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DURATION

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2 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

[00:00:06] Speaker2

Some of you may have seen this viral post from just this week, that's real life Olympic windsurfer Karen Barlow from the Netherlands on the right with the blue arrow cut into his hair on the left also with a blue arrow on his bald head. Well, that's a ring. And he is the fictional character from the TV series I'm going to be talking to you about today. In my spirit Flick's message, I'm going to introduce you to the world of Avatar, The Last Airbender. Now, Batlow made this post before he raised and he wrote in part, this haircut tribute to the what is to the one and only true wind master. I hope the spirit of this great warrior gives me the power to sail well this week and use the wind in my favor. It makes me happy that this fictional young monk with a blue arrow on his head named Ang is getting an online nod from a real life windsurfer. I'll explain their element based connection in a few moments, but right now I'll just take a moment to introduce myself. Hello, my name is Carol Breslin and I am the Spirit director here at Wellspring's AM also co leader of the Youth Bridge Ministry. And I'm really excited to be with you here today to share a message centered around the two thousand six Nickelodeon children's animated series called Avatar The Last Airbender. This complex story is about hope and kindness, responsibility and determination, and it spoke to me even before I was a Unitarian Universalist and especially as a parent.

[00:01:54] Speaker2

As you you religious educator, I've pondered how to share this expansive story with our kids for some time. In fact, in your spare spirit this summer, we've been watching some episodes together online as a way to explore our new faith. And I'm a part of a professional group exploring ideas for creating an extended YouTube curriculum centered around this series. So when I learned that there was an opening to preach in this summer Spirit Flix season, I decided to take the opportunity to share this unique story with all of you. And despite the show's well-established appeal to children, my message is not specifically directed at our youth spirit friends. It's for anyone listening. Now, the world of this animated series, Avatar, The Last Airbender, is a fantastical one in the show, is both a commercial success for Nickelodeon and a critical one for its creators, Brian Connetquot and Michael Dontae DiMartino. It is sixty one twenty three minute episodes set up in three seasons. There's water and there's Earth. That's the characters and fire. And you'll note it's a pretty well worn and beloved series here in my family. The the original music is amazing and the artwork really is beautiful. But it's a lot of material, and as I began to think about what I wanted to say about this cartoon or more specifically, how it would help me say something about us as well, Springers and as you use, I focused on our seven principles.

[00:03:49] Speaker2

I personally love our seven principles, which I keep handy in one word form for my spirit, friends, research, respect, kindness, learn, search, vote, justice, connection. And soon there will be an eighth principle around anti-racism or wholeness. I love them so much because they give me simple and accessible ideas for living into my faith and they make sense to me as a guide for shaping a better kind of world for us all. And that is something that really matters to me. Turns out making the world better or more whole is something that also matters to the characters in Avatar, The Last Airbender as well. The basic premise of the story is a bit complex, so bear with me for just a few minutes. There's four nationalities or cultures that exist in some pretty technological version of our world. They're comprised of the air nomads, the fire nation, the water tribes in the Earth Kingdom. Now, in each of these cultures exists specially gifted people known as benders, and they can, through a series of martial arts type movements, they can manipulate or bend the element they're part of the world is named for. So er vendors live er nomads, fire vendors or from the fire nation. Water vendors come from the water tribes and earth vendors come from, you guessed it, the earth kingdom vendors can control the elements for good or for harm, to defend or attack, to create or destroy.

[00:05:36] Speaker2

There's one person in this world called the Avatar whose purpose is to keep balance in the world among the four peoples. The avatar is born into each of the cultures in a repeating pattern of reincarnation, fire, water, earth and air, fire, water, earth and air and so on. And only that one person possesses the ability to master all four elements, the avatars, the world's spiritual leader, born from all four peoples throughout humankind's experience, demonstrating our interconnectedness and with roots in all four countries, that person helps the world to stay in balance, to stay in peace, to be whole. We learn that the leaders of the fire nation have decided that their way of life is the best way of life for everyone. And they have launched a world war, world war against the other nations that's lasted one hundred years. Their posture is not unlike some nations or leaders of today who seek to spread their power in authoritarian ways. We see the fire nation overwhelm other nations with force, use misinformation to create a narrative that what they are doing is just to foster prejudice amongst their own people to create a sense of superiority and righteousness. Can you think of countries and leaders who do that in our world today? Well, in the story, the next avatar in the cycle would have been born among the air nomads, the air nomads are easily identified by the blue tattoos, blue arrows tattooed on their heads, and they have the ability to manipulate the wind in the air.

