

**OUR LIVING TRADITION:
A TRIBUTE TO FORREST CHURCH**

Cedars UU Church, Bainbridge Island, WA — Sunday, September 27, 2009

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Call to Worship

Leading worship is a privilege and I take it very seriously. As most of you know, Jaco and I plan and prepare very carefully for each Sunday's service, and we expect the same of our colleagues in this work including Worship Associates, the Directors of Music and Religious Education. It is a rare Sunday that I haven't thought and planned and worked on the worship service for many days, even weeks leading up to it.

This is one of those rare Sundays. On Friday morning, I received an email telling me that one of the greatest American religious thinkers, and wise sage of Unitarian Universalism had died. His name was Forrest Church, he was my friend, and the world is diminished by his absence.

Forrest's death put my other sermon on hold. Or, more accurately, the sermon and service I was meant to do today emerged upon hearing of his death. All the pieces were already in place, including the sermon title. Not surprisingly, given Forrest's and my understanding of how God works in our lives, the title I chose weeks ago works perfectly. For I learned more about our Unitarian Universalist living tradition from Forrest Church, than from anyone else, with the possible exception of my father.

Today's worship is not a memorial service. That will happen next Sunday in New York City where Forrest lived and worked for many, many years. Rather this morning is a testimonial to what he taught so many of us about how to be faithful, religious and evangelical Unitarian Universalists.

Sermon:* **Our Living Tradition: A Tribute to Forrest Church*

The first Unitarian Universalist that I heard calling himself a "UU evangelist"—other than my father—was Forrest Church. Though I don't remember exactly, I think I read about it in an article in the *UU World*, our denominational magazine, in the mid-1980s. I was astounded. Here

was someone else saying what I'd learned at my father's knee—that our faith was worth talking about, worth sharing with others.

In those days, the idea that we could and should “evangelize” was downright controversial. When I was in seminary, I was teased about my evangelical inclinations because everyone knew that Unitarian Universalists didn't proselytize. We waited for folks to find us. If they did, great. If not, oh well.

Then I discovered similar tendencies in Forrest Church, who was rather famous if for no other reason than his father was Frank Church, the liberal Senator from Idaho. Forrest was telling the whole UU world that it mattered not only *that* we talk about our faith but *how* we talk about it. Here is his frequent description of a familiar setting we UUs might recognize:

Imagine yourself at a dinner party, the only person there who goes to church. When this telling bit of information inadvertently leaks out, you pique the curiosity of your companions, all of whom graduated from organized religion years ago. They want to know why [you go to church]. They want to know more. All of a sudden the dinner party is in jeopardy. Feeling more defensive than evangelical, you start pushing spin control buttons. "Well, not really church. You see, I'm a Unitarian Universalist."

"I've always wondered about Unitarian Universalism. What do you actually believe?" the woman across from you asks.

"Actually, nothing," you sputter. "Well, not really nothing, more like anything." You then rush to assure them that you don't believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or resurrected on the third day, you almost never read the Bible, and you certainly agree that religion is the most dangerous force in the world, especially today. To which your friends respond that these are the very reasons they *don't* attend church.

Forrest captures the UU dilemma brilliantly. Because so many of us come from other faiths we've long had a tendency to define ourselves *over and against* other beliefs. This negative approach to our faith had always bothered me. As someone who grew up UU, I never felt the need to say to people that I wasn't this or that, although I knew a lot of people who did. But until Forrest put it into words so vividly, I didn't know how to express my frustration with it. No wonder we don't grow, I remember thinking to myself, if this is how we talk about our faith!

Forrest might have left us there to ponder and pout. But in what I was to learn was typical of his style, he quickly gave us reason for hope. Here is the same conversation, with a new and positive spin on it, once again in his words:

"I've always wondered. Just what do Unitarian Universalists believe?" the woman across from you asks.

"Many of the same things the nation's founders did," you reply. "Jefferson and Adams were both Unitarians. They believed in freedom and the democratic process and so do we. Our religious principle, *E pluribus unum*, is just like the nation's: out of many, one. We believe there is one light, one mystery, one God, call it what you will. We model in our churches the way the world should work: mutual respect; no stone throwing; democracy; religious freedom—all in one community of celebrants and sufferers who challenge us to be our best and help us when we're down. 'Deeds not Creeds' is our motto; liberty and justice is our social platform; and love our highest law. Come with me some Sunday. You'd love it."

Wow! This was language I could use and understand to help articulate our faith. And yes, for those of you familiar with the UU identity curriculum that [my spouse and co-minister] Jaco and I authored in 2003, it was partly Forrest Church who inspired us to build the series of workshops called *Articulating Your UU Faith*. Forrest had an ability to talk about our faith in language that made sense. After all, he was the person who gave the world these wise words: "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die."

