

LOVE AND DEATH

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham Unitarian Universalist

All Souls Sunday November 1, 2009

The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Call to Worship and Unison Chalice Lighting

We are living members of the great family of all souls:

Those alive now sharing the earth with us;

Those who have gone before and left to us the heritage of their living labor and sacrifice;

And those whose lives will be shaped by what we do or leave undone.

Prayer

from *Love and Death*

Forrest Church

Let us pray. Let us awaken from the soul-crushing allures
of sophisticated resignation and cynical chic,
To savor instead the world of abundance and possibility
that awaits us just beyond the self-imposed limits of our imagination.

Let us awaken to the saving gift of forgiveness,
where we can, in a single breath, free ourselves and free another.

Let us awaken to the possibility of love, body, mind and spirit,
all-saving and all-redeeming love.

Let us awaken to the blessing of acceptance,
expressed in a simple, saving mantra:

Want what we have; do what we can; be who we are.

Rather than let wishful thinking or regret
displace the gratitude for all that is ours, here and now, to savor and to save.

Let us want what we have –
praying for health, if we are blessed with health,
for friendship, if we are blessed with friends,
for family, if we are blessed with family,
for work, if we are blessed with tasks that await our doing,
and if our lives are dark, may we remember to want nothing more than the loving
affection of those whose hearts are broken by our pain.

Let us do what we can –
not dream impossible dreams or climb every mountain,
but dream one possible dream and climb one splendid mountain,
that our life may be blessed with attainable meaning.

And let us be who we are –
embrace our God-given nature and talents,
answer the call that is ours, not another's,
thereby enhancing our little world and the greater world we share.

This is my . . . prayer. Call it thoughtful wishing.
All we have to do is put our heart in it and there's one more bonus:
unlike wishful thinking, thoughtful wishes always come true.
Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.

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Some of you pointed out to me that today is really All Saints Day, and tomorrow is All Souls. But that's in Catholic tradition. When I visited the Unitarians in Eastern Europe some years ago, it was on Sunday the 31st of October, which they celebrated as Reformation Sunday. Then the next morning, their seminarians and professors took me to the ancient Unitarian burying ground, where they swept off the graves of deceased lay leaders and ministers, told stories of their lives, and then left behind a fresh laurel wreath. As in Mexico, they just call it the Day of the Dead.

So here's a tale one of you shared that could have come from there: A poor man and his wife had been married for more than 60 years. They had shared everything, joys and sorrows alike. They had talked about everything. They had kept no secrets from one another—except for one: the woman had a box in her sewing corner that she'd told her husband never to open or even ask about. He obeyed. But then one winter the woman became very ill. The doctor came but told the man that his wife had only days or hours to live. To his surprise, she asked him to bring her the box. "It's time to open it," she said. Inside he found two little crocheted dolls. And a stack of money that for them constituted a small fortune. His jaw dropped open, and he just looked at her.

"When we were married," the woman said, "my grandmother, who taught me to crochet, told me that if I wanted a long, happy marriage, when I was angry with you I should just crochet a doll, and try to bite my tongue until forgiveness came. It worked."

The man was so moved he had to fight back tears. Only two dolls! In all those years of marriage, she had only been angry with him two times. "Sweetheart, forgive me for the times when I was angry with you! That explains the dolls, but what about all this money? Where do you get that?"

"Oh," she explained, "that's the money I made from selling all the other dolls. ..."

No, there are few saints. A friend who worked hard on behalf of the homeless once told me he tried to assure everyone who helped that he wasn't one either. "In this line of work," he said, "too many folks think they're either saints or martyrs; the martyrs have to put up with the saints."

But benefactors? We all have many. Lately I've been conscious of how many large, generous but also flawed souls have benefited my life. I think of Jacob Trapp, the Unitarian minister who was a mentor to both Ed Lane and me. Jake was a poet, a mystic, and an *almost* saintly man. But once when he and his wife Helen were driving back from their retirement home in New Mexico to the church in Summit, New Jersey, where he had served many years, Jake got to thinking about something while driving, and continued musing about it all the way through a stop for restrooms and gasoline. Then drove off, still thinking, and left Helen behind! He noticed sixty miles later. But to his credit, Jake told that story on himself. Helen, who had been a kindergarten teacher, blamed his failings on the fact that Jake had never learned everything he needed to know because he'd never gone to kindergarten!

Or take my friend John Ertha, whose memorial service was held in this very Meetinghouse last Sunday afternoon. John grew up in one of the two African American families in Bangor, ME, became a Unitarian Universalist and a radical educator, who influenced a whole generation of young people at schools in Newton and Boston and at a UU-inspired youth leadership development camp he ran for over a decade. A place where leadership was defined simply as "having something left over after taking care of yourself to take care of someone or something else." A radical democrat, he gave everyone, regardless of age, an equal vote in camp meetings, where leadership roles were filled by election, not by his appointment, and where community was built around doing plays and musicals. At 22, never having acted or sung in public, I played Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. A play John loved because he also wanted young people to learn the value of tradition. Conservatives, he taught us, are often far more reliable and consistent than liberals. Yet when it came to managing details, or money, John himself was a disaster. Once at camp, when the 16 year old financial manager told me we didn't have enough money in checking to pay the milk bill, and I was a kind of assistant director, I found almost as much money in uncashed checks for camp fees in John's cabin as there was money in that box with the dolls!

Yet I loved John; as I did my one-time colleague in ministry and co-author, Forrest Church.