[00:07:28] Speaker2

But this avatar, the world's next spiritual leader, has been missing for a century. And really since the fighting began in this war ravaged world is way out of balance. The fire nation has literally wiped out the air. Nomads and world domination is in its grasp. In the first episode, a mysterious 12 year old boy, the blue arrow on his head, has been found frozen. Captain America style in an iceberg, along with his giant six legged flying bison. He is rescued by two water tribes named Kitara and Soka. Now, just stop a minute here and share that McLain, the Breslin family, is an Avatar family from way back. We started watching the series when my kids were around six and eight years old. Allow me to share in their growth now. Allow me to share just a few examples of how deeply my family connected with the series. My son Joe must have watched the four episode finale about, I don't know, 20 times or more to this day, he holds almost every episode in detail here in his head. He's actually been a great resource for me as I've revisited the series and put my message together. Both of our kids consumed a lot of the Avatar related material, like books and graphic novels.

[00:09:00] Speaker2

And we watched the sequel Horror Together on Nickelodeon as well. My daughter's old email address features the acronym Atalay ATLA as a part of its address. Turns out ATLA is the phantom acronym for Avatar The Last Airbender, and I'll actually be using ATLA as shorthand for the series name from time to time here in my message. Now, when Joe was about nine, he insisted that we shave his head and paint a blue arrow on it so that he could be dressed as being the primary protagonist for Halloween. So here is a picture of the character in here is my son, Joe. Even once in a while today, my grown kids still Google real life recipes for the fantastical foods eaten on the show, and they make them together. Most recently, they made stewed, stewed prunes from the water, tried. And yes, I assure you, they tasted about as good as they sound. But why would an animated show primarily aimed at elementary school kids about this young man named Aang and his giant flying bison and his friends in a totally fictional world where you can manipulate the other elements like fire? Why would that have so much staying power? Well, honestly, I still think that's a pretty cool idea for a show today, but it wasn't just with the Brazilians. There's a whole ATLA fandom out there and with the pandemic and everyone stuck at home, a new audience found their way to the series on Netflix.

[00:10:51] Speaker2

I read that the fan base for Avatar, The Last Airbender, expanded 10 times over the past year and a half. And I think this program found its way into so many hearts and minds because its creator said that they wanted to make a children's series with integrity and heart. And in doing so, they created characters that go beyond the typical two dimensional good versus bad conflict. Yes, there are heroes and yes, there is a happy ending. It is, after all, a kid's show. But you are complicated. I don't have to tell you this. And I found so often that the kid shows when my kids were growing up, the characters were thin. So one dimensional, funny and silly is great sometimes. But so often characters would lie, they would cause harm. And only when they were caught did they reconsider their actions or make some sort of amends. I think in bringing us characters that make mistakes, commit harms and seek forgiveness, Kinetoscope and DeMartino reveals something very connected to our own lives that we can all choose both good and bad actions, and that there can be heroes and villains on either side of a conflict and that they can all make plenty of mistakes as they go after their goals. Now, the young friends we meet in the first episode embark on a journey to help that young airbender found in an iceberg, bring balance back to the world.

[00:12:40] Speaker2

Ang Lee Kim with the blue arrow on his head. If you haven't figured it out by now, is the long missing avatar. And since his people, the air nomads, have been wiped out by the fire nation, he truly is The Last Airbender. And although he is technically over a century old, having spent the last hundred years suspended in ice and is really just a 12 year old boy who ran away when he learned prematurely about his immense responsibilities as the spiritual leader of a war torn world. We learn pretty early in this story that our hero and like all of us, is far from perfect. Already in Airbender Angliss, find teachers to help him master the other three elements Water, Earth and Fire, in order to defeat the leader of the fire nation and bring the world back into balance. The pressure on this kid is incredible. The pressure on our Olympians is also incredible. The picture of Olympian windsurfer Bradlow, who created that haircut tribute to Ang Airbender, shows he's clearly inspired by this character's ability to literally tame the wind, but also by acting as a great warrior over the course of the series and does indeed prove to be someone who persists under immense expectations. And Batlow, with his blue arrow hair, did win the gold. Back in ATLA, the new friends set out to achieve their collective goal in this pursuit takes them all over the planet.

[00:14:25] Speaker2

And how are these youths able to move about the world so freely? You might ask why on Ang's flying bison? Of course, there's just a lot of fun parts in the show, but this common purpose takes them on their own personal journeys as well, each of them. And as we watch our main characters pursue these individual paths, they each grow as humans and they find the personal will to help their friend and accomplish his core mission. And they'll need to, if you'll forgive the overused term, become their best selves. Yes, I did say that makes me think of astronauts. They become their best selves. They achieve these amazing careers, yet they're all so dependent on one another in that little space capsule or our Olympic athletes like the ones we've been watching these past few weeks, they're each under pressure to perform individually and they also need to represent their country together on the world stage. The pressure on these athletes is incredible. And while each of the individual episodes in ATLA are entertaining on their own, the real power is in the extended story arcs of its main characters and Katara saga in Zuka, these four individuals possess a depth rarely given to characters in a children's story. And if you would have told me years ago, what's the kids cartoon? That while full of light hearted moments and if you wince worthy ones as well because no show is perfect, but that also touched on war, genocide, fascism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, hubris, colonization, lying, self-doubt and bad judgment.

