



Pat Humphries' "Swimming to the Other Side" **Recognizing That We've Arrived**

From the message series *Songs of the Spirit*

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Edited Transcript

You may have heard this one before. It's a good one. A priest, pastor and a rabbi, they walk into a bar. All friends, they're discussing with each other who is best at their job. They decide that the best way they can determine this is that each of them will go out into the forest and find a bear and try to convert that bear to their religious tradition.

A couple of weeks later on the street, the priest and the pastor run into each other: "How'd it go?" Well, the priest responds with a black eye and scratches all over him. The priest said, "Well, I found a bear out in the forest, and I sprinkled a little bit of holy water on that bear. He didn't like it, but next week he's taking his First Communion."

The pastor has two black eyes, scratches all over him, his arm in a sling and is watching with a crutch. He says, "I found a bear, and I read the bear the Holy Scripture right up in his face. And that bear and I, we wrestled back and forth and up and down until finally I tired him out. And I got him into the water and I gave him a full-on immersion in that water of a Holy Spirit Baptism! He's a Bible-believing Christian right now."

"What about our friend the rabbi?" the priest asked.

"Go to the rabbi's house. I'm let in. Go into the rabbi's bedroom. It's all dark and hushed and quiet, and laying there in a full body cast and in traction is the rabbi. And I said, 'Friend, what happened?' Just this bare whisper, this bare whisper comes out: 'I shouldn't have started with the circumcision.'"

[Laughter]

Perhaps we can cap this all up perfectly by saying that cliché: We plan, God laughs. Our plans don't always turn out like we expect. Our success and our understanding of success, what we're good at in this life often changes, and it should change.

This is a time of year of graduation for a lot of folks, of high hopes and accomplishments, celebrating achievements, and focusing on successes past and successes yet to come. Now, you may have become familiar a number of years ago, or maybe just in this last week because it's been making the rounds in social media, with the commencement address by the author David Foster Wallace, the address he gave at Kenyon College in 2005.

It begins like this, with a little story. (He says all commencement addresses have to begin with a little clichéd story.) Two young fish are swimming along one day, and they come upon an older fish, a wiser fish. Says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two fish swim on for a while, the two younger fish, until finally one turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

He says this is the point of the fish story, which is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and hardest for us to talk about. He goes on to describe in wonderful, great detail that the point of education and life is not about conventional success, as much of

our society defines it. And by the way, it also isn't about cynicism and being embittered about other people's understanding of conventional success.

And then he continues. He says to those graduates, those bright-eyed, bushy-tailed graduates,

If you really learn how to pay attention...it will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

This is real education. It has almost nothing to do with knowledge and everything to do with simple awareness: awareness that what is so essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us all the time, it's so hidden in plain sight that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

This is water.

This is water.

In other words, we're all swimming to the other side, and we're all swimming together. But as David Foster Wallace said and as our song we sang together just said, we can, as we move through this life, "never recognize that we've arrived." We can miss what is most obvious. We can miss, misjudge, mistake, misunderstand the lives of other people. And so it's so important to remind ourselves over and over again: This is water. This is water, and we're all swimming in it.

There's a postscript to the David Foster Wallace story, and it's a sad one that some of you know. David Foster Wallace, who was one of the leading lights, the true American great young novelist, lived for decades with awful soul-crushing depression until finally, at the age of 46, he felt he could not take it anymore, and he killed himself.

Now, knowing this about David Foster Wallace, if you did not before, do you find yourself responding to the wisdom that he just shared differently? Because I know some people have. It's a natural reaction, even if it's not a reaction we want to have. Some people have questions whether the wisdom he had in his books, whether the wisdom in his Kenyon College commencement address, might that be invalidated because he ended his own life? I think the answer is no, not at all. I think it actually makes his insights all the more powerful and meaningful because he lived and knew such incredible psychic and soulful pain throughout his life and yet still could maintain such remarkable insight into our common human condition. If anything, perhaps his sensitivity was too great, his insight too much.

Indeed, for our Mindfulness Retreat next week, there's only one reading I have given to people. And even though David Foster Wallace never mentioned the words "mindfulness meditation" or "mindful yoga" or "walking meditation," it is all about mindfulness, all about the capacity to pay attention to our lives that makes all the difference. Because when we do, we will find that some of the commonplace assumptions embedded in many commencement addresses and graduation addresses this time of the year about what success is, we may find them changing. And we may come to know in light of David Foster Wallace's story, and some of the tragedies and heartbreaks of our own, that commonplace understanding of success is not enough to get us through this life in a meaningful way.

