



I ordered those key changes for you. I ordered them to prepare you for this. Out there, there's a world outside of Yonkers. Out there full of shine and full of sparkle. Close your eyes and see it glisten. Fine, all right. I'll just go. Listen, Barnaby. No, I'm just going to do this all day. Those are the first words you hear if you watch the movie WALL-E. Who's seen WALL-E? Okay, and if you haven't, don't worry, I'm going to ruin the ending for you. It's great. In the movie WALL-E that was screened this week, it's part of our Inspired By Summer series. We won't be screening sequential movies, we'll be talking about different ways that we are inspired, different artists and other things like that throughout the summer. And so, just keep an eye on whatever the artist or the inspiration is for that Summer Series.

But in WALL-E, when it begins, not much is glistening in the way that Cornelius sings it. See, WALL-E is a trash collecting robot left on earth for 700 years, after Earth's human inhabitants evacuated the planet because it became unlivable. The opening shots of the sickly orange earthly hellscape show advertisement after advertisement for the company by and large like BUI and large, that had clearly taken over most of the functions of earth. Its name is on everything. It's on banks, it's on big supermarket superstores, it's on private space travel. WALL-E, though, was released by Pixar Studios 18 years ago, almost 20. Before the authors even themselves knew what kind of expansion of private enterprise we would see today.

The opening 20 minutes of this movie, friends, don't feature any dialogue at all, unless you think the chirps of a charming cockroach count as dialogue. And if everything I've said so far doesn't convince you to watch it, maybe the idea of a charming cockroach will. No, not really. See, WALL-E was the brainchild of Andrew Stanton. Stanton was a huge fan of silent movies, a big fan of Buster Keaton in

particular. When asked about film and about what we have today, this is someone making movies now, said this. "We didn't gain something with sound. We lost something." Yeah.

I chose WALL-E to explore two important topics that are very central to our faith. Twinkies and cockroaches. Someone doesn't like cockroaches, I can hear you there. No, but that's the movie's way of talking about what is important to our faith and our lives, which is resilience.

The idea for WALL-E came to its creator, Stanton, when Pixar was making its first hit that it released, Toy Story. At that time, they were making all kinds of figures with little machines and this idea came to Stanton, an idea about loneliness, that he could not get out of his head this idea of a desolate landscape and a trash picking robot in that landscape. Couldn't get it out of his head. It was an image of loneliness, he said, on a scale that he just could not let go of, couldn't drop it.

Then during the sound recording for the voices for Toy Story where he was, he had a chance to speak to Tom Hanks. Hanks had starred in Cast Away, which was about a man stranded on a deserted island with nothing but a volleyball to keep him company, for which he did not win the Oscar, but that's a whole nother story. Anyway, Hanks, one of the greatest actors maybe of two generations, had given a lot of thought and preparation to Cast Away, to loneliness. And he was talking to Stanton and he says, "Well, a person's greatest fear is loneliness." Nothing like a little light banter with the zany Tom Hanks to get you going. But if he's right, that fear is very real.

Last year, actually, the American Psychological Association published a paper that said more than half of all adults report feeling lonely and in need of greater and greater support. 10 years ago and much has changed, usually not for the better. In that regard, the Surgeon General reported on loneliness as an epidemic, and that the health impacts of it are on par with smoking 15 cigarettes a day. That was when we did science as a government. Sorry, I'm just feeling a little... See where this might be going. Of course, loneliness and disconnection are only some of the ways many are struggling now. They are at the root though, of many people's struggles.

And being asked, told, suggested, cajoled into being resilient sometimes in the face of these that our society carries, it can be hard. It can feel farfetched, at least to me, it can feel pretty out there. But on the other hand, it also makes sense, because isn't life right now feeling more and more a little out there? Yeah, like out there off the rails sometimes? With virtual reality or different concepts of reality, online personas and interactions and relationships revving up now with the unearthly torque of artificial intelligence, it's challenging our basic assumptions about how people connect, how they form relationships.

Out there, there are millions upon millions who think church and that religion have nothing left to offer, after millennia and millennia and millennia of enduring through all kinds of problems. It's weird. I'm going to sing the rest. Out there, there are even people who like some of what I'm saying, but wish I'd just get to the point. So, let's do that. Let's talk. Let's talk about resilience instead of just singing about it.

Michelle Obama said this in her book, *Becoming*. She said, "Grief and resilience live together." Oof, five words that cut to the quick. "Grief and resilience live together." I want you to just take a moment though, and think, look at the movie in your mind that's brought up by those five words. Are they married grief and resilience, or are they just living together as partners and figuring out, splitting the bills? What does living together look like for grief and resilience? However it might be arranged for you, their natures, their lives are connected, are wound together. Her point, I think, is that they're always linked, even if we don't quite sense it. There is little need, if you will, to be resilient if we never know any grief, right? But how they coexist for each of us is deeply personal, very personal.

