



I love that line in the hymn we just sang, probably one of the few of Paul's letters that infuse our hymns. "Though I may speak with bravest fire and have the gift to all inspire and have not love, my words are vain as sounding brass and hopeless gain." These are a poetic version of Paul's letter to the growing first century community in Corinth in Greece.

They proceed that familiar wedding reading that you have heard so many times, "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way."

These are instructions to that community that was inspired by this new story that a man named Jesus died in Judea and lives again, and is the one and only God among the many that the Greeks worshiped. It was hard going for that early Christian community. They were not welcome. They were confused about the logic of this story.

They were spread across the Roman Empire with varying practices and customs, and Paul was writing furiously in an attempt at unification. In fact, the early Christians were called atheists in Greece and Rome because they did not believe in the many gods, choosing one over Jupiter or Venus or Apollo.

And for all time they were inspired by Paul, and encouraged to love, to understand, and to endure their persecutions. It was an amazing feat to gather these rebel Christians, but they did it, even as they continued to interpret all this differently. Though I may speak with bravest fire, may my words inspire."

And may my words inspire. Today, they are infused with love for you. As here in the beginning of this summer series we call Inspired, we ministers thought through what inspired us: improvisation, America, beauty, resilience, and so on.

In the series there will be artists and films and authors, world events that will inform these Sundays. And interestingly, no one chose the Bible. That's okay because we refer to it when we find ways, but it is also not the inspiration for this faith. Our inspiration is largely seeking truths that feed us.

And so in this series, it's a way into that idea. And I wanted to unpack this idea of what it means to be inspired, not by the crusty letters of Paul, but with the crusty Kurt Vonnegut letter to the high school students. In it, he was encouraging them to explore and let the world of art inspire them.

In that letter, the 84-year-old deeply humanistic satirist who used dark humor, simple language, and the framework of science fiction to confront the absurdity and cruelty of modern civilization tells these New York high school students in the early 2000s to break with convention and push their own buttons and see what happens. Inspiration.

So here are five things you don't know about Kurt Vonnegut. Number one, he was a Unitarian. Number two, he was raised in large part by Ida Young, his family's African American cook and housekeeper during the first decade of his life. And he said, "She gave me a decent moral instruction and was exceedingly nice to me. She was as great an influence on me as anybody." He described her as humane and wise. Believed that compassionate forgiving aspects of his own beliefs came from her.

Three, he was deployed to Europe during World War II, captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, and imprisoned in Dresden where he survived the allied bombing by sheltering in a meat locker of a slaughterhouse where he was being held. Inspiration for a later novel.

Four, his first published piece, the Report on the Barnhouse Effect, was an anti-war sci-fi story about a professor who could destroy weapons with his mind. It appeared in Collier's Weekly, a widely read periodical in 1950, and it earned him \$750.

His short stories helped him sustain, this is five, sustain his family. At one point, he opened a car dealership in Cape Cod. It failed within a year. He went on to design board games, some of which were never published or used.

And yet, he became one of the most successful satirists in American history. He won awards, he inspired generations. There's even a museum dedicated to him and his work in Indianapolis.

And at age 84, he wrote that letter to a group of high school students, saying, "Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you to make your soul grow."

That phrase is the key to any discussion of what inspires us, the experience of becoming. From a boy raised by a compassionate caregiver, to a soldier, to a writer, Vonnegut became and became and became over 84 years.

He lived for inspiration and art. He cut through the mess of life to the core truth he was promoting to those high school students a few months before he died. A core principle that we can take with us today, that we are meant to create, that we are meant to unfold, to grow into what we are becoming.

So as we explore this summer series, the first thing we should think about is, what does this word inspire really mean? Inspire means to breathe. It comes from the Latin *inspirare*, to breathe into, and its earliest usage has a deeply spiritual meaning, to be filled with the breath of God.

In Genesis, it says, "Then the Lord formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human being became a being."

In Judaism, this passage is viewed as the ultimate expression of humanity's dual nature. Our physical vulnerability, "From dust we come, to dust we go," and our divine intellectual soul from God's breath comes the very essence of who we are.

The rabbis emphasize that we possess an elevated capacity for consciousness and morality, and speech that separates us from other creatures because of *inspirare*, inspiration, because of that breath.

When God breathed into Adam's nostrils, he did not just provide air. It blew a part of itself into humanity. This breath is the *neshama*, the highest level of the soul. The rabbis teach the spirit is infused, infused in humanity to bear the [foreign language 00:09:15] image of God.