Another great novelist, John Updike, said:

All things end under heaven, and if time is hell to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds.

I read these words when I was like 20, and they have been among the most important words I've ever read. So I'm going to share them with you again: "All things end under heaven, and if time is hell to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds."

I've been focusing on this a lot in my life right now. Next month I was invited to do something that I never quite expected I would be invited to do a couple of decades ago in my life. I am leading a memorial

service for my classmates at my 25th high school reunion, right up here at the Hill School, right up Route 100 for all of my classmates and all of our classmates who have died, a number of whom by their own hand. Over the years, if you've been here for a while, I've shared with you the story of one of these young guys, a guy named Chris. About five years ago, my wife and I were walking into a concert. I just, to be honest, distractedly started checking my smartphone. And I'm glad I did in that moment, because I received via Facebook what turned out to be a suicide note for my friend, Chris, who I hadn't seen in almost two decades.

A couple of hours searching, we were able to track him down, and in a couple of hours of talking I was able to talk him down. And he did not take his own life that night. We stayed in touch for a while. I asked myself if I did enough. Eventually, Chris took his own life, struggling with some of the same demons that David Foster Wallace did.

I reflect back on our bright days together, our commencement address. We set out wanting to subdue the bear. But sometimes in life, the bear subdues us, sometimes, painfully and irrevocably so. Under conventional definitions of success, David Foster Wallace, my friend Chris, they couldn't make it somehow. Some might even call them failures, or harshly, *losers*. It's not true. Not at all. And it says more about sometimes our limited understandings of what success is and our fears about whether we have deeper success than just outward success, than it says anything at all about their failures. And by the way, suicide is not a failure. Neither is it noble, artistic or heroic. It is just sad, sad and sad.

What we hang our hearts on in this life, the true definitions of success, what makes us a success, matters a great deal to the kind of world that we wish to live in. The kind of values that we want to foster. The kind of people that we want to be.

This past week, you may have heard via social media a bunch of things about Abercrombie & Fitch. I think I have a few Abercrombie & Fitch articles of clothing. I like clothes, I like fashion, although my abs are not nearly washboard-y enough for Abercrombie & Fitch. But we found out some really disturbing things about Abercrombie & Fitch, that they intentionally stock extra small but do not stock extra large. I don't know too much about women's sizes, but they don't stock anything for women above size ten, which, as I understand it, is really quite a perverse choice in terms of saying what kind of body types matter and what kinds of body types don't.

And then we found out even a little bit more about the CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch. He said this a number of years ago: "In every school there are the cool and popular kids, and then there are the not-so-cool kids. Candidly," he said, "we at Abercrombie & Fitch, we go after the cool kids. We go after the attractive, all-American kid with the great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don't belong in our clothes, and they can't belong."

I will not be buying anything ever again from Abercrombie & Fitch until they change this corporate philosophy. And I'm not laying all the things that are horrendous in our culture, all of our misguided understandings of success and who is cool and who is not on, Abercrombie & Fitch. But we hear the seeds in this, don't we? We hear the seeds of exclusion. We hear the seeds of bullying. We hear the seeds of hatred, of distrust of those who are different, of those who don't conform in some way to mainstream, so-called mainstream, understandings of who matters and who doesn't.

Reminds me from Charles Dickens (who, by the way, was a Unitarian) from *Great Expectations*. Jaegers, the quote-unquote "realist lawyer," sees the world the way it really is. He said there are only two types of people: beaters and cringers. But in a Universalist tradition, we know this is a false choice. Too often the societal definitions of success rest upon, are we going to be a beater or are we going to be a cringer? We know that's not the only choice because we can look around, cultivate that awareness. We can sing and say with the song today that there are "some in power and some in pain" if we open up our perspective widely enough. And you know what the truth is? There are some of us who are in power and some of us who are in pain at the same time. There are some of us – perhaps it's you right here today – who seem to be swimming through life, from what other people can tell, perfectly. But inside, with every additional stroke, you are saying, "This is the one where I go down and I drown."

