

## **“Through the Eyes of a Butterfly”**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar  
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Excerpt from Who Dies by Steven Levine:

In this culture we look at life as though it were a straight line. The longer the line the more we imagine we have lived, the wholer we suppose ourselves to be, and the less horrendous we imagine the end point. The death of the young is seen as tragic and shakes the faith of many. But in the American Indian culture one is not seen linearly but rather as a circle, which becomes complete at about puberty with the rites of passage. From that time on, one is seen as a wholeness that continues to expand outward. But once "the hoop" has formed, any time one dies, one dies in wholeness. As the American Indian sage, Crazy Horse commented, "Today is a good day to die for all things of my life are present." In the American Indian wisdom wholeness is not seen as the duration one has lived but rather the fullness with which one enters each complete moment.

In place of the second reading I want to share a story my father told me.

He has been spending time recently with a young boy who is blind. The other day they were building a castle together with legos. My father was handing him the legos and he handed him one that had a rounded edge. The boy threw it down and said, "No not that one, I don't like that one." When my dad inquired why, the boy said it felt funny. So my dad explained that that is because it is curved. The boy said, "What is a curve?" My dad looked around for something else with a curve and he picked up a snowshoe that he had brought to show the boy. He put the boys hands on the curved part of the shoe and then on something flat and then back on the shoe. Then the boy asked what was the thing with the big curve and my dad explained it was a snowshoe with which you can walk on the top of the snow. "Wow" the boy said, "walking on top of the snow that sounds neat." My dad told him that someday, if the weather were right, he would take him to walk on the snow.

### SERMON

American Buddhist Sharon Salzberg tells a story about a mother who explains to her four-year-old son that the woman who has cared for him since he was born is going to be moving away. The mother takes great care in explaining what is happening. She tells her son that the woman really loves him and that he can call and write her whenever he wants, but that she will be moving away to be with her sister. When the mother finishes, the boy, who had been listening carefully said, "Mommy, tell me the story again, but with a different ending." There are times when all of us wish we could change the ending of a story.

As my wife and I prepared to have our son, Elias, who was born last month, we read a lot of books about pregnancy and childbirth. We probably read too many of these books. At one point, we came across a story in Ann Landers' column of a couple that had had a baby with Down syndrome. They had not had any tests and weren't expecting their child to have Down syndrome. They talked about their initial feelings of shock and disappointment. As they described their hopes and expectations leading up to the birth, my wife, Anitra, and I could relate, as we too were filled with dreams and plans of our soon-to-be child.

The authors of the story described their experience of having a child with Down syndrome by using a travel metaphor. As the metaphor goes, they said it was as if they had been planning a trip to Italy for nine months. They had bought all of the travel guides, read up on all of the best things to do. They had purchased and charted maps and routes along which they planned to travel. Over the nine months they could practically taste the experience and visualize being there. And then there was the plane ride. It was long and bumpy, at times uncomfortable, but they knew that Italy was waiting at the end of the ride, but when the plane landed and they got off, they found that they were in Holland. At first, they were shocked and confused, and then

they were angry and very disappointed; they realized that all the books and preparation were useless. They were going to have to buy new books and learn about a whole new country and culture. Once the couple came to accept the fact that they were not in Italy, they realized, well, it might not be Italy, but it is Holland and it has windmills and tulips and it is indeed a beautiful and interesting place.

One of the reasons I have been thinking about these things is because when my father was visiting recently he was telling me about a new volunteer program in which he is involved. My father has been a hospice volunteer for the past 13 years, and recently, he was asked to take a case in a new program called the Butterfly Program. The Butterfly Program is a palliative care program for terminally ill children. It is not hospice, technically, because the children are expected to live more than six months, and in some cases, the children will live into their teens. The name comes from the fact that butterflies live only a short time, but in that time they bring beauty and grace into the world. My father's new patient is a young boy named Anthony. He is four-and-a-half years old and has retinoblastoma, which is cancer of the retina. When my father first met Anthony, he had lost one of his two glass eyes. Some of the other kids teased him about it, so one of the first things my dad did was to arrange to get Anthony some new glass eyes. There is something remarkably satisfying about getting a little boy new eyes. At one point early in Anthony's life, his parents had taken him to Venezuela to a well-known, Catholic, faith healer named Maria Esperanza. The family didn't have much money, so the Make-a-Wish Foundation paid for the trip. They, of course, were hoping for a cure, a miracle. What they got was a healing, not of the eyes, but of a way for themselves to go to the next level in their journey together as a family; what they received was the strength and understanding to deal with what happened next. Within months of returning, Anthony lost sight in his second eye.

When my father was visiting the family one day, they showed him a video of the session with Maria. At one point, Maria said to the family that this is a crossroads in your lives. My father heard in this a universal message that any baby can change the world – certainly the world of the parents and those who come in contact with the child. As he saw tears well up in the parents' eyes in the video, it seemed they had the realization that a short life was probable. The message he heard was: "Take your son home and be kind to him. He will not be cured. Protect your baby, and when the judgement comes, you will be judged by the kindness and the care and love that you give him." The story is an illustration that there can be healing even when there is no cure. We can change the story, even when we can't change the ending.

The Buddhists have a lot to teach in this regard. One of the central principles of Buddhism is called Dukkha, which is translated as suffering, discontent, unsatisfactoriness, and change. The Buddha's primary teachings are about the existence of Dukkha and the ending of Dukkha. When I first learned about it, I was very skeptical. I am skeptical of any product, program or religion that claims to be able to end suffering. I agree with the first Noble Truth of Buddhism, that life is filled with suffering, discontentedness, unsatisfactoriness and change. However, the Noble truth that there can be an end to these central components of the human condition used to strike me as unconvincing.