When people would tell him they were “not religious,” Forrest would say, “Everyone has a religion, whether they admit it or not. As Jefferson said, ‘It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read.’” His definition of religion was as simple as John’s of leadership. Regardless of its form, he said, “religion is our human response to the dual mystery of being alive and knowing that we will have to die.” And if you told him that you didn’t believe in God, Forrest might ask you to describe the God you don’t believe in, and then say, “Well, I don’t believe in such a so-called ‘God’ either. But ‘God’ is not God’s name; God is simply our name for that which is present in each yet greater than all.” God, could he turn a phrase!

I joined Forrest at All Souls in New York as his colleague and co-minister in 1987, when he had already been there nine years. It’s often said of us clergy that we don’t become real ministers at ordination, but only after we do our first funeral. In Forrest’s case, his own ministry came into its own after his father, the famous Senator Frank Church of Idaho, died an early death from cancer. Forrest wrote a memoir called *Father and Son*. The church began to fill. He began to write more.

During the six and a half years that we worked together as co-ministers, he wrote eight more of what were eventually to be twenty-two books. Together, we grew the congregation enormously. At the peak, we were taking in more new members each year than this congregation has in total. But guess who was then at the church until all hours, counseling, teaching lay leaders, overseeing staff and the hundreds of volunteers we had doing social ministry in the city, from downtown welfare hotels to East Harlem to our own programs for the homeless? Still, it was a privilege.

Meanwhile, I think Forrest was unconsciously trying to live up to his father’s huge legacy by becoming an influential interpreter of the role of liberal religion in the development of American democratic pluralism. He did it well. With his last three books—*So Help Me God*, a history of religion in the lives of the first five US presidents, and our first battle over church and state; with *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, written after, as he put it, he was unimaginative enough to come down with terminal cancer at the same age, 59, that his father died of the disease; and with his last book, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*, just released this month—he established himself as the leading UU theologian of our generation.

Did I envy him? Sure. I'm no saint either. Emulation, hurt, and forgiveness are a complex equation, as every benefactor, parent, partner, colleague, student, or child must learn in time. Gwen and I remain close with Forrest's first wife. Their divorce—which only proved that Forrest too was hardly a saint, since he had by then taken up with someone else, a married parishioner— took place while I was already running for UUA president. Now imagine *that* for a moment!

But as I wrote him when he was first diagnosed with cancer three years ago, we both experienced far more stress during the rapid growth of All Souls than either of us were able to voice then. Still, we left behind something; if nothing else, a growth of soul in each of us than we knew. “Life,” said A. Powell Davies, “is just a chance to grow a soul.” Becoming a giving part of what Channing called “the great family of all souls.”

I wrote these words as Gwen and I, with help from some of you, were cleaning out our house, preparing to move to the apartment across the street from here, where we'll be for three years, until I retire. Just at this moment in my writing, our daughter Mary handed me this little book she found. It's an 1846 edition of excerpts from *Plato: His Life, Works, Opinions, and Influence*, published under the title *The Gentleman's Book*. The inscription on the inside, in my own handwriting, reads, “from David Boston, who died in January 1977 at the age of 20, ‘a young man of virtue.’”

Reading that, the memories rushed back. I knew David when I myself had just turned thirty. A parishioner, his social worker, had asked me to minister to him in his last few months of life as he died of testicular cancer. No dummy, David couldn't be an ordinary Tennessee Baptist, which is where I knew him, in Knoxville, my first congregation. During his last months of life he asked to learn to play the hammer dulcimer. And I persuaded a fellow named Guy Carawan to teach David. Guy, who—along with Zilphia Horton—had co-written and then popularized “We Shall Overcome.”

Then when David died, Guy and a musician named John McCutcheon and I stood at his grave to sing a Pete Seeger song, which Jim and Dave and I will now attempt:

*To my old brown earth/ And to my old blue sky/ I'll now give these last few
molecules of "I."*

And you who sing,/ And you who stand nearby,/ I do charge you not to cry.

*Guard well our human chain,/ Watch well you keep it strong, As long as sun will
shine.*

*And this our home,/ Keep pure and sweet and green,/ For now I'm yours/ And you
are also mine.*

Was I a perfect minister to David as he died? Or to anyone else I've ever tried to love or to help? Somehow I doubt it. Forrest ended *Love and Death* saying: "My love has been far from perfect. My first wife will attest to that, and many others. ... I don't shamelessly beg for forgiveness, but I welcome it, knowing that I can accept myself completely only if I embrace the forgiveness of others ... whom I [still] deeply yet imperfectly love." For the final form of love is forgiveness.

"That said, will my love live on forever? I believe so. And your love too. ... "

May all our loving, however imperfect, be received not only by our fellow, forgiving human companions, but also by that inscrutable Love which brought this beautiful, imperfect universe into being, and still yearns—yea, needs—to have us contribute to its ongoing life of loving and creating.

May we want what we have; do what we can; and be what we are. Amen.

And may God bless us all.

And now let's sing a hymn I want everyone to use to sing me out when my life is over. And may love even then once again triumph even over death.

*Hymn 10

Immortal Love

John Greenleaf Whittier

Words for the Dedication of the Memorial Garden

*Hymn 207

Earth Was Given as a Garden

Walking Benediction

Words of Charles Forman

May God bless you and keep you;
may God keep all those whom you love,
whether here or in some other place.

May Love be your companion and you be God's friend,
as you walk together through all the days of your life;
and at the journey's end, may you find the welcome of God's love.

It keeps us all. Amen.