What is a human life worth? I don’t know the answer to that question. I do not actually know the answer to most of the questions that I am going to ask today. Today I am going to talk about wholeness and balance and in many ways I am the last person to talk about balance, because I know that I get it wrong more than I get it right.

What is a human life worth? While I cannot answer that question there are some metrics where I can try to start to tackle that question. Each of us here in this space possess a body, a human body. Maybe we could look at things in terms of parts? Clearly that must have some value, right? But what value? Well, that depends. What if we just talk about the value of the chemical components of your body? What comprises the human body? You are something approximating 65% oxygen, 18% carbon, 10% hydrogen, 3% nitrogen, 1.6% calcium, and 1.2% phosphorus as well as a huge list of elements including potassium, sodium, zinc, copper, iron, silver, nickel, aluminum, and believe it or not, gold. All this stuff must be worth something right? I mean after all we are talking about gold here! Well, the main ingredient, oxygen, home healthcare businesses such as Lincare have built an entire industry on providing oxygen, surely it is worth something. Fair market value on the approximate 49.14 kg of oxygen present in your body is $9.83. The carbon present is worth about 1 cent per kg. For the 18.29 kg of carbon you have to offer you can add 18 cents to your value. The hydrogen is a better value at approximately $1.60. Nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus will bring in about another $1.41 altogether. After that is a long list of elements the most valuable of which is potassium which is worth about $104.00. So eat lots of bananas!!!! Everything else is in such a trace amount that it isn’t worth much. That gold I referenced is present in a trace amount to net you about one-tenth of a cent. The list goes on and on, but the end result is a grand total of just over $160.00. So, we could say that a life is worth $160.00. Right?

Maybe that is not the best metric to use? I mean after all we are more than a collection of elements walking around, right? I mean, we have earning potential right? We have marketable skills and knowledge. There is a metric we can apply here: life insurance. The point of life insurance is to replace your earning potential so your family can continue in the life they
are accustomed to. The average life insurance coverage is between $100,000 and $250,000. So a human life is worth between $100,000 and $250,000. Seem better than the $160? Sure, but is that really satisfactory? Doubtful.

According to some sources you are worth up to 45 million dollars if you are looking at selling bone marrow, DNA, lungs, kidneys, heart, heart valves. However, strictly speaking selling these items is illegal and you are going to have a hard time living without all of these very necessary parts.

In summary I don’t think I have found a good metric for answering the question of what is a human life worth. Broken down into its chemical and elemental parts our whole being is worth about $160.00. Is that the value of a human life? Was the life of Abraham Lincoln worth $160.00? Adjusted for inflation he was probably worth far less in 1865. How about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was his life worth only $160.00? In the case of both of those their contribution to history is without much question priceless. How about your mother, father, siblings, partner, children. Can you identify a life there that was truly only worth $160.00? I am guessing not. The reason is hopefully abundantly obvious: a human life is worth more than what it can be sold for as scrap!

The flaw in this logic is that you are not just physical parts. You are more than a pile of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorus. You are more than a liver, spleen, lungs, heart and brain. You are also a spirit, but you are more than a spirit. You are energy, but you are more than just energy. You are an intellect, but you are more than just an intellect. In the words of Aristotle: “The whole is more than the sum of its parts.” You are more than the sum of your parts. In recognizing you are more than a collection of trace elements you can begin to approach the reality of your wholeness. Don’t get me totally wrong here: the reality is that your body is a collection of elements and one day you will return to those elements. You are a body, a physical structure and you must pay attention to your physical health. You are much more than that though! You are also the earning potential and marketable skills that I mentioned are covered by life insurance. You have human emotions and your emotions are responsive to both the world around you and your interior life. You also have a mental capacity and carry with you all the knowledge and experiences that have brought you to this day. You are also a spiritual being connected to the world around you and the stars above in ways that
you may not take enough time to ponder. When we do take the time to ponder the interconnected nature of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual selves we begin to touch wholeness. Taken together the intersection of these aspects of our wholeness cannot be valued or a price tag attached because in Aristotle’s words we are more than the sum of our parts. In our wholeness and our interconnection with the universe we transcend the sum total of our parts and are much more. We are much more than can be calculated by any metric available to us. As we have already discussed the impact of Abraham Lincoln on the history of our nation was clearly worth more than the $160.00 we can place on the value of what lies in the earth beneath his tomb in Springfield.

