

LIVE ALONG THE WAY

From Rev. John R. White – The First Congregational Church of Dudley, MA – United Church of Christ
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On February 20th I had the opportunity of attending what has become one of my favorite annual events, the Banff Mountain Film Festival when it comes to Somerville, Massachusetts where my brother Jim lives.

On this day there were 9 short films shown, all of them superb, ranging in length from 2 to 44 minutes. Always thought provoking, affecting my thinking in various ways for the entire upcoming year, these films are the result of an annual international film competition centering on mountain culture, sports and care for the environment. The four day event in Somerville has become so popular, there is no longer any advertising for it and this year all four days of the event were sold out a month before it happened.

There was, for example, a 12 minute film called “The Beaver Believers: Meet Sherrie Tippie,” about a working hairdresser who is also a certified live beaver trapper working to restore the North American Beaver, which we learned is a keystone species, a species on which other species in an ecosystem depend for their survival. Whatever you think about an increasing pace of species extinctions, some species, like beavers, are particularly key to the overall well-being of environmental systems, and the survival of other species, including our own, which is, of course, something to think about.

Two other films also started preparing my mind and heart for a Christian season which begins March 6th, the season of Lent. You can watch both of these short films on YouTube. One is 22 minutes in length, from Canada, called “Liv Along the Way.” The other is 14 minutes in length, from the USA, called “The Frenchy.”

“Liv Along the Way” is a story in the life of Liv Sansoz. The YouTube description of the film says: “Since she first summited Mont Blanc as a teen, Liv Sansoz knew she would make her life in the mountains. She was twice crowned World Champion in sport climbing, and eventually expanded her professional horizons to mixed climbing, ski mountaineering, and base jumping. In 2017, at 40 years old, Liv set out from her base in Chamonix, France to attempt to climb all 82 of the 4,000 meter peaks in the European Alps in a single year.”

Allow me to put this in perspective for you. Mt. Greylock, the tallest mountain in Massachusetts is approximately 3,491 feet or 1,069 meters high. All of the 82 peaks Liv Sansoz attempted to climb in a year are, at minimum, approximately 4 times taller than Greylock. This is quite impressive, right? Indeed it is.

Yet, every time I experience films at this festival I find myself thinking two ways at the same time. On the one hand there are always stories like the story of Liv, people attempting feats on the very edge of what is possible for the human body to achieve, and capturing stunning film footage so millions of other humans can see some of what they see when they are doing what they do. Then there are stories like that of Sherrie, people more like you and me, people who do some work, to the best of their ability, a job which serves others and pays the bills, yet nothing you'd ever hear about beyond the little corner of the world in which they live, certainly not internationally, unless they become inspired to look within and wonder how the fullness of love is calling them to be and then choose to live that way. While we won't all become internationally famous, Sherrie now is, out saving beavers, not only because they appreciate it, yet because we need beavers just as much as they need us.

The film which seemed to stand out though, for many in the audience this year, was "The Frenchy," a story touching on both these ways at the same time, a story of someone who pushes the limits of what is humanly possible and also of a man who understands his human frailty and vulnerability yet simply refuses to succumb to living his life in any way less than fully. The YouTube description says: "This is the story of 82-year old French snow ski racer and mountain biker, Jacques Houot, a local legend as an age-defying athlete and an incorrigible flirt. Houot has survived some two dozen close calls with death, including avalanches, cancer, car accidents, a heart attack, drowning and even attempted murder. Frenchy inspires us to stay positive today."

And so, for Christians reading this, we prepare for the adventure of Lent, of renewing our commitment to following Jesus. Yet, everyone reading this can appreciate being inspired by those who call us, as Jesus does, to interact with people, creatures and the earth, with radical, seemingly impossible ideas about love, leading some to potentially life threatening feats of standing up for the lives of humans, creatures and earth, and others to simply stay positive and do what they can do to love the life which surrounds them daily. Sure, I appreciate watching and listening to stories of people like Liv, who do and see what few humans will ever do or see. Yet, perhaps even more, I am inspired by people like Sherrie and Jacques, because they are people so similar to me, people who remind me and all of us that we too are called to live amazing lives, making a positive difference with the people and creatures we interact with on this earth we walk on, because this is home for all of us. Jesus calls this way of living The Way. This Lent and always, this is the way for me. Peace, Pastor John