

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Wholehearted

On a cold January night in 2008, *Washington Post* sports columnist Mike Wise took his golden lab on a jog along the frozen-over C&O Canal in Washington DC. He writes, “Looly went out onto the ice and fell through, and I went in after her.

He couldn’t touch bottom. After several minutes, he says, “I managed to put my arm under her abdomen and jerk her up onto a solid piece of ice.” Looly scampered up the embankment and on down the path, then circled back for him, waiting on shore, pacing. Mike tried to put his elbows up on the ice to get a little rest, cutting his wrists on the sharp edges. But he couldn’t feel his hands and arms. Then he could barely move. He was all alone, and he was dying. Trying not to panic, he began to yell for help.

Suddenly, a young man came out of the shadows, also out for a run. First he noticed a couple of holes in the ice. Then he spotted Looly on the bank of the canal. Then he saw Mike. He slid down to the canal and lowered himself in, breaking up the ice and wading into the freezing water up to his chest. He reached for Mike — they just kept reaching for each other — and then, Mike felt his foot touch bottom.

“I knew I was going to make it,” he says, “and Looly didn’t have to go home with someone else that night.

Mike continues, “[The guy made] sure Looly and I were all right.... I was in shock from hypothermia.... freezing, out of breath. [But] I asked him his name and where he worked.

“‘Jason. Jason Coates,’ he said. ‘I’m in law school at GW.’ ...He said he was cold, too ... and he took off again — like some superhero who shows up when people are in dire need.”

In the days that followed, Mike tracked down Jason. Then they became friends — Mike helped Jason with his career; Jason attended Mike’s wedding to Christina; Mike got a one-day license from the Universal Life Church and performed Jason’s wedding to Alex.

In the middle of the ceremony, he looked up and caught his wife smiling at him. Their four-year-old son, Oliver, was seated in her lap. And he fought back tears of gratitude, knowing he would never have met her, wouldn’t have that baby or the one on the way, if it weren’t for Jason.¹

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I heard Mike Wise tell this story to Ira Glass on NPR last Saturday. And of all the heroics in it, the thing that touched me most was the wholeheartedness of these two men. In planning Jason’s wedding, Mike learned how Alex loved the way Jason indulged her spontaneity when they went out in the gale-force winds and rain of Hurricane Irene. It was only after they returned, sopping wet from head to toe, that she found out Jason really hates getting wet.

As I was letting that sink in — imagine someone who hates getting wet wading up to his chest in the icy water of a freezing canal — Ira Glass asks Mike Wise if he thought he’d made the wrong calculation in trying to rescue Looly. It had almost cost him his life. Mike says no, that the wrong calculation he made was in taking off her leash along a frozen waterway. Ira presses him; given that Mike nearly died, did he really think he should have gone into the canal to save his dog? Mike says yes, and then his voice breaks. “I don’t think I made the wrong choice,” he says, “because a life without her for the next ten years wouldn’t have been a life worth living. That dog was everything to me.”²

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This morning, I want to make the case for wholeheartedness — for opening our hearts and living from the heart, for devotion, for being all-in, for giving our all for love.

Leadership coach Robin Sharma writes, “Great achievement often happens when our backs are up against the wall.... Who you truly are surfaces only when you place yourself in a position of discomfort.... [Our] power most fully exerts itself when the heat is on. Challenge serves beautifully to introduce you to your best — and most brilliant — self....

¹ Please see washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/a-jogger-saved-mike-wises-life-six-years-later-the-columnist-got-to-repay-him

² Please listen at thisamericanlife.org/669/scrambling-to-get-off-the-ice

“It’s very human to take the path of least resistance,” he continues. “And ... it’s ... normal to want to avoid putting stress on [ourselves].... But ... easy times don’t make [us] better. They make [us] slower and more complacent and sleepy.... Staying in the safety zone — and coasting through life — never made anyone bigger....”³

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Born in 1913, W. H. Murray was a Scottish mountaineer who wrote a compelling account of an expedition to the Himalayas in 1951. There was a lot in the way of getting to Everest, but he and his team were undaunted. He writes, “We had definitely committed ourselves, and were halfway out of our ruts. We had put down our passage money — booked a sailing to Bombay. This may sound too simple, but is great in consequence.

