

NAME

The Farewell Sunday Service for August 16, 2020.mp3

DATE

August 18, 2020

DURATION

26m 35s

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

[00:00:07]

Hi, everyone. It is so good to be back with you after two weeks off this morning, I'm glad that you're here.

[00:00:15]

I want to start this morning actually with a story that I saw last week online. There's an actor named Keraun Harris. He is a black man. He lives in Los Angeles. And last week, something very unusual happened to him, something so unusual that as soon as he got home, he recorded a video of himself telling the story of what had happened and posted it on Twitter, where it's now been viewed over 100000 times. I thought about just showing you the video of Keraun himself, but unfortunately, it has a few too many curse words. So I can't do that. But you can Google it later if you want to watch it easy. Keraun was driving in his own neighborhood and he was pulled over by a police officer. He was pulled over for not having license plates, plates on his car, which was because he had just gotten a new car. So he said, I did have plates, but they were that paper kind and I didn't have them in the window. So I told the officer, explain the situation. And he said, OK, cool. Well, let me just go back and I'm going to run some numbers and check if this is your car. And if it is, you're free to go. And Keraun was, you know, used to that. He said, OK, fine, this is annoying, but I'll wait here. Even I haven't done anything wrong. Sure.

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So Keraun was waiting in his car and he noticed as he was waiting across the street from him, a white woman had pulled over her car and she was holding up her cell phone like this. And he realized that she was recording. She was recording Keraun sitting in his car and the officer back in his cruiser. And he said the cop had me waiting for about 15 minutes or so. But he said for all of those 15 minutes, this white woman was sitting in her car recording the whole interaction. Eventually, he said, the cop came back and said, OK, you know, everything checked out, you're free to go. He said, thank you, I appreciate it. And he started his car and he looked back over across the street at that woman and she looked worried and she kind of gave him this thumbs up, like, are you OK? And he said, Yeah, yeah, it's OK. I'm good. Thank you. She looked really relieved, he said, and she started her car, but then she waited for him to pull off and then she pulled off to. He said, I'm not used to this, this is this has never happened to me before. I've been pulled over a lot of times, but I have never had this happen. And he said, you know, we really got allies now. We've really got people looking out for us.

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The woman had stopped just to make sure that he was safe. And he was so surprised because it was such a new and unusual way to show up, to show love. But my gosh, we are all getting used to new and unusual ways to show love these days, aren't we?

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With so much changing for us and around us. It can be so confusing sometimes to know what is up and down and right and wrong, and that's all the more reason that instead of relying on old habits in impossible times, we need to ask, what does love require of me right now? And the answer will not always be something we're used to or something that we expect.

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Many of us never expected that love might require us to take 15 minutes out of our day to record a traffic stop, or that love might require us to forgo haircuts for five months straight or to figure out homeschool laws in our state or to find new and creative ways to support the U.S. Postal Service or to overtip our delivery drivers religiously or to learn to play games like Scrabble and Whiplash online. Love requires all kinds of unexpected things from us right now. The answer to that question can change, it can make us uncomfortable, and yet asking that question is exactly what we are always called to do as Unitarian Universalist.

[00:04:53]

What does love require of me? What does love require of me right now?

[00:05:04]

The main character in today's SpiritFlix movie certainly never expected the answer she got when she asked that question. That's what love required of her might be, keeping her grandmother's terminal diagnosis a secret. From her grandmother, *The Farewell*, today's movie is a story about loss and sadness, about honesty and lies, about the desire to connect and to protect the ones that we love. It tells the story of Billy, a 31 year old Chinese American woman who's living in New York City, who agrees to visit her grandmother, who she calls Nainai her nainai in China with her family. You see, Nainai is sick with stage four lung cancer. But as is apparently customary in some Chinese communities, the family, the whole family is hiding her diagnosis from Nainai, believing that knowing this would do her more harm than good. Instead, they concoct a fake wedding of a cousin as an excuse to gather their family around by nine one last time in her hometown in China.

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Billy's family is telling her that this is what love requires of her right now.

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And she honestly is torn. To put it mildly, she's torn, this deception she feels, though well intended, is wrong, it makes her very, very uncomfortable.

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To be honest with you, it made me uncomfortable to I have a strong reality bias.

[00:07:07]

I read non-fiction. I believe in truth telling. I always air on the side of transparency. Yes, sometimes too much. I think I put my faith in the idea that anything can be faced if we are honest with each other and stay connected through it. Truth builds intimacy and connection, right. I have preached that message before and I wanted to preach that message today. I promise you, actually, if you hate the next 20 minutes and you want to hear me give that message instead, call me some time because it's ready.