Forrest understood at the bottom of his soul that our faith was truly religious and he fought against those who would try to define us otherwise, whether from the left or from the right. But more, Forrest used his prodigious gifts as a writer and preacher to tell the wider world about our living tradition, a tradition with roots particularly deep in American culture.

Forrest loved America and he was steeped in its history. So much of that history is intertwined with religion but Forrest was one of a significant, if rather short line of scholars to confirm that the religious roots of our nation lie less in conservative Christianity and more in the liberal spirit that was at the heart of early Unitarianism and Universalism. He published numerous books about this, including a thorough introduction to the Jefferson Bible leading up to such wonderful tomes as *God and Other Famous Liberals* and *The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer*. Forrest, more than any other liberal religious thinker, helped Unitarian Universalists reclaim their patriotism and understand that the most American religion is our own.

But, let me pause for a moment and reflect on what Forrest's ideas mean to us here, right now, at Cedars. Forrest would want me to do that. He was someone who deeply revered the past but aimed to live fully in the present. As I reflect on Forrest's legacy, and how we might learn from it today, I can't help but challenge all of us (myself included) to take our commitment to share our faith a bit more seriously. The world really does need more people who believe in Unity and Love, or as Forrest would say, the world needs people who know—and can express—that we come from the same source and share the same destiny.

Who are those people who will share this good news? Look around you, my friends. We are the one's we've been waiting for. And believe me, I'm not just talking to you; I'm talking directly to myself. There are times and places where I feel a bit funny sharing my faith. As some of you know, I volunteer at Helpline House [the local service center] once a week. When I'm there, I'm not working as a minister, I'm just helping out.

But recently, talking with some other volunteers, I was asked a question about my faith. All of a sudden, I was called upon to share our good news. I did, articulating our faith as best I could. Not sure what to expect, I admit being surprised (and delighted!) to find both people eager and excited by what I had to say. One person told me that what our church stands for is exactly what she believes. A convert, perhaps? We'll see. But I give thanks to Forrest for helping me understand that when the occasion arises I can and should share my faith with a willing and open heart.

That open heart is what many of us here at Cedars want to make manifest. At the Board retreat last weekend, one of the primary goals for this year, affirmed by your leaders, was to nurture an increasing spirit of hospitality in the congregation. We recognize that in order for people to feel connected and accepted here, everyone needs to walk the talk of what some call "radical hospitality" as a spiritual virtue. What does such hospitality look like? Not only does it mean *believing* our principle that all people have worth and dignity; it means *living* it, too.

It means taking time on Sunday morning to talk to strangers as potential new friends, not just seeking out your current friends and neighbors. It means stretching yourself by offering to help out in the Sunday school, or sing in the choir. It means inviting a friend from work or school or your neighborhood to service, and then following through with a ride offer. It means standing up for what you believe in, even when to do so makes you unpopular.

Forrest Church modeled this kind of open heart in his life and in his writings. He always sought to offer us—both those who read his books and sermons from a distance and the over 1000 members at his All Souls congregation in NYC—a way to understand and appreciate the simple yet profound meaning of our faith.

One way Forrest helped UUs to understand themselves and their religion more thoroughly was a handy little book he co-authored with John Buehrens, who was a minister with Forrest at All Souls before becoming president of the Unitarian Universalist Association for eight years. *A Chosen Faith* has been a best seller among UUs for two decades. It is a fount of inspiration for many of us, and a pretty easy read. John and Forrest took the six "Sources" of UUism, found in our Principles and Purposes statement, and gave them shape and depth through their writing.

These Sources continue to inspire today, and my previously planned sermon for today was partially about why I feel they have much to teach us into the future.

The Sources document begins with a key element of our liberal religious understanding—“The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources”—and then goes on to powerfully describe six that have truly shaped our faith. At the annual General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists this past June, a very close vote kept this statement from being radically altered. I was one of those who voted not to change it in such a significant way. I did so partly because of the work Forrest and others did to illuminate this meaningful portrayal of our UU heritage over the past 25 years.

Our hymnal is based on these Sources, as is much of our religious education material. For over two decades clergy and others have dived deep into the meaning of our Principles and Sources and have probably only scratched the surface of what they have to teach us. Though some would say a living tradition needs to be changed with every generation, I believe that we need to live with our Principles and Sources for more than a generation to fully understand what they mean. If we were to lose these poetic statements, we could too easily dismiss the wonderful hymns, stories and essays written about them.

I don't want to risk diminishing some of the most beautiful writing Forrest Church ever did, offered as an aid to more fully understanding the Sources of our UU faith. In *A Chosen Faith*, Forrest's chapter title image, “The Cathedral of the World,” captures our imagination and serves as a powerful metaphor for the kind of deeply broad religion we espouse. If you get a chance, read the whole chapter someday. For now, here is a much shorter version of it, taken from one of Forrest's sermons.