For me, I like to imagine them sitting together, watching a movie, popping some popcorn, maybe watching *WALL-E*, or maybe watching *Hello, Dolly*. See, those opening words and these tunes I've been singing to you they're from the musical *Hello, Dolly*, which a movie was made of. It's a musical written by Jerry Herman, which starred Barbara Streisand, featured Tommy Tune, was directed by Gene Kelly, and also starred Michael Crawford. And if you don't realize how gay everything I just said is, Pride Month 2027 is a year away, get working people. Geez. The next thing falling out of my mouth is going to be a purse and you're just sitting there. Hi, dad. He's an angel.

Anyway, Michael Crawford's voice as the character of Cornelius in this movie appears over and over, actually singing things like, "Put on your Sunday clothes when you feel down and out," or, "It only takes a moment." His recordings are actually the primary way *WALL-E* shares how they're feeling. Michael Crawford has more lines in *WALL-E* than *WALL-E* does, I think. So, Crawford eventually learned that his voice was going to be featured so prominently in this movie so he asked to take Andrew Stanton, its writer and director, to dinner. And Stanton was like, "Oh my God, this is like Broadway legend. Is he going to be mad at me? What's going to happen? I know I own the rights. What can he say?" No, I'm just kidding.

But at dinner, they sat down and Crawford explained that the music for *WALL-E*, the words that were being recorded, were being recorded in the exact same studio where he recorded the music for *Hello, Dolly*, decades and decades before. And as he was recording out there, that song I sang to you for that movie's first big production number, he was struggling to give Gene Kelly, the director, the sound that he was feeling he wanted. Gene Kelly was a maniacal perfectionist. You cannot be a dancer like that and not be. And he said Gene Kelly eventually came into the booth while he was there trying to record the music and he said to him straight, he said, "Michael, stop thinking about the town, stop thinking about the girl. This is about the whole universe." And that is the take right after that comment that is immortalized today in the movie *Hello, Dolly*.

Right after Gene Kelly's direction, it opens up this whole universe of *WALL-E*. Now we, this church, this faith, we have something to say about the universe. It's in our name, after all. Universalism tells us that no person, no soul is ever fully removed from God, no matter what. All of us, no matter our course in life or after life, through this universe are going to be reunited. We are each going to be reunited with whatever that source, whatever that grounding of all being forever and ever, amen. I will quote Randy Travis in *Texas* if I please. Friends, I didn't write that. I don't know why I'm telling you that.

But friends, listen as jovial as I am and as true as this is, this idea as real as it may feel and may be to us, for many on paper, it's kind of out there. You know that? Love saves. Love holds us forever. Love never dies. That is at the core of this religion. But when we experience loneliness, when we're cut off from others, when we feel unloved in this life, when no one understands us or quite gets us or even just returns our calls or invites us anywhere, love, despite all we say can feel pretty far away. And it's different for all of us, I know. But loneliness like few others have felt was WALL-E's constant companion in the movie until a beautiful robot comes along and lands on earth and WALL-E falls in love with it. I say it because as much as we think we know the robots don't actually have sex or gender markers, just wanted to note that, gender is fluid.

But after the visiting robot almost blasts WALL-E into vapor after his initial advances, which is always a good reminder about consent to all of us. WALL-E, with barely a vocabulary, almost only with their actions, tries to win the object of their love. And WALL-E does it like any red-blooded suitor would ever do, by constantly playing selections from the gayest musical ever written. It may not be the gayest, but it's close, for this robot that they're trying to woo. And it's not a bad strategy, because as Michael Crawford sings, "It only takes a moment to last our whole life long." So the question we have as individuals, maybe as a church, as a faith, and as a race of animals trying to share this world is, what is our moment and what do we do in it when it comes?

Levertov has one perspective that she shares and tells us what she thinks and does not mince words, thank God. "A gulf has split the ground between us and you won't wave. You're looking another way. We shan't meet again unless you leap it, leaving behind you the cherished worms of your dispassion, your palate ironies, your jovial murderous, rye, humored balanced judgments leap over un-balanced." She has a hyphen there. She goes, "Un-balanced," on the next line, un-balanced. Then, how our fanatic tears would flow and mingle for joy. This is exactly what Michelle Obama's words embody, how grief and resilience live together for Levertov. The grief of dispassion, this lack of regard broken open in a moment, a leap across a Gulf from this palate non-engagement to take a fricking side, right? Levertov understands how awful it feels to those suffering in a society among a people right around them and not having anyone to take their side. And her poem speaks to the kind of resilience that comes with a single act, a choice, a volitional thing that sets a life on a new and a different course out in the world.

While our other author, Ha Jin, a veteran of the cultural revolution in China who had to get in line to stay alive, and watched his society crumble and tear around him, even had to take part in it by force. Speaks to another kind of resilience. "You must hold your distant center. Don't move even if earth and heaven quake. If others think you are insignificant, that's because you haven't held on long enough. As long as you stay put year after year, eventually you will find a world beginning to revolve around you." I love that poem. And this message, as much as the defining moment of change, is exactly what the writer of WALL-E had in mind.