Another analogy for all of this is your home, the place where you live be it a single family home, apartment, trailer, public housing, dorm room, etc. In the same way I asked what makes a human I ask what makes a home? Concrete, 2x4 studs, nails, drywall, plaster, plywood, copper pipes, PVC pipes, metal, vinyl siding, bricks, screws, ceramic tile, vinyl flooring, insulation, shingles, ductwork, maybe even some duct tape! In a very literal sense this is exactly what makes a home! All of those constituent pieces come together to form the home that surrounds you whatever form it may take. There is a price that an be attached to each of those items (insurance companies have made an industry out of this). However, as in the example of the human body and its value in pieces and parts somehow attaching a price to something does not really reach its actual value. Your home is more than the parts and pieces that form it. It may be the place where you laugh and cry and love and have at times slept soundly or passed lonely hours alone through a long night. It may be the place where you have enjoyed time together with family. The place where you have cursed the loneliness. The place where you saw your child take their first steps. The place where you remember the broken treasure strewn across the floor after a baseball was thrown. The place where you first saw your daughter radiant in a wedding dress coming down the stairs. The place where your spouse or partner took their last breath. It is the place where your treasures and art and baby books are stored or displayed. These things are actually of very little value without you and the value you assign to them. If you don’t believe me go to an estate sale or auction. Your home and the items in your home are part of the wholeness of your home and the wholeness of your life. Put all the composite parts of your home together and you have a bigger picture than wood and stone and family heirlooms. You have something that is greater than the sum of its parts. You begin to
encounter wholeness. Like your body it is a temporary wholeness as one day it will all be taken back apart into its pieces and parts - everything around us is turning to dust. Also like you, for this moment in history, it has a wholeness that is more than the sum of its parts.

When you begin to encounter and appreciate your wholeness you also being to appreciate the composite parts that make that wholeness. Once you come to realize that you are a whole person comprised of many aspects you begin to realize the care that each aspect needs to continue to contribute to the whole. Returning to the analogy of your home as an example of wholeness; imagine that you have a room in your house where the roof is leaking. It is a guest room and you don’t have guests so it is no big deal right? Just shut the door and don’t worry about it. It is far too expensive to repair roofs and you really just don’t have the time to mess with it now so you can worry about it later. Days turn into months and months to years and you had completely forgotten that room until one day when you step into the bathroom and you feel a soft floor under your feet. The rot caused by something you can ignore has come to invade another area of your home and you can no longer ignore it. In like fashion you may neglect your mental, spiritual, and emotional health because you are just too busy with work and the days turn into months and the months to years until one day you step on that soft spot on the floor so to speak. You have neglected important parts of your whole self in the interest of one aspect of may and now the damage may leak out into another aspect of your life and the damage may be severe! It may be a nervous breakdown, a wrecked relationship, the list goes on. You would probably find the opposite to be just as true! If you don’t focus on say work and spend all your time attending to your spiritual needs that could be equally problematic. Spending 14 hours a day in Zen meditation practice might be wonderful but it will cause a problem when your mortgage comes due and just like attending too much to your career this much attention to spiritual needs may result in severe consequences as well.

As I mentioned before, I am by no means an expert in the area of balance. And, ultimately, I am asking you to do something that is nearly impossible - find balance is a unbalanced world. It may not be completely attainable, but it is a goal. I am not an expert in balance and maintaining balance in theory or practice. I assure you that I get it wrong way more than I get it right. I am just here to challenge you to think about it and keep balance before you as a goal. I am here to ask the questions. How are you
encountering your wholeness? Are you encountering it at all? How are you balancing the needs of a physical body, emotional well-being, mental health, spiritual wellness? I do not know your inner life or what rooms in your life have a leaky roof you need to attend to. Only through your own reflection and intentional introspection can you find the leaks in your roof and attend to them before you go through the floor of another room. Maybe you need to take a long delayed vacation? You might need to turn your cell phone off for a day? There is great value in not checking your email for several days in a row! For myself, I love to be alone on my kayak when the world gets to be too much. Maybe your balance requires that you say no to some committee work; maybe it requires that you say yes! I do not know you, I cannot tell you what you need to do. You need to look at your own inner and community life and decide. Then you have to keep deciding and keep rebalancing day after day, year after year. It has been said that you never step in the same river twice. Life changes and life evolves, you need to keep examining and keep redistributing and keep repairing leaky roofs in different areas of your life at different times.

All of the aspects of your life are essential to building the whole. I cannot find a metric to decide the value of a human life - at least not a useful or reliable one. That value is up to you. How much do you value the life you have been given? How much do you value the wholeness of your person and the parts, pieces, and aspects that make you who you are. Think about the aspects of your wholeness so that you can both respect your wholeness and its composite parts. It is in respecting the parts you appreciate the whole and in respecting the whole that you appreciate the parts.

I have a sign on my classroom door that reads: “The world needs you to be who you were made to be.” My dear friends the world needs you to be who you were made to be. All of who you were made to be.