[00:16:23] Speaker2

I would have said that really doesn't sound like a kids show to me, but I'm really glad that my adult cousin who loved the series himself, gave us the DVD set and we were all in from the beginning. How do you present flawed heroes and multidimensional antagonists with humor and also these heavier themes to children? If you're the outlook creators, you mix in forgiveness, responsibility, respect, kindness, vulnerability, redemption, science, determination and free choice. And how do I share Avatar, The Last Airbender, not just with our kids in your spirit this summer, but with you, my Wellspring's friends and fellow you use as well. As I said earlier, I find the show so personally relatable because I see all seven of our YouTube principles present in this show. Here's just one example. At one point, the main character and EKOS you principal number one respect in response to someone's harsh comments towards a citizen of the warring fire nation. And he says anyone is capable of great good or great evil. Anyone deserves to be treated like they're worth giving a chance. Even someone from the fire nation. Just a few weeks ago, lay preacher Chris Groppe reference this very tension between honoring our first principle respect in the very difficult political and cultural divides we're experiencing as a nation today.

[00:18:13] Speaker2

But although I find ATLA to be a veritable treasure trove of ways to explore and illuminate them all, my husband Jim gave me some really good advice, which was maybe just consider focusing on one of them. And so I thought about which one that would be. And first and foremost, I realize this story is the story of a quest that of individuals and that of a group. A few weeks ago, when Reverend can preach on and the apocalypse movie, I also like to use the word individuation and I thought I understood it from context, but I looked it up for my own clarification. And it is the process by which a person achieves a sense of individuality separate from the identities of others and begins to consciously exist in the world. That got me to thinking about our main characters and how each of them are on the search. And the Avatar must defeat the fire Lord. But as a young monk, he wants to do it in a way that does not betray his true non-violent nature. Qatar wants to become a master water bender. Her brother Sako wants to become a true leader. And Zucco, who is Zucco, is in search of restoring his estranged relationship with his father, Firehawk, who is leading the war against the other three nations. He believes he can regain his honor and return home if he captures the avatar and helps his father win the war.

[00:19:54] Speaker2

His story takes, twists and turns that without wanting to spoil anything, I will say it really presents a complex picture of a character who makes mistakes, gets angry, is confused, acts out in exile, even against those who care about him the most. These characters are all on personal journeys. They are seeking what is true and right in life for them. Principal for tells us that is you use we believe in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Yes. So that's what I landed on. Search. And for me, that means you can pursue learning religion, science free from others, insisting you must follow this philosophy or that dogma or that religion. That free will and the ability to think and to evolve and even dream. Well, that belongs to everyone in the nation, whether it's the fire nation in ATLA or North Korea in real life today or Hitler's Germany from the past, no nation should try to take that away from us. That word, Reverend, can introduce me to individuation. Sounds similar to another word. Individualism often defined as oh, let me say I know it. Individualism is, of course, so do you. But I'm going to read the definition where the needs of an individual are prioritized over the group as a whole. Now, both of these words are about the self, yet in the context of our fourth principle, I see a vast difference in them.

[00:21:48] Speaker2

Individuation is the realization of oneself as we mature, as we learn who we really are. We can meet our personal challenges and potential, and in so doing, we're better equipped to contribute our best gifts to society to make the world more whole. Individualism is about centering oneself as the primary focus, searching online for one's own perceived needs and desires, perhaps at any cost, without the guidance or other you principles offer, such as respecting others, remembering kindness and being mindful of our connection to one another and to the planet can evolve into a kind of toxic personal quest. I feel this is something our own society here in America is wrestling with today. Many seem to be on a search to protect only what they perceive as as theirs. Take a look at our our sad covid saga. And we're arguing over science and masking in vaccines. Many see their need for individualism, their freedom, as somehow threatened by the scientific realities of this pandemic and thus choose to not take steps that protect us all or consider the ferocious conflicts brewing all over the nation regarding equity in schools. I attended the school board meeting in Downingtown just last month to support our own DTI office was established to foster diversity, equity and inclusion in my school district. After that experience, I submit some are on a quest to keep access to things all students need limited, limited to just a privileged few.