The fact that Buddhism puts it right out in front, that life is filled with Dukkha is liberating. Of course, the message that life is filled with great joy is easier to accept; in many ways' joy is commonly considered the normal or proper human state. It is the state for which we strive, it is the goal; when we are sad, mad, disappointed or depressed, joy is the state to which we hope to return. No one ever says, "Gee, you seem joyful today, is there anything I can do?" Buddhism is honest about the fact that life is filled with suffering and change. This isn't as much a judgment about life, as it is a statement about the nature of life. It is liberating, in part, because it exposes the illusion that the normal state of life is joy and that all other states are somehow abnormal and therefore to be avoided and overcome. It is liberating because so much of our dissatisfaction, discontent, and mental suffering are due to the fact that life so often doesn't live up to our expectations. There is, it often seems, a way that life is supposed to be and then of course, there's the way it really is; there are our images of the perfect marriage, the successful child, and "the good life." These images are created by everything from Coca Cola commercials and television to books we read and stories we hear.

When our life doesn't live up to the way we think it is supposed to be, we experience Dukkha. If we don't have the resources to deal with Dukkha, depression, addiction and despair are always close behind.

The reason the Buddha begins with Dukkha is because it is the most universal of human experiences. Yet we so often deny it, we avoid it and we hide it from others. In fact, we are taught to be ashamed of our discontent, dissatisfaction and suffering.

Sharon Salzberg writes:

When I was first in India and heard the Buddha's teaching on suffering, I felt as though I was being handed a precious gift. Finally, someone was speaking openly about how things really are. Suffering does exist. While there is great pleasure in the world, there is also a great deal of pain. There are wonderful times of coming together, and there are also partings and losses. There is birth and also death. I felt like I was hearing the truth for the first time – a truth that no one else wanted to talk about.

Salzberg goes on to explain how common it is for families to deny suffering. It is not unusual for families to remain in denial about problems, illnesses, or violence. The inability or unwillingness to confront these kinds of issues leads to more suffering. By hiding these things from children, we foster distrust. Children can sense when something is wrong, and when no one talks about it, they begin to distrust their own feelings, as well as distrusting the adults who care for them. In this sense, recognizing and acknowledging suffering is liberating.

Acknowledging a problem may not cure the problem, but it may offer healing. Whether the issue is death, divorce, disease, or discord, acknowledgement may not be able to change the end of the story, but it can transform the situation. Like the story of the mother explaining loss of a loved one to her young son, she could not change the facts, but by talking openly with her son, she was able to help him begin dealing with his sadness. When the Buddha spoke of ending suffering, he was not referring to ending disease, or bodily pain or death, he was referring to ending the mental suffering that comes from denial of life's natural conditions.

People today talk about wanting "wholeness" in their lives. One of the reasons people often do not feel they have wholeness is because wholeness is usually thought to be analogous only with positive physical and emotional states. Yet, if all we ever felt were the positives in life we would not be experiencing wholeness, we would be experiencing "lopsidedness." It might be a joyful lopsidedness, but it would not be life. It is not really possible because all life involves Dukkha. When we strive to eliminate certain feelings we have, we are attempting to eliminate parts of ourselves. It is in experiencing these feelings and accepting them as part of us that we become whole. In my newsletter article this week, I told the story of a man who finds his friend out under a streetlight looking on the ground. The man asks his friend if he has lost something. "Yes," replies the friend, "I have lost my key. Can you help me find it?" Sure enough the man gets down on his knees and looks around and eventually he asks, "Are you sure you lost the key here?" "Oh no, I didn't lose it here, I lost it inside," replied the friend. The man asked, "Then why are you looking for it out here?" "There is better light out here," the friend explained.

This story reminds me of the way most people search for the keys to wholeness. We look for them in the places that have light and we try to avoid the darkness. In the words of the Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield:

It is not darkness that is our opponent, but our rejection and denial of it. It is [often] in our greatest difficulties that we find the world's everlasting, unquenchable light. As we turn toward the specific shadows in our own lives with an open heart and a clear and focused mind, we cease resisting and begin to understand and to heal.

In the case of the young boy, Anthony, it was when his parents began to accept that their son would probably die, that they were able to move to the next level, as a family. Their acceptance doesn't change the end of the

story or the fact that he will die someday, but it has allowed them to appreciate every day that he is with them, and it has helped them find the support he and they need to live and love right now.

My father visits once a week to allow Anthony's mother some time alone out of the house. Last week, my dad finally took Anthony snowshoeing. At one point, they were out in a big open field. Since Anthony is blind, he can't usually run, but my dad explained to him that there was nothing to bump into and only snow underneath. At first, Anthony was scared, but eventually he ran and also got to climb in the snow. It made both of them feel whole.

The story of Anthony running reminded me of another story of wholeness from the Special Olympics. There was a group of children, all with Down syndrome, competing in the 100-yard dash. When the gun went off and they sprinted from the starting line, one of the children fell down and began crying. Instantly, all of the other racers stopped and turned to see what had happened. Then, without saying a word, they all began running back to help the child up. Once they had lifted him up, they all proceeded to lock arms and they finished running the race together. It reminded me that sometimes you want to change the end of a story, and sometimes, when the story ends like that, you don't. May each of us be touched by the beauty of the butterfly, and the wisdom that "wholeness is not about the duration that one has lived, but rather the fullness with which one enters each complete moment."