If we look around and open our hearts, we see that we are all swimming in the water. From this, we can build a deeper understanding of success beyond the popular images of this time of the year, beyond the bright-eyed bushy-tailed understandings of success, and dive deeper, and to know that for all of us, probably for most of us, it's a mixture of life between the successes we have had and the failures that we thought would crush us. Between the hopes we have deeply in our hearts that exist right alongside, not canceling out, not bigger than, not less than the heartbreak that also exists right at the center of who each and every one of us are.

When I focus on the commencement addresses of this time of the year, one of the things it draws me back to is the tradition in which was raised, the Jewish tradition, which began even before it was known as Judaism just as ancient Israeli, Israelite tradition. It rested on these two blessings. They're called the Abrahamic blessings. Basically, their understanding of God said, "Abraham, follow this way and you will receive land and progeny. People will come after you who are from you, and you will have a place to call home." These are great promises. There's nothing wrong with them. However, taken to their extreme, they also become the worst forms of religion: territoriality and tribalism, protecting mine and ours against others.

But here's the thing: These promises didn't really come true for the ancient Israelite people. Sometimes their children died. Sometimes they were dispossessed of the land they thought was theirs. Things did not turn out as planned, and they suffered and they struggled. And so they evolved into a new understanding of what the heart of their tradition was. In Hebrew, it goes by the word *hesed* and *pali*. The language of Buddhism, *metta*. In Christianity, it's *agape*. It simply means a love that is here and present for all of us, regardless of who we are, regardless of what we have done, a love that is much bigger and not dependent upon how much we succeed or how much we achieve, or how much we fail.

When I focus on a different understanding of success, I think about this. I'm sure I've used this before, this Powerpoint slide here. This side, going up and down, vertical axis: abundance and scarcity. Along the top, active or passive. And we see, if we have a passive and scarce attitude towards this life, we're going to compare ourselves to other people. It's a pretty miserable way to be, and I've done a lot of it in my life. [Laughter] Always comparing; are we up, are we down? If we're active and yet with think resources are scarce – love, money, meaning – we're going to be competitive. By the way, most of our traditional understanding, societal definitions of success, are number two. [Laughter] Number three, passive and abundant, appreciation. You did a great job. I have nothing to do with your success whatsoever. I'm going to applaud you. That's amazing. And then the fourth, which is, I think at the heart of what we're trying to do here at Wellsprings and in all of our lives: active, engaged and abundant, cooperative. We are swimming together. This is the water.

A lot of our societal definitions of success are in category number two. And I get it. I have a competitive streak, more competitive than I like to admit. On the night of my ordination, about five years after my mom had died, my dad said to another friend of mine in ministry, "Ken gets his caring and compassion and love for people from his mother. He gets his ambition from me." I get a little bit more than that from my dad, but it's a pretty honest breakdown. As I age, though, my ambition hasn't gone away. But it's become clearer, and it's also not my ambition. It's relatively simple, to be present, to be aware, to be awake and to be kind and to know that in the measure that I achieved these, I know what success is.

I think if all of us take a step back from some of those conventional understandings of success and we reflect on those people who really have been successful, as we understand that word in our hearts, we will see that their success not – does not rest upon them giving us something [laughter], making us successful in a conventional way. But it's because they taught us something about good and proper and the whole ways to be alive. They modeled what true success for us is. Understanding that what Updike said is absolutely real, all things done under heaven. And if time is held to be invalidating, then nothing under heaven succeeds, nothing real succeeds. Those who die with the most toys don't win. [Laughter] That's why we have to have a deeper understanding of what makes for success in this life. The Beatles, I think, put it as well as anyone did: "And in the end, the love we take is equal to the love that we make."

This is the water. This is the water. When we open up to the reality that this is the water. We know that old cliché attributed to Plato. He did not say it, but it's still true: "Be kind, for everyone you know and

everyone you encounter is fighting a great battle." Be kind because we are all swimming to the other side. Be kind, finally, because this is the water. This is the water.

This is the water. This is the water. This is the water. We are the water, and we are all in it. And so may we be kind to ourselves and to each other. Amen. And may you live in blessing.

Let's pray to God:

Oh, Great and Infinite Source, that which calls us into wholeness in this life, who calls us to wake up in the midst of life, in the midst of going about our days sometimes numb, sometimes tired, sometimes angry, sometimes high and bids us wake up, this is the water. What else are we waiting for?

This is the water. Let us swim in it. Let us save as best we can those who are drowning.

May we find our strokes and waves through the water, to be clean and kind and loving.

Amen.