new kid in class, someone who doesn't speak their language or the school custodian) that young people expand their *circle of concern* and become able to consider the justice of their communities and society.
- 4. Be a strong moral role model.** Being a role model doesn't mean that we need to be perfect or have all the answers. It means grappling with our flaws, acknowledging our mistakes, listening to our children and students and connecting our values to their ways of understanding the world. It means that we, too, need to continually practice and zoom in and out, cultivating our capacities for care, widening our circles of concern and deepening our understanding of fairness and justice.

That's the "me" part.

The "we" part comes next, when we realize that as much as we do as individuals, we need to work together to change the messages our children hear about the definition of success and what it means to be an ethical

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<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Jones, "The Children We Mean to Raise," *Huff Post: The Third Metric – Redefining Success Beyond Money & Power*, posted July 16, 2014.

member of a community.

To begin, we'll have to stop passing the buck. While Americans worry a great deal about children's moral state, no one seems to think that they're part of the problem. Parents often blame other parents. Our research suggests that teachers tend to blame parents and sometimes other teachers. It is clear that we *all* need to take a hard look at the messages we send to children daily and reflect together on what different messages we might work to collectively send.

Finally, when putting these four principles listed above into practice, some values -- especially achievement -- play out quite differently across class, race and culture. For many teens, achievement *is*, for example, about concern for others: it's a means to provide for their family, contribute to their communities and honor their parents' sacrifices for them. It's important for all of us who work with children to be mindful of these differences.

Being a role model for your kids and talking with other adults -- and with kids -- about making caring common seems obvious and easy, but in fact it's hard. It requires awareness of your actions; it requires setting aside time to talk about ethics and justice. It can take us out of our comfort zones. But that's what we expect of our children, and so that's what we have to model as adults. With the help of many like-minded organizations and individuals, we think we've helped start the conversation about making caring common online, in our schools, at dinner tables around the country, and we hope you'll join us with your ideas, your strategies and your passion.

# Prayer for Sunday worship in the wake of the Charleston massacre

June 20, 2015 by Jill Duffield, Editor of Presbyterian Outlook

Almighty God, our gathering together for worship and prayer is, this day, both an offering of praise and a show of courage. We come to this sanctuary mindful that even sacred spaces are not necessarily safe spaces. We bow our heads remembering our brothers and sisters in Christ whose last earthly act was prayer. We give thanks for the lives of your faithful servants: Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Tywanza Sanders, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Susie Jackson, Daniel Simmons and Depayne Middleton Doctor. Comfort their families and friends and strengthen them in the difficult days that are ahead. We pray, too, because Christ commands us to, for Dylan Roof and his family. Bring peace, transform hearts, show us again your resurrection power in places we cannot imagine it can come.

You tell us, Lord God, that perfect love casts out fear and the families of the victims of Mother Church and the people of Charleston have shown us what loving fearlessness looks like. Forgiveness has been extended, hands have been held, hymns have been sung, prayers have been lifted, unity has been demonstrated. The Goliath of hate and racism has not and will not win.

People of faith and prayer, slain after extending Christ's welcome in God's house, have left a legacy that cannot be gunned down. Their lives of love and grace have begat love and grace. The gifts of the Spirit that you gave them – gifts of love, joy, peace, gentleness and goodness – appeared defeated on Wednesday night, but on Thursday when people came together and sang, "We Shall Overcome," and on Friday when words of forgiveness were spoken and a vigil packed a coliseum, and on Saturday when crowds gathered in solidarity to say that symbols have consequences, and today as we and countless others pray for peace and commit to being peacemakers, we recognize the gifts you gave those nine are unstoppable, exponential, inevitable and victorious.

God of justice and compassion, you sent your Son for the sake of the world you love. He was murdered, his last words a prayer for forgiveness. Three days later he rose from the dead, his first words ones of reassurance, telling us not to be afraid because even death had been defeated.

Today we remember and proclaim: Violence and hate do not have the last word. The love of God made known to us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, always has the last word. The Spirit's crop of goodness and love and joy and peace and gentleness will not stop growing. Now is the time for us – people of faith, brothers and sisters of every race and background – to recognize these unshakable truths and in the midst of the storm, trust the power of the One in the boat with us.

We yield ourselves to you, Triune God, knowing you bring redemption, reconciliation and resurrection. Make us your witnesses. May your perfect love in us and shown through us, cast out fear and help transform the world.

Amen.