

Anyone here ever bought a helium filled balloon from someone at the Stanley park aquarium, the PNE, or the Vancouver International Children's Festival? You know how kids are fixated on the balloon when you buy it – dreaming about the places it might take them if it could carry their weight, wondering where it lands when the child accidentally and with great drama, lets it go. But have you ever wondered about the person selling the balloon?

From the minute we meet Carl Fredrickson, in the Pixar animated movie UP from Disney studios, we know balloons – helium filled balloons – are going to play a significant role in his life. From beginning to end, helium filled balloons, and all the magic they contain for every child or adult whose ever bought one, take us on an adventure of life transforming proportion.

We meet Carl as a youngster, who idolizes the great international explorer Charles Munts; not only because Munts discovers great wonders of the world, but also because his hydrogen filled blimp inspires great adventures. When Carl meets the tom-boy Ellie, who also idolizes Munts for the same reasons, they form a secret club that eventually turns into a life-long marriage. Carl becomes a helium balloon salesman in the park, Ellie becomes a librarian. And together they live the lives of any normal couple as they fantasize the joys of a new marriage, purchase their own home, experience the everyday mishaps that eat into the savings account, experience the tragedy that they'll never have children. From the makeshift tent that was their clubhouse in the secret club, to Ellie's death some 60 years later, Carl made a "cross your heart" promise to Ellie to build a house at Paradise Falls in the wilds of South America. Secretly, they hoped throughout their lives to meet the illusive adventurer Charles Munts in person. Munts who had been publicly humiliated for being caught for concocting a fake skeleton of a rare south American bird, disappeared from the public eye for decades, in order to capture alive the illusive monster bird of Paradise Valley.

That's the first 10 minutes of the movie. But the adventure of the movie UP happens with Carl is in his 70's, dealing with the death of his beloved Ellie, coping with all the losses of a failing body, and trying to fend off the property developers who are building condos and box store shopping plazas all around their home.

The adventure comes when Carl is interrupted by a knock at his door. Funny thing about life changing adventures, they often come as an interruption in our lives...sometimes as simple as a knock on the door. Imagine the knock on the front door of the parents of the Georgian luger, Nodar Kumaritashvili, after last Friday's accident.

At Carl Fredrickson's door, it's Russell, an eight year old Wilderness Explorer (not unlike one of the kids here today in scouts Canada), trying to earn his "assisting the elderly" merit badge. It's the only one he has left to earn in order to become a senior Wilderness Explorer. Reading his script from the handbook, Russell interrupts Carl with the promise of an adventure. Only on first meeting, Carl doesn't know it yet. To get Russell out of the way, Carl sends him on wild snipe chase, hoping Russell won't come back. Instead, Russell chases what turns out to be a mouse under the porch of Carl's house.

The construction workers knock down Carl's mailbox at the street by accident, a mailbox he and Ellie put there with great love. In an ensuing argument, Carl hits the foreman with his cane; is changed for being a menace to the community and sentenced to move to the Shady Oaks retirement complex, forcing him to give up the home he and Ellie loved for 60 years.

Well on the morning he is to be taken away, Carl had been up all night filling thousands of helium balloons. Releasing them into the sky, anchored to the grid in his fireplace, Carl's house is ripped off its foundation as it floats up into the sky and southward to Paradise Valley. Another knock on the door reveals the terrified Russell, who had been under the porch chasing the mouse.

At first, Carl tries to get Russell down to the ground by cutting some of the balloons free. But it doesn't work. And after storms, fog, rain, near collisions with buildings, power lines and rock formations, the house touches down on a ridge, across a deep valley from the beloved Paradise Falls. In making the decision to walk down the ridge, through the valley, and finally put the house on the ridge beside the falls, Carl and Russell encounter a harrowing adventure.

Some might even say they were sent into the desert. They meet the illusive south American bird that Muntz has wasted his life trying to find. They name him Kevin, before they discovered that Kevin was female, with young ones. They meet Dug the dog, an aging golden retriever who by way of a transmitting collar could speak many languages. They encounter a pack of Muntz' killer dogs who are hellbound to find Kevin. Worst of all, Carl's hero and source of his own adventuresome spirit, Charles Muntz, ends up being the villain, with whom they have a life and death battle.

UP is a great movie...even if you don't like animation. Somehow Pixar digital animation is improving with every iteration, and this movie captures the facial expressions and subtle body nuances beautifully. The cascade of colour in the helium balloons is really quite remarkable. Ed Asner as the crotchety Carl Fredrickson, and Christopher Plumber as the voice of Charles Muntz are perfect.