See, Andrew Stanton was raised religious with his brother who also worked on the movie, but mostly he said left a lot of that training go, except the great commandment to love thy neighbor. But what Stanton said he wanted to show with WALL-E was a quality of that commandment was to show that

we might be saving first the humanity inside WALL-E, even before then WALL-E is concerned with saving the rest of the earth. He said the phrase that guided the entire production was this, "Irrational love defeats life's programming." Every Pixar movie has an index card that's the main guiding principle of the movie, he said, and that was the index card that they put at the top of all of the drawings, all of the work they did. "Irrational love defeats life's programming."

Over and over in the movie, EVE our hero, and she should be named Eve. Oh, I did it, she. It should be named Eve, because they're beautiful and not cursed and her love is beautiful. I just want to say that. It's not here, but EVE fights with all their might to stop WALL-E from changing their programming, changing their programming with WALL-E's love. They try to stop WALL-E because Eve's got a mission, she's got to stay on track, Eve's got to stick to the plan. The duty that EVE has in their programming is the most important thing to them, right up until WALL-E sacrifices himself, takes that leap so that EVE could follow her programming, her destiny, their destiny. I'm so sorry. Until WALL-E loves EVE so much, that WALL-E loves what EVE was born to be and leaps across space and time to help EVE become that.

If there is a God, if there ever was a God described in sacred texts throughout time in our midst, God is what is there in every breach, in every broken place where too many too often fear to tread. Until one, then two, then more, then a church may be and a faith, till they leap, until they leap and choose love, till they choose irrational love. I know we love our rationality here, but think about irrational love. In our most quiet, in our most private, lonely times, I believe God acts more often than ever speaks. And that's why we are never closer to God than when we love others, not, not, not because of who they are, but because it's who we are. We love others because of who we are. We are universalists, heretics in the eyes of many, because we refuse the idea that a loving God would create anything so beautiful as our children and then them to hell. We say no to this, and we are the ones who are thought that we are out there. Y'all, get right. Get right.

Like WALL-E, this faith for millennia has been tending to the wreckage of other faiths founded on division, on judgment, on scorn, faith that point to a person's love, a person's personhood as targets for hate or worse, damnation for a long, long time. And trust we are not stopping anytime soon, that's for sure.

But I think about this. I see the loneliness in the world. I see addiction. I see the division in people's lives and families among loved ones. Is it any wonder the world is more lonely and getting more lonely when religious bigotry is on the rise? Is it any wonder that loneliness that disaffection grows when the world and its resources, all of its inhabitants of all species are degraded and exploited in this way? Is it any wonder? It is no wonder that more and more people are feeling disconnected from others when civic leaders are unbound or unbridled by even the tiniest speck of decency or regard for their fellow person, right? It's only human. It is only human to have your cell phone go off in worship. It is only human. Y'all, we're not perfect. Thank God. It's only human. Also, too long to see justice done in this world. I get it. We want to see it done in our life, we want it done now. It is human to yearn for love at last among our fellows here now on earth as it is in heaven.

But if one Obama told us grief and resilience lived together, another Obama this week reminded us at the opening of his presidential library of these words spoken by a Unitarian pastor. "We do not see that justice is always done on earth. Many a nave is rich, sleek and honored while the just man is poor, hated, and in torment. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight. I can divide it by conscience, but from what I see, I am sure it bends toward justice. And what is justice but love in public, right?"

These words by our Unitarian abolitionist forbear, Theodore Parker, who had his own problems, you can research that yourself. Beautiful words, had his own problems. Remind us we see but a little in this life, but in the time we have in it, what we do, how we leap across divisions in our lives in society matters, not just to us but the people who are watching. It matters as much as sticking quietly and decisively to the faith that has taken us this far though heaven and earth may shake around us. If you are someone wondering if God will love you, if you are someone who doesn't care whether God loves you or not, preach. If you are someone just looking for love in what feels like growing desolation, if you're someone lonely or someone lost in searching, if you're someone just frankly human, the message of this church, the message of our faith and the message of this movie is, put on your Sunday clothes when you feel down and out. It won't solve everything, but it helps to dress up.

But what it is saying is to find the divide, to find the ford, to find the river that you've got to cross, a way to get across and to make that bridge with another person, to take the leap and feel the decisive way that the action might change your very life. And then to hold fast, for that distant center, no matter what anybody else tells you, no matter what the world tells this church or the people in it about them being wrong and them being right, we do not listen. We hold our center and we wait with patience, with kindness, with joy, and always with completely irrational love for the moment that will matter the most. Because remember, it only takes a moment, but you got to watch for it to come, to last your whole life long. May it ever be so. Blessed be, bless you all. Happy Father's Day, and amen.