“In the cathedral of the world there are millions of windows, each telling its own story of who we are, where we came from, where we are going, each illustrating life's meaning. Every religious, philosophical, even scientific worldview has a window, or many windows, through which the one Light shines, refracting Truth, bringing illumination to worshipers and seekers.

No one can see the one Light (Truth or God, call it what you will) directly, only as refracted through the cathedral windows. Every great religion teaches this insight. We cannot look God in the eye any more than we can stare at the sun without going blind. This should counsel humility and mutual respect for those whose reflections on ultimate meaning differ from our own.

Sadly, this is not always the case. Some religious leaders, perceiving the Light shining through their own window, conclude that theirs is the only window through which the Light Shines. If they forget that it is in our lives and not in our words that our religion must be read, they may go so far as to incite their followers to throw stones through other people's windows. Skeptics, on the other hand, perceiving the bewildering

variety of windows and worshippers, conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light, only where the Light shines through.

This metaphor is a perfect description of Unitarian Universalism. One Light (Unitarianism) shines through many windows (Universalism), illuminating human minds and hearts in many different ways. In our congregations we honor this truth by encouraging our members to reflect on the Light through whatever set of windows they find most illuminating. We only require that this same freedom be honored for others. For this reason, this church and those like it are nothing less than little laboratories for the practice of *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one.”

Such a lovely and moving metaphor! And how useful it is for us as we aim to share our good news with others. This was truly Forrest’s gift—the ability to put simply yet powerfully into words what so many of us know but can’t quite articulate. He gave us words to more easily express our deepest beliefs—metaphors that are poetic, yet obvious and true. What a blessing. What a gift.

Forrest Church died on Thursday one day past his 61st birthday. It is tempting to wail at the loss of his gifts at so young an age. What wondrous blessings might he have bestowed upon us if he had but lived!

Yet, I know Forrest well enough to appreciate that he left this life as he lived it—rich with gratitude and wonder and acceptance. He knew he would die and yet he never let that knowledge keep him from fully living until the very end. When he wrote what he expected would be his final book, he called it *Love and Death*. Love and death – the two most mysterious and challenging words in our language.

Forrest understood that our faith has a lot to teach us about both, and as he faced his last few days and weeks he allowed himself to fall in love with life over and over again, even as he accepted and came to appreciate that death is simply a part of the story we all must embody. He experienced what I witnessed in my father and in so many other faithful, religious Unitarian Universalists—a courage and humility in the face of death. He knew, as I know and I hope you know, that death is not the final word. For whatever we believe about whatever comes after, there is no doubt that love will be there, always and forever.

When I lead memorial services, I often talk about the eternal nature of love. Of course, Forrest found a way to say it best.

“After death our bodies may be resurrected. Our souls may transmigrate or become part of the heavenly [host]. We may join our loved ones in Heaven. Or we may return the constituent parts of our being to the earth from which it came and rest in eternal peace. About life after death, no one knows.

But about love after death, we surely know. I learned this from my father, as he did from his father and grandfather before him. I learn it also from each of you. The one thing that can never be taken from this world, even by death, is the love we have given away before we die. Those fortunate enough to complete life's seven acts may die sans teeth perhaps, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything but love. For love, I swear it, is immortal."

And the love that Forrest shared with the world lives on. And so, too, the many things he taught that deserve to be remembered. So, today, I remember. I remember the man who taught me to come out of the minister's study and greet folks at the church door. I remember the writer whose eloquent prose helped me own a language of faith.

I remember the Mets fan, the rock-n-roll Senator's son, the Harvard educated cowboy, the arrogant, humble, caring friend. Though our paths crossed infrequently, I was lucky to share a tiny piece of his last few months. He read the sermon I wrote last February, based on his words, and I'm glad to say, appreciated it. The song my sister wrote based on it touched him deeply. The last email I received from Forrest, when he told me the cancer had returned with a vengeance, ended thusly: "*Other than that all is well here, much to celebrate. Love, Forrest.*"

Forrest, as you have left this world for the great mystery that awaits, I can only say, to the dark, beautiful and Holy Spirit that holds us all, thank you. For the gift of life. His life. My life. Our life, here together. May some of what Forrest taught linger on. And may we always remember, in his words:

"The one thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die. Thus, the purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for."

Your life has proved that, Forrest my friend. Go in peace. Amen.

Closing Words

"But for now, I bid you farewell. Go forth into this fragile, blessed world we share with laughter and tears at the ready. Love, work and serve to a fare-thee-well. And then, when your own time comes, let go. Let go for dear life."

QUOTE ATTRIBUTIONS: All quotes come from the All Souls Church (New York City) website <www.allsoulsnyc.org>, from various sermons therein, with the exception of the last two, which come from Forrest's book, *Love and Death*.