

## **The Legacy of Forrest Church**

Alison Wohler, November 1, 2009  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

Beginning with our Call to Worship and ending with our Closing Words, we will be celebrating the life and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church. Forrest Church was a Unitarian Universalist minister, of some considerable renown, whose physical self has left us but whose body of work and ministry remain. Let me begin this morning with the official announcement of his death from the headquarters of our organization, the UUA in Boston.

Call to Worship: *The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, acclaimed author of more than two dozen books and longtime minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, died on September 24, 2009, following a three-year battle with esophageal cancer. He was sixty-one years old. Church is survived by his four children and by his wife, Carolyn Buck Luce.*

*The son of former U.S. Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho) and grandson of former Idaho Governor Chase A. Clark, Forrest Church earned his Ph.D. in early church history from Harvard University in 1978, and began his career at All Souls that same year. Selected from approximately twenty-five applicants for the position, Church was twenty-nine years old. He served All Souls from then until his death.*

*In 1986, Church told the Boston Globe, "...generally, politicians try to change society for the betterment of the individual. I like to change the individual for the betterment of society." Through his work as a minister and a public intellectual, Church profoundly influenced both individuals and society.*

*"I join thousands of Unitarian Universalists and Americans in mourning the loss of Forrest Church," said Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales today. "We have lost a brilliant and articulate thinker, a champion of democratic values, and a compelling advocate for liberal religion. More importantly, we have lost a kind, thoughtful, and loving spirit. What courage and grace he showed in his final years. Even as we feel our loss, let us be grateful for his enduring legacy."*

Chalice Lighting: I light our Chalice this morning for lives – for all of our lives. After his cancer was diagnosed Forrest Church was given 6 months to live, Three years before his death Forrest Church was diagnosed with cancer and given 6 months to live. He ended up giving a number of "last" sermons, one of which was called "Beating the Odds" in February of 2007.

*You, Forrest Church says in this sermon, have already won the only race that really matters. Unconsciously, yet omnipresent, you ran the gauntlet of starts and genomes to assume your full, nothing less than miraculous, place in the creation.*

*Being alive to love and hurt, to fail and recover, to prove your grit and show compassion, that is life's true secret. Life's abiding opportunity, bequeathed against all odds to each and every one of us, is much the same: it is to live, and also to die, for the multitude of brothers and sisters who beat the odds with us, who labored with our ancestor's hands and wept tears (of grief and joy) from our ancestor's eyes, connecting us as kin to [the Universe] and each other, blessed together, always together, with the privilege of running from gate to flag in life's glorious race.*

Reading # 1: I have two readings for us today. In trying to present the monumental legacy of Forrest Church's work, all of which is incredible, it became clear that I would have to pick and choose what to offer in this service today. We could spend the entire year appreciating his many and significant contributions to our Unitarian Universalist tradition, our American history, as well as to our personal lives.

My first reading is from a sermon he delivered in June of 2001, first to his congregation and later that same month to the assembled crowds at the UU General Assembly in Cleveland. I was there. His subject is something he had apparently been interested in since at least 1989 when he wrote a chapter for A Chosen Faith called "The Cathedral of the World." His ideas have evolved, and they are tied closely to his love of the Universalist side of our tradition. His final book, just recently released, is called The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology.

*Imagine the world as a vast cathedral. This cathedral is as ancient as is humankind; its cornerstone is the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and blessed by tears. Search for a lifetime – which is all we are surely given – and we shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with our gaze.*

*The builders have labored in this cathedral from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches, buttresses and chapels, organs, theaters and chancels, gargoyles, idols and reliquaries. Daily, work begins that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who construct it, or the expectant worshippers. Nonetheless, throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines.*

*Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational, some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.*

*As with all extended metaphors, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (or Truth or Being Itself) shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well. Together with the*