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It's ready to go in my head. But I appreciated that this movie asked me to sit with that discomfort and asked me to be uncomfortable for a while to watch a story unfold differently than I might have expected to wonder, even if everything I believe is always right.

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And, of course, to look at another uncomfortable truth, which is that we all tell lies. According to researchers, most of us tell one to two lies a day, which is about as often as we brush our teeth. They're not always big evil lies. We lie sometimes for reasons of ease. Saving time, social lubrication, even altruism, prosocial reasons to make people feel good.

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We sidestep sometimes by not exactly answering the question being asked, or we leave out key parts of the truth because we haven't technically been asked about them. The movie *The Farewell* itself is actually bookended with these kinds of lies. In the very first scene, Nainai calls Billy on the phone while she's walking through the streets of New York. And Billy says, Yes, Nainai, I'm wearing a hat, but she isn't. And Billy stops at one point and has a short conversation with a stranger and says, Who was that? She says, Oh, that was a friend. It's just easier, right?

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At the end of the movie *Lies*, once we understand Billy and her Nainai saying goodbye to each other for what they believe is likely the last time.

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They say things like, I'm not crying. I'll see you again soon, I know we'll visit each other again very soon.

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I have a strong reality bias. But even I understand that sometimes it's best to temper raw honesty with compassion. Especially in the most difficult moments.

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I have probably officiated about a dozen memorial services now in my time as a minister, probably twice as many weddings.

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And I've learned over time.

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That these kinds of family events bring out all sorts of family issues, maybe you've seen this, too.

[00:10:23]

I've had different family members pull me aside to ask that I not talk about a particular aspect of someone's life. Or to ask that I give this person the longest reading or the first. Or to say that I should keep an eye on this person when it's their turn at the microphone to share.

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And the truth is, I've learned in these moments. To be gentle. To be actually at my most gentle.

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There's a lot going on that has nothing to do with me. There may be agendas and decades old conflict happening. There may be competing stories about the person being honored that day, but I've learned it's not my job on that day to dig down and find the real truth. Instead, I tried to make the space big enough for all of it.

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I try to give voice to the fullness and the complexity to include it all somehow even doing that might ruffle some feathers. But I see my role as making space for the family, all of the family, to grieve or to celebrate. And to experience some of that sense of compassion and gentleness. In a stressful moment of change and transition.

[00:12:13]

The Reverend Christina Shiu is a Yueyue chaplain. She works at Cedar Sinai in Los Angeles and she herself is Chinese American. She actually had an article published about this movie in the February edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association. In her article, Christine shares that she actually first heard this story that's told in the farewell three years before the movie was made. You see in 2016, the filmmaker behind this movie, also a Chinese American woman, Lulu Wang. She recorded an episode of NPR's This American Life. Where she told the real life story of her family, Lulu Wang's family and her own grandmother's cancer diagnosis and her own real life family's deception that inspired the film. The irony, right, that this movie about a lie is based on a true story. Reverend Christina brought that recording of this American life to the palliative care team, her co-workers at the hospital, so that they could all listen to it together and it resonated for all of them. It turns out all of them had experienced this, had witnessed and supported families who'd made the same choice that Lulu Wang's family did out of a deep sense, she said, of love and a desire to protect. They deliberately concealed a terminal diagnosis from a patient. Many cultures, Reverend Casteen said, not just Chinese, not just Asian, believe in the power of the negative consequences that can come from knowledge of a poor prognosis. Everyone, Christina said that standing in doorways, she had received whispered instruction from families not to make the patients sad, not to discuss anything stressful, not to talk about death.

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This persistent belief she'd seen that talking about death might hasten its arrival.

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Christina's training as a chaplain teaches her to do much the same thing as I have learned to do in milestone ceremonies. She tries to meet each family member with compassion. She tries where she can to help them communicate, to translate, to build bridges between them, but ultimately she just creates a space that's big enough. From multiple things to be real to them, for multiple things to be true at the same time, which can still ruffle some feathers. But hopefully creates a container that each person feels they have room to belong in, where each person feels heard and seen by someone in a difficult time.

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It's in that bigger, expanded kind of context that Kristina can see the family's actions in the farewell as a form of palliative care. There are different opinions in the family in the film about whether their choices are right or wrong. But there are undeniably a range of true spiritual values that are guiding each of their actions. The value of seeing our lives as belonging to a greater whole. The strength that we can derive from our relationships with the people that we love. The importance of being present and in the moment with each other and the value of holding space for everything in this life, the unavoidable, contradictory joy and pain.

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Of the human experience.