[00:23:40] Speaker2

And that harms everyone. Focusing on primarily our own needs or wants or ambitions easily can push aside awareness or caring for awareness of or caring for the needs of others. And in fact, I wonder what the experience of two and a half minutes of weightlessness at the edge of space will mean for one Jeff Bezos in the years to come? Well, his next journey be one of individualism or one of individuation. Will he use his newfound knowledge to put Earth's trash into space because he can? Or will he evolve into someone who truly makes the planet a better place for all of us here on Earth? But in a world filled with examples of searches, driven by questionable motives and undaunted by harm caused, there are still times where we can witness the responsible search for what is true and right in life right before our eyes. Last week in the sermon, Olympic champion, world champion, sexual abuse survivor and self-proclaimed goat greatest of all time was poised to bring home more Olympic gold for the US. The pressure must have been incredible. Then she withdrew from competition, first from the individual event and then from the team event and Byles renowned for her difficult moves. Cited something known in the gymnastics world as the twisties, where she was finding that her mind and her body were not communicating in the precise way that is so necessary to complete and survive these death defying feats.

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Some of the world rushed in to attack Byles for letting down her team and her country. Many called her a failure. She did fail, after all, in her search for gold, but in her her own responsible search in her own life, she was able to ascertain that she needed to create a different path for herself and that her journey was not predetermined. She was able to change her course and very possibly save her own life. And while many offered no compassion, many millions more found in Byles, an even greater source of strength and bravery beyond her already known story. You may have heard that since then, Miles did come back to earn the bronze on Tuesday morning, she decided that she could perform on the beam safely and she said it meant more and all the gold she's earned. So what happens, though, if you leave the responsible part out? What if your journey is more about individualism than individuation? Here's where we encounter some bumps along the way in our outlook characters personal journeys, our young Airbender Áng is so focused on and really excited about the chance to bend fire. That sounds kind of cool to me to be able to manipulate it. But he he then fails to embrace the danger and wild nature of the flames and accidentally burns his friend.

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Another example, Katara is so intent on growing her water bending skills that she steals teaching Skrull and puts the group in great danger. Her brother Sokka is eager to so eager to demonstrate that he is a strong leader and he winds up offending new allies and embarrassing himself by relying on gender stereotypes and sexist assumptions. But over the course of this epic, the gang does better. And initially says he will never work with fire again after causing his friend serious injury. He does learn to forgive himself, but he also learns from this mistake, the importance of balancing the excitement in the quest for mastery, with responsibility in the same way searching for truth and meaning in real life as you doesn't mean one's individual cost search at all costs freedom to take land that is not yours, or experiment on people without their informed consent or pollute the air everybody breathes. Yet that ability to search for what is true and right and life. For for truth and meaning, it is essential to the human condition, had Einstein not escaped Nazi Germany, would we even have the theory of relativity today? Had every scientist who dreamt of spaceflight been told to forget it? We might not even know what our. And had they gone ahead and given up, we might not even know what our own planet looks like. What if civil rights leaders? Dared not dream of a better nation, would we still be stuck in the Jim Crow era of government sanctioned, separate and totally in equal water fountains, hotels, schools and more? In pursuing our individual searches, humans can grow in ways that allow us collectively to make the world better.

[00:29:35] Speaker2

That concept applies to both the fictional world of Avatar and the real one we live in right now. Just look at some Byles she chose to change the course of her search right in front of the whole world and in doing so, inspired people suffering from emotional illness and an act of self realization. She made the world better for us all. The key word here is searching responsibly. And without the ability to follow one's own path or to forge a new one. Or to forge a new one altogether, our lives would truly be stunted socially and scientifically and spiritually, I guess life would be great. Life would be static and unmoving. But if we are free and brave enough to responsibly pursue our own paths, we grow and discover and invent and evolve. Now, our friends in Avatar, The Last Airbender, they have a common goal helping defeat the fire lord and bring balance and thus peace to the world, their adventures together form one of the best buddy movies, but he stories one could imagine. But they're their individual quests, their search for what is true and right in life. That's what brings out their best selves and their strongest potential.

[00:31:07] Speaker2

And they each then contribute to the gang in ways that prove critical to the success of the collective mission. Ultimately, there is no toxic individualism here. Well, once they learn a few of these tough lessons along the way, they are moving towards individuation even as they are working together to rescue the world from war and tyranny. Avatar, The Last Airbender resonates with kids because it is a cartoon full of fun and adventure with action and silliness and friendship, Avatar, The Last Airbender also resonates for kids of any age because we can all recognize the human condition in its characters. We all possess the ability to dream, to make a difference or to create a better world. And you don't have to be you to understand this. So I'd like to leave you with some questions to consider in your own life's journeys. Where are you longing to individuate and find your voice? Is your individual search taking you to a place you can be proud of? How can you focus on your own growth and then use that growth to make the world better? May all your world be filled with the color and the spirit of your dreams and ideas as you continue your own responsible search for truth and meaning, thinking of our core vision called to make the world whole is my hope as a wellspring that each of our personal searches contribute to creating a world that is more in balance, more peaceful and more whole for everyone.

[00:33:07] Speaker1

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END OF TRANSCRIPT



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