*windows, we are a part of the cathedral, not apart from it. Together we comprise an interdependent web of being. The cathedral is constructed out of star stuff and so are we. We are that part (or known part) of the creation that contemplates itself. Because the cathedral is so vast, our life so short and vision so dim, we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the whole creation. We can explore but a handful of its many chambers, myriad windows. Yet, since the whole is contained in each of its parts, as we ponder and act on insights derived from even a single reflection, we may experience self-illumination. We may also discover or invent meanings that invest both the creation and our lives with coherence and meaning.*

*Because none of us is able fully to comprehend the truth that shines through another person's window, nor to apprehend the falsehood that we ourselves may perceive as truth, we can easily mistake another's good for evil, and our own evil for good. A Universalist theology tempers the consequences of our inevitable ignorance, while addressing the overarching crisis of our times: dogmatic division in an ever more intimate, fractious, and yet interdependent world.*

There is but one Light. There are many windows. Unitarian Universalism.

Reading #2: In the fall of 2006 I gave a sermon called "Turn the Page," which was based on a sermon by Forrest Church that I was lucky enough to hear in person at Chautauqua in the spring of 1997. It changed my life. I know, from the comments I received from you after this sermon, that his words found fertile ground in you, as well. Here is some of what he said in that sermon:

*Think of your life as a book, difficult but potentially worthy. The cover attracted you. The first few chapters won your interest. Not a great book perhaps, but a good book. How will it turn out?*

*Thumbing through the pages of our lives, sometimes we get stuck. We read a single page over and over. Surely, this has happened to you. Often it happens to me. I read a page only to realize that my mind wasn't tracking. So I go back to the top to read it again. As often as not, when I reread the page, I get even less out of it than I did the first time. The harder I try to get through this page of my book, the more incomprehensible it becomes.*

*If you are stuck at some point in your life, when the harder you try the less you comprehend, when you have read the same page three times with diminishing returns, my suggestion is this: Don't assume that you have to get everything right with the past and the present before you dare approach an unknown future. [Resist the temptation to insist that it has to make sense.] Turn the page. (Lifecraft, p. 119-120)*

The legacy of Forrest Church is broad based and diverse. He was a theologian, an historian, and a pastor. I'll continue after these notes from our Choir...

Sermon: I don't really want this to be akin to a memorial service, but it is hard not to gush about the impact this one man has had on our Association and on our country and

even on my own small life! I did get to meet him in person and have conversation with him (if ever so brief) on a couple of occasions. The most significant of our meetings was at an afternoon tea of the UU Fellowship at Chautauqua at which Forrest Church was a guest. I was not yet an ordained minister, but he treated me as colleague and wholeheartedly affirmed my intentions. More recently I traveled to hear him speak about one of his books, So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State. I swear he remembered me from our meeting several years before! He signed my book: To Alison – Congratulations on your Ministry. Lots of love, Forrest. I own seven of his books, and three others for which he was the editor. I have brought them with me today, and you may borrow them if you like.

Forrest Church, in his sermons and in his books, does not hesitate to talk about himself. He clearly holds to Emerson's advice that a minister should use their own lives, passed through the fire of thought, as the best way to reach the minds and hearts of the congregation. Here is part of the Introduction Church wrote for a Beacon Press edition of The Jefferson Bible. (p. vii-ix)

*In 1956, my father, Frank Church, won election to the United States Senate. As had been the custom since 1904, on the day of his swearing in he was presented with a copy of Thomas Jefferson's Bible, The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth. Two years later he gave the book to me.*

*On first reading, even to the eyes of a ten-year-old boy, Jefferson's Bible struck with the force of unexpected revelation. For instance, there was no mention of virgin birth or resurrection. From my occasional bouts with Sunday school, I knew how the Jesus story was supposed to begin (with angelic visitations and an immaculate conception), and end (the empty tomb and ascension to heaven). Being skeptical by nature and upbringing, such miracles figured prominently in my resistance to this great story's saving power. Jefferson's Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth began to change all that. A