So what happens when we consider inspiration as breath that is holy? What happens when we can slow down enough to actually breathe and to listen to what moves us, to what motivates us, to what holds us, to what calls us to become?

Beneath all the noise of the world, beneath the practicalities of life. When we breathe, we might find there is something in us that yearns to grow, to become. We might find moments of inspiration that are actually invitations to our continuous unfolding.

The Episcopal priest and teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says that, "The soul grows by steeping in the present moment through attention, through practice, through noticing the sacred in the ordinary."

By attention to the breath we focus less on orthodoxy or the right belief, and more on orthopraxy, on right practice, noticing the world and the people around us, noticing the sacred in the ordinary.

We learn about becoming from the places of sorrow and waiting and uncertainty in our lives, places in our lives that require real transformation. That starts when we embrace our humanity.

It does not happen by escaping the world. It happens by finding the sacred within it. In the dust, in the bone of life, in the breath that breathes inspiration for us to attend to what is in front of us. This is the beginning of soul growth of becoming.

The late Reverend Howard Thurman says that, "Such soul growth happens because in our lives we find that we can be unsettled. It takes away what is familiar but asks us to trust, even when we feel alone, even when the path is unclear, and and we breathe into that unknown, into that moment," Thurman says. We gain wisdom, the wisdom that God requires of us.

And so what am I saying? To inspire or to be inspired is to invite the unknown, invite the soul growth that waits for us. It means writing poems and tearing them up or simply because they help us become. It means making art, not for recognition, but for the soul.

It means letting a moment, a person, an idea, stop us in our tracks and change our direction. It means that real creativity, real faith and real growth requires a courage to change. And yes, that requires trust. Trust in ourselves and trust in others, and trust in the breath within us that calls us forward.

It requires going places we don't expect, traveling figuratively to the places that feed us. St. Augustine said, "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page. The world is indeed vast and a living book, its pages written in landscapes, and cultures, and encounters, and stories. To travel widely is to turn those pages, to discover perspectives that stretch our imagination and deepen our understanding of what it means to be human."

What Augustine meant was that we might never cross oceans or climb distant mountains, but each of us has been entrusted with an interior world no less expansive. Our thoughts, our loves, our wounds, our hopes. These are terrains that are waiting to be explored.

To tend to the soul we've been given is to take up the quiet, the daily work of noticing what is growing within us and what is withering, of nurturing what is good and gently transforming what is not.

In this sense, the becoming that Kurt Vonnegut asked of his high school friends is a form of travel. It is courage to being open. It is writing new ways about old assumptions. It is letting grace interrupt our habits. It is letting compassion widen the borders of our concerns.

It is the willingness to be unfinished, to trust that life is not a static possession, but an unfolding gift. That we become when we forgive, that we become when we listen deeply, that we become when we choose hope over cynicism, and presence over distraction, and love over fear.

So said Paul in not-so-poetic ways, and so said Kurt Vonnegut when he asked the students to let inspiration grow their souls, and so says I when I ask you what and who inspires you, what breathes life and soul into you?

And how can you have more of that and less nonsense, and less fighting with the world, less allowing yourself to be pulled in whatever way pulls your attention away from what is important?

We become when we, "Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money or fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow," because those things don't let us stew on the news or daily routines.

They don't let us get confused by cage fighting on the White House lawn. They breathe into us deeper invitations to open up to one another, to speak bravely and to act from love.

And so that's the invitation today. And whether your life seems large or small by outward measure, it is, in truth, immeasurably significant when it is lived with intention, when it is lived with invitation, when it is lived with inspiration.

Each day offers us a new line to write, a new passage to live into. And even if we never wander far from where we began, a soul that keeps becoming will discover that it has, in the end traveled, very far indeed.

So maybe this summer as we explore what inspires us, your homework is this, to pay attention to your life as it is, to trust that something sacred is already breathing within you, to risk becoming, not perfectly and not completely, but honestly.

To try something small, something creative, something kind, something just a little outside the path you usually walk, because the breath that formed us is still forming us. The spirit that inspired life in the beginning is still inspiring life now, and our task is not to have it all figured out.

Our task is not to be impressive or certain or finished. Our task is simply this, to keep breathing, to keep noticing, to keep becoming. Or maybe, to write a six-line poem, rhyming, and tear it up and disperse it into many receptacles, not for anyone else, but for your heart. Amen and amen.