UP is also a great movie because it speaks to us deeply about our attachments to stuff; our attachments to our ideas about what makes great adventures; our attachments to people who are no longer in our lives; our attachments to the stuff in our lives that weighs us down.

In these few weeks before Easter, in the season the church calls Lent, we'll get ourselves ready for the gifts that Christians believe Easter brings. Not just the eggs and the chocolate, not just flowers in the garden and leaves on the trees, but a new sense that life as we had known it is no longer, and a new life is to begin.

There are two stark images in the movie that speak exactly to this notion of letting go. As Carl and Russell begin to make the perilous journey through the valley to take the helium ballooned house to Paradise Falls, Carl is seen with the garden hose wrapped around his body, which is attached to the house, which is attached to all those balloons – some of them already losing their helium. Carl's shoulders are rounded, he is leaning well forward as he struggles to pull this weight, and he walks slowly with a limp. There can't possibly be a new adventure with all this weight.

The mythological story of Jesus being tempted in the desert by the one who would weigh him down is a very similar image. The devil (I don't believe in a real devil anymore than I believe in a talking dog – this is a story that speaks to a very real human predicament.) The devil tempts Jesus with position, power, and responsibility saying it can be his if he renounces a life in the Spirit. Recognizing the temptation, and even recognizing that having position, power and responsibility could be a good thing, Jesus says, no, I can travel more swiftly with greater effectiveness if I travel lightly. Get behind me Satan.

I think of all the weight we carry as men, women and children as we try to live our lives. We hang on to the responsibility of work and home and community and friendships and debt and the mythological journey towards the "good life." These things become our identity. We carry the shoulds of our upbringing. We carry the guilt of our mistakes. We carry the fear of our inadequacy. We carry the fantasy that we alone are the source of someone else's happiness. All these things are heavy and we move slowly with a limp – shoulders rounded and bent leaning way forward. It may look faster in the fast lane, that's a delusion. It's just heavier.

The second scene in the movie that stands stark in my mind comes after the battle with Charles Muntz and his sinister attempt to bring back the bird at all costs. Muntz loses, of course. His pack of fighting dogs is overcome by Dug the talking dog. Muntz' blimp, which was called the Spirit of Adventure, has crashed. Carl is still trying to put the house on the ridge beside the falls...but the helium is failing.

In order to lessen the weight for the balloons, he begins to throw out his belongings, those family keepsakes, and heavy chairs, and full china cabinets that we lovingly pass on to our children. In the end it all fails and the house floats away. Russell, faithful, compassionate, spirited, resilient Wilderness Explorer, who has been with Carl through this whole ordeal says – I'm sorry about your house." Finally Carl gets it and says, "It's just a house."

It's just a house indeed. How often do we miss the adventure in front of us because we think the adventure used to be in something behind us? We're often so busy looking backward, that we fail to miss life ahead of us. As church community you might be thinking that I'm speaking about our attachment to this building. And partially I am. I'm also thinking about what goes on in here that may no longer be useful to a spirit-searching community beyond this place. Friends, it's just a house.

But just as importantly, how often do we miss the daily adventures in our lives with every ordinary experience. In thinking about the mistakes we made yesterday, we aren't very quick to say, it was just a house, and forgive ourselves, learn from it and move on. We hang on to it. In replaying all the old tapes of conversations and ex relationships and old rules and old shoulds, we rarely say, it was just a house, it's time to move on.

Attachment, letting go, being present to this moment is a way of understanding that first reading from Deuteronomy. In gratitude for life, bring your first fruits. Lay them down...and move on. "A wandering Aramean WAS my father." That was then, this is now. What matters is now. You've heard me say this before, but the question continues to be germane to our conversation and to our life as community; "what is my relationship to this moment?"

In hanging out with Russell, that perky, pesky, persistent Wilderness Explorer (cubs, take note here), Carl was given a new opportunity for adventure. He let go of the trappings of his life that kept him weighted in the past. Just as importantly, when he finally let go of the trappings, he gave himself fully, threw himself really, into the adventure that presented itself, and he discovered a whole new life. And friends remember, he was 78 years old, with a cane and a limp.

As we embark on our journey towards Easter, let us consider those old tapes, those old scores, those old habits that bind us to "what was." Let's live into an attitude and practice of letting go, creating a new relationship to this moment leaving nothing unturned as we grow into a life that Spirit sets before us. Like Carl, it won't resemble anything we imagine. That's the adventure. Amen.