Good morning.

First things first, when I teach my psychology class, I encourage the kids to approach the concepts that I present to them as if they were eating at a salad bar. What I mean is that I am going to offer you ideas that you can consider tomatoes, but I am not asking you to eat those tomatoes. If you like my conceptual lettuce, then eat some lettuce. If all you love is okra, then fill your plate with okra and eat only that. As you listen to my talk this morning, I encourage you to adopt the same philosophy. Take what you need or want, and feel free to leave the remainder on the table.

Second, I am going to violate a principle that I generally abide by, and often ask other people to abide by, as well. I am going to state some of my musings as truths. This may rub some of you the wrong way. Trust that the effect is intentional.

So here we go…

The reason for your existence on the planet is to learn. While school learning is part of that, I am talking more about learning what it is to be human. You are here to love and have your hearts broken, to win and to lose, to thrive and to struggle, to rule and to follow, to be blissed out and crushed, peaceful and depressed, to succeed and to fail, to be titillated and bored, beautiful and ugly, awash in friends and lonely. You are here to be the complex human beings that you are, and to ultimately be at peace with that complexity. The purpose is to be whole, ripe human beings. The goal is definitely NOT to be perfect. Perfection is not growth inducing, human, nor particularly interesting.

The good news is that, in the interest of helping you to learn what you need to learn, and to give you the experiences that you need to become whole and ripe human beings, your soul has a distinct and personal agenda for your life. That agenda is constructed specially for you. Your soul has a plan for you that will give you the experiences that you specifically need to grow. The bad news is that your soul’s agenda is likely quite different from your conscious agenda of happiness and success. Your soul may not be interested in perpetual happiness or how big and lovely your house is, because those things may not help you grow. In fact, your soul may give you more than your share of struggle because that is what is called for, for you, at a particular point in time. Trust that the plan is divinely inspired and exquisitely intelligent on the level of your soul.

To illustrate the point, when I was in high school, my best friend was a guy named Mark Marinelly. He was a hotheaded, Italian American kid who loved small, furry animals, gambling and fist-fighting. When he was in a confrontation that was starting to escalate, he would ask me to hold his wristwatch. The watch was precious to him because it had been his grandpa’s and he didn’t want to break the watch during the fight. He would turn to me and say, “Hold my watch.” and I would know that it was “game on”. I would often try to talk him out of the fight that was coming, but once that train was rolling, it was hard to stop him.

In any case, when we were 20 years old, and both juniors at Cal, my friend was diagnosed with cancer. I found out while I was studying in Italy for the semester. He was not the kind of person who would ask me to come home, so I asked my parents and friends to keep an eye on things and to let me know if it looked serious. A couple of months later, I was visiting Paris with some of the people in my program and I got a call from my mom. She told me that things weren’t looking too good with Mark, and that if I wanted to see him, I should come home as soon as possible. I flew home that night.

Over the course of the next two and a half months, one of our friends and I rotated visiting Mark at home everyday, as he moved through his various treatments. We’d gossip, watch a movie or tell stories from high school. Sometimes we’d laugh, sometimes he’d fall asleep or you’d see grimaces of pain flit across his face. Sometimes the time flew, and sometimes it crawled by. Some days were almost normal and others were crushing in their heaviness. In all that time, I never heard him complain. Never. I still think that is extraordinary.

At any rate, when it became apparent that the prognosis was bad for him, he used his savings to buy a motorcycle. He spent a few weeks roaring around the streets of our town, until he got too sick to go out any more. Through those months we watched him slowly, and then more rapidly, waste away. On an early morning in mid-June, he died. His mom called me later that day to tell me that he had passed. She also asked me to deliver the Eulogy at his funeral.

While my friend’s death was an unspeakable tragedy for a large number of people, including me, this is where the complexity of soul lessons comes into play. Between the daily visits to his house, and the writing and delivering of his Eulogy, those things comprise the hardest things that I have ever done in my life. But, I look back now and feel unequivocally proud of how I handled myself during that time. In fact, they are the proudest moments of my life. It is an exquisite blessing to have the memory of that time because I was afforded the chance to prove my own character to myself.

The other gift that came from that tragedy is that my worldview was inalterably changed. My awareness that it was possible for a vibrant 20-year old boy to die, resulted in me paying intense attention to how I am spending my time on Earth. The blessings that sprang from that awareness are innumerable and changed the course my life.

We often don’t know what is actually going on, or what the outcomes will be, when we move through the major events of our lives. I believe that these experiences are evidence of your soul’s agenda for your growth. We often do not know what the lesson of a given experience is until much later.

Finally, in addition to the knowledge that we are all here to learn on a soul level, and that your soul has an agenda for your life, the final truth that I am going to share with you may well be the most important of all. That truth is that you are exquisitely and unequivocally loved. You are never alone. Ever. Help is always there for you. Always. In your darkest and most punishing loneliness, you are loved completely and tenderly and help is always there for you. Your worth in the universe is boundless. The only real sin is thinking that you are on this journey by yourself. You are not.

Thank you.