“Until one is committed, there is hesitance, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves, too.

“A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings, and material assistance, which no [one] could have dreamt would have come [their] way.”

W. H. Murray concludes, “I learned a deep respect for one of Goethe’s couplets:

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”⁴

This is what it means to be wholehearted.

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In the spirit of anti-colonialism, all of us are invited to completely reimagine the stories we were told of many early explorers and pioneers, to the end that there’s very little uplifting or inspiring about their exploits. The sheer greed and violence of their missions are soul-searing. There’s one small part of one story that has stayed with me, though, which proffers a metaphor for wholeheartedness.

³ Robin Sharma, *The Greatness Guide*, p. 43

⁴ W. H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition, 1951*. According to wikipedia, this “Goethe couplet” is actually a loose translation of Goethe’s *Faust*, lines 214-230, made by law professor and poet John Anster in 1835.

In 1519, Hernando Cortés and his army landed on the shores of Veracruz, Mexico, determined to conquer it for Spain. This expedition was the beginning of the end of the Aztec Empire. But in the early days, as they marched inland to battle, the Spanish Conquistadors were met by a powerful native resistance, felled by disease, and quickly ran out of basic resources.

This may well be legend, or at least not entirely correct, but here it is, as I heard it: In the face of certain death, Hernando Cortés ordered one of his lieutenants back to the beach with a single command: *Burn our boats*.

I learned this story from my fourth grade teacher, Miss Parsons — the same one who, in a science lesson about the eye, popped out a contact lens and passed it around a classroom full of astonished nine-year-olds. I wouldn't put it past her to have planted the idea of burning our boats as a metaphor to live by — sabotaging our instinct to retreat, compelling us to muster our courage, and destroying the option for failure.⁵

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To be wholehearted is to align ourselves to our moral compass, to take risks for our values, to take risks for love. Over thirty years ago, my friend Father Grant wrote me from his parish in the slums outside Lima, Peru and begged me to come. There was a civil war raging, and hundreds of children were being orphaned by the ravaging poverty. It was still illegal for queer people to adopt children, but a sympathetic social worker agreed to help me. The only requirements were that I had to pretend to be single — kind of like a nun — and that I couldn't tell anyone what I was up to.

I ground my way through the paperwork, and gave half my life savings to an adoption agency in Atlanta, which was brokering international adoptions in Latin America; the other half was in reserve for actually going to Peru and getting my kids out of there. It was a long, frustrating slog — small advances followed by heartbreaking setbacks, with no assurances that there'd actually be a family at the end of it. And then, almost three years into the process, I received a letter from the attorney general's office in Georgia. The adoption agency had been shuttered, and all my money was gone.

I was devastated — crushed — and there was no one I could tell.

⁵ Robin Sharma also tells the story this way. Please see *The Greatness Guide*, p. 44

By grace, as you know, my story had a happy ending, but that lowest moment taught me something really important. Ever since then, when people say to me, “We’re pregnant, but we’re not telling anyone yet,” I ask, “Why not?” And when they say, “It’s too early; what if something happens?,” I say, “That’s why you should tell — tell everyone. First of all, the world needs a whole lot more joy! But secondly, if something happens, you’re going to want a lot of love and reassurance and support.

Not telling doesn’t protect us from grief; it only intensifies the feelings of loss. Take the risk — for love.”

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Poet Mary Oliver, who died in January, wrote a lot about risking for love and living until we die. Here’s one of her beautiful homages to wholeheartedness — the close of her poem *When Death Comes*.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.⁶

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we wade out into icy water,
burn our boats,
be undaunted, be committed,
be introduced to our best and most brilliant self.

May we open our hearts,
live from the heart,
be devoted,
be all in.

May we choose to be wholehearted.
May we give our all for love.

⁶ Mary Oliver, *When Death Comes*, from *New and Selected Poems*