

# “In Praise of the Ordinary”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Last June, David McCullough, a high school English teacher, stood before the graduating class of Wellesley High School and said to the scrubbed and shiny faces sitting before him: “Do not get the idea that you are special. You are not exceptional.”

Now, needless to say, it wasn’t your average commencement address.

Everyone knows that the order of the day is to extol the gifts of the graduating seniors—to remind them of their promise and their potential.

But McCullough told them instead the truth—that they were among thousands of people graduating that day, and then went on to make the point that even if any of them is a “one-in-a-million” kind of person, there’s still nearly 7,000 people just like them on a planet of some 6.8 billion people.

“In our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another—which springs... from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality — we have of late,” he said, “... to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement.”

“We have come to see them as the point—and we’re happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that’s the quickest way, or only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece, something to pose with, crow about, something with which to leverage ourselves into a better spot on the social totem pole.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alina Tugend, “Redefining Success and Celebrating the Ordinary,” *The New York Times*, 29 June 2012.

These words went viral in no time.  
In the months since, the video  
has been seen millions of times on YouTube.

When I read about this speech last summer, it caught my attention  
because I know the town of Wellesley, Massachusetts relatively well.

It is a beautiful suburb of Boston, with a population of just under 28,000.  
The village at the centre of the town is quaint beyond compare;  
the streets lined with exclusive little shops  
and the restaurants all with crisp linens and great wine lists.

It's no mistake that people living in nearby towns call it "*Smellesley*."

Most of the people who live there have worked hard to achieve—  
with one of the most outward signs of their success being a Wellesley address.

I came to know this community as one of its ministers.  
The congregation I served before accepting your call  
was the Unitarian Universalist Society of Wellesley Hills.

I was there only for a year as the Interim Assistant Minister  
as I completed divinity school and jumped through the final hoops  
on the path to ordination.

It is a marvelous congregation, and I will always be grateful  
for the opportunity to study and practice the art of ministry with them  
before being turned loose to minister on my own.

One of my areas of responsibility was working with the youth group,  
who taught me many things, including how to work an ipod  
on a road trip to visit the working farm of the Heifer Project.

I recall meeting with them one night  
after a student at Wellesley High School took his own life.

Sadly, this was an all-too-common occurrence in this picturesque town.

My heart was heavy as the youth  
talked about the pressures under which they lived.

The children of overachievers, they felt a not-too-subtle obligation  
to strive to match their parents' expectations.

And, yet, they knew the score.

They knew that out of each senior class at Wellesley High School, the Ivy League universities from which most of their parents had graduated would take only two or three of them, at most.

Now, these are, of course, privileged problems to have. But during my time in Wellesley, I learned that there is ministry to be offered to the “up and out” as much as the “down and out.” Mark Twain once wrote a story about a man who, for one day, had a remarkable gift.

For better and for worse, for this one day, the man could see every person he met, regardless of their outward appearance, as “the struggling, incomplete, imperfect human beings that they were.”<sup>2</sup>

Upon meeting a complete stranger, he “could immediately see and sense all the hidden hurts and burdens, all the secret scars and wounds that these others carried hidden away inside themselves.”

And, maybe most importantly, “others could see in his eyes that their inmost sorrows were revealed to him.”

The uncanny ability he possessed for this single day left him forever changed.

From that day forward, he knew that the world is not always as it appears.

He knew that no matter what the outer trappings might tell, every life has its share of sorrow, and every life has its defining moments when courage is found when all seemed hopeless.

In Wellesley, I saw first-hand the pressure on our youth to be extraordinary—which is no small order in a world that is in so many ways less hope-filled than the one their parents and grandparents knew.

While these young people had most every advantage available, they are coming of age in an era that faces truly daunting challenges.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the telling by Rev. Patrick O’Neil in “The Missing Piece: On the Blessings of Imperfection,” preached in Brooklyn, New York, 14 September 2008.

And in ways that break my heart,  
youth are coming of age in a world that measures basic success  
by what should rightly only be considered extraordinary achievement.

Not everyone is going to grow up to be Sidney Crosby or Clara Hughes,  
Shania Twain or, for that matter, Justin Bieber  
(who went to the concert last night...?).

That astute, if brutally honest, English teacher was right.  
We are more ordinary than otherwise.

The problem with that is that, as Brené Brown puts it,  
“In this world, an ordinary life  
has become synonymous with a meaningless life.”

In a world that narrowly measures success in life  
by the money or power one accrues  
or by athletic or even academic achievement,  
something terribly precious is being lost.

Success must be understood as more than outward achievement.  
Some of the most successful people I know  
would have little to show by the standard measures of accomplishment.

But they have much to demonstrate by their commitment  
to living lives with the quiet courage of integrity.  
These are people who from ordinary lives  
do the most extraordinary of things:  
practising compassion,  
mastering the art of hospitality,  
giving generously of themselves from what they have.

You might recall that last spring, *The Toronto Star* ran a beautiful and powerful piece  
titled “Shelagh was here—an ordinary, magical life.”

Shelagh Gordon had recently died of a brain aneurysm.  
She didn’t leave behind a partner or any children.  
She didn’t leave behind the most exciting of careers.  
She dropped out of university, waited tables early on,  
sold wine for a few years, and then, at the time of her death,  
was selling ads to real estate agents  
in Toronto’s *Resale Home & Condo Guide*.