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Christina also offers a lot of gratitude in her article to the filmmaker, to Lulu Wang for telling this story about a lie. So honestly, knowing, of course, it opens her up to criticism, it opens her family up to criticism. Indeed. Unfortunately, it right in a world where we too often stereotype the things we don't understand opens her entire culture up to criticism, potentially. But Christina says she is very grateful for the bravery it took to share that, for the authenticity and the vulnerability it took to share that story, because it illustrates an undeniable truth that no family is perfect.

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Especially when confronted with loss. With the desire to connect and protect all the things that come up when a family is faced with a grave illness.

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No family is perfect.

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And healing and love. Can take so many forms. Unexpected and surprising ones. Sometimes.

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But always. As she puts it, healing comes not in spite of. But through our brokenness and our flaws. The sacred mixes in with our messy embodied lives.

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In impossible times. When we are faced with challenges that have no easy answers, when all we want is healing.

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We all need to ask ourselves. What does love require of me? What does love require of me right now?

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And let that be our guide. Even if the answer is not what we expect.

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I won't tell you if the family in the movie In The Farewell manages to successfully keep nine diagnosis from her, if you haven't seen it yet, of course, part of the draw in the film is wondering at every turn right, is somebody going to break? Is somebody going to let the truth come out?

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But I will tell you that in The Real Story, in the real life story from this American life in 2016 of Lulu Wang and her family. Lulu shared some surprising things that she ended up learning about her Nainai after that awkward, deceptive, fateful trip to China.

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When she returned home, she started talking again with members of her family, asking them questions, and she learned that her neighbor's husband, Liz's grandfather, Yayo, had liver cancer many years before and the family had followed the exact same path with him. Nainai had followed the exact same path with him. Keeping news of his diagnosis from him until the very end.

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Lulu asked her father about this and he said he believes he knew no one told him, he said, but deep down, people can feel when they are really dying. They knew and he knew, but everyone pretended not to know.

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Lulu Wang also learned that in 2007. Six years before her nine lung cancer diagnosis, she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Now her nine, I got that news directly from her doctor so she knew, but she kept it from the rest of the family except for her sister. Lulu's father and uncle, her sons didn't know, nor did Lulu herself. I had a mastectomy and had been wearing a prosthetic breast for nine years. Her sister insisted that I concealed this not because she was ashamed. But so that we wouldn't worry.

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They said all this time that we were lying to her to protect her. She had also put on a show to protect us. And perhaps the most surprising part of this real life story after that fateful lung cancer diagnosis in 2013 and their trip to go see her, which they thought would be their last, Lulu Wang's grandmother is still alive today, going on seven years now. Her sister is certain that Nainai is still alive because of the family's decision to lie to her because they gave her joy instead of worry.

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But Lulu says everybody in the family has their own idea of what has kept her going. She says Google thinks it's because of her weekly prayers at the local Daoist temple. My uncle, she says, credits my nice survival to some expensive miracle probiotics that he brought her from Japan. And after a while, when I seemed to be doing fine, Lu says, my parents said to my uncle, maybe we should get a less expensive brand of probiotics. And my uncle freaked, she said. He said if we switch it and she dies, then it's suddenly on you.

[00:23:04]

There are so many things that we can and so many things that we can't control in this life, there are always going to be some mysteries and some problems that aren't meant to be solved. But one thing we can always do is ask that question.

[00:23:27]

What does love require of me right now?

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And we can make room for the answers, maybe a bigger room than we're used to, a bigger space than usual in

these difficult times for some new answers, for some healthy humility, for asking if we are always sure that our first instinct is correct, we can open that space for each other today. That just might lead us towards more trust, towards more honesty, and maybe even towards some healing.

[00:24:19]

Amen and may live a blessing.

[00:24:23]

I invite you to take a moment wherever you are to relax and be in this moment, maybe close your eyes, maybe bow your head. If it feels good, let your shoulders fall and join me in the spirit of prayer. God of our hearts. Spirit of the unknown of all that we cannot see of all that is a mystery to us and we'll stay a mystery. Help us to remember that when everything is confusing and mysterious and changing and shifting, that there are still some guideposts to follow and there are still some threads we can find and hold on to. The call of our common humanity, the knowledge that we are in this together and the voice of that love then is always here, whether it's near or far from us, it's always reaching out to us. Asking us to take a risk to reach back and follow it. May we all be greeted with grace and gentleness? And gifted with courage as we follow the voice of your heart, God calling to our own hearts. For the prayers I've spoken out loud and for the prayers that every single person with us this morning is holding on their hearts, we say amen.

[00:26:19]

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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