And, yet, her obituary, which ran on Valentine’s Day last February read:  
“Our world is a smaller place today without our Shelagh.  
Our rock, our good deed doer, our tradition keeper, our moral compass.”

As the column explained, “it stated she was the ‘loving aunt and mother’  
to a list of names, without differentiating among them.”<sup>3</sup>

“Her home teemed with dogs, sisters, nieces, nephews and her ‘life partner’—  
a gay man—who would pass summer nights reading books  
in bed beside her wearing matching reading glasses.

*The Star* had decided to explore the impact a single, ordinary life  
can have on others.

A team of reporters attended her funeral.  
They interviewed the more than 200 people  
who turned out to say their goodbyes.

What they discovered was that  
“She had a lot of magic in her life...” and  
“That you can live a full, interesting, ordinary life.”

Many of us know this, of course.  
But I’m surprised by how often we forget.  
How frequently we find it impossible to believe—  
in our heart of hearts—that our lives,  
as ordinary as they may sometimes be,  
are of inherent, intrinsic, unimaginable worth.

A few years ago, I recall reading in a blog by my colleague Parisa Parsa  
that she had arrived uncharacteristically early  
to pick up her son from summer camp.<sup>4</sup>

As she tells the story, “It was the last day of camp...,  
and as part of their closing ritual,  
they were giving out awards to each kid  
based on the most positive spin on their character.

“The formula was to describe all the characteristics,  
then pause dramatically before saying the name of the child.

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Porter, “Shelagh was here,” *The Toronto Star*, 16 March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Parisa Parsa, “That Special,” <http://pastorprayers.org/2008/08/11/that-special/>, 11 August 2008.

“The first child to get an award was lauded as  
‘the most calm, collected, and thoughtful helper of all,  
who was always there with a considerate word for fellow campers and for the counselors.’  
“When they said the name, up popped this skinny little five year-old girl,  
whose shoes looked like they could swallow her toothpick legs,  
and whose glasses were teetering heavily on her delicate face.

“She was adorable in the way that made [Parisa] want to  
be able to follow her around through her childhood  
just to make sure no one is mean to her.

“As soon as she heard her name, she exclaimed ‘Me? Really?’  
in the most sincere and genuine way, and turned bright red  
with what looked like a mixture of pride, embarrassment and shock.

“She marched up to get her [bristle-board] award,  
and on the way back, shaking her head,  
exclaimed with complete sincerity: ‘I had no idea I was that special!’

That’s when, Parisa says, that her eyes began to leak.

As Unitarians, we uphold as our first principle  
“the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

That principle has long guided us to fight for human rights.  
And, yet, we so often struggle to know  
that it applies as much to ourselves as anyone else.

How often I overhear the doubt  
that seems to sit on so many of our shoulders,  
telling us that our imperfections and our shortcomings  
are the true and only measure of our worth.

The voice that tells the lie  
that our failings and disappointments diminish the value of our life.

How easy it is to take in those doubts  
and let them define who we know ourselves to be.

How hard it is to trust the rest of the story.

Many years ago, there was a Franciscan nun named Sister Helen  
who taught Grade Three math at Saint Mary’s School.

Among her 34 students, she was particularly fond of a very talkative little boy named Mark Eklund.

He was tidy in appearance but had a happy-to-be-alive attitude that made even his occasional mischievousness delightful.

Mark talked incessantly and Sister Helen had to remind him again and again that talking without permission was unacceptable.

Strangely enough, each time she got on to him, he thanked her.

“Thank you for correcting me, Sister!”

She didn’t quite know what to make of it at first, but before long became accustomed to hearing it many times a day.

A few years later, she had Mark as a student again, though he didn’t talk nearly as much in grade nine as he had grade three.

One Friday, toward the end of the year, the vibe in the classroom was off. Things just didn’t feel right.

The class had been struggling with a new concept all week, and Sister Helen sensed the students were frustrated with themselves—and edgy with one another.

In a fit of inspiration, she asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on a sheet of paper, leaving a space between each name.

She then told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and to write it down.

It took the remainder of the class period to finish the assignment.

That weekend, Sister Helen wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper and listed what everyone else had said about that person.

On Monday she gave each student his or her list.

Before long, the entire class was smiling.

“Really?” she heard whispered.  
“I never knew that meant anything to anyone!”

No one mentioned those papers in class again.  
Sister Helen never knew if they discussed them after class  
or with their parents, but it didn’t matter.  
The exercise had accomplished its purpose.  
The students were happy with themselves and one another once again.

That group of students moved on  
into the unfolding adventures of their lives.

Several years later, Sister Helen learned the news  
that Mark had been killed in a terrible accident.

On the day of the funeral, she entered a church  
crowded with his family and friends.

The organ played. The minister spoke.  
Mark’s loved ones filed past his coffin.

When the funeral was over,  
Sister Helen expressed her condolences to Mark’s parents,  
explaining that she had been his math teacher—twice.

Through their grief, Mark’s parents managed a smile  
and told her that Mark had talked about her a lot.  
They invited her to their home for the reception.

When she arrived, Mark’s parents asked if they might show her something.  
Taking her son’s wallet from her purse,  
Mark’s mother opened it and carefully removed  
a worn piece of notebook paper  
that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times.

Without looking, Sister Helen knew that the paper  
was the one on which she had listed all the good things  
each of Mark’s classmates had said about him.

Mark’s mother thanked the elderly nun  
for this gift that Mark had so clearly treasured.

Glad to see their former teacher,  
a number of Mark’s classmates gathered around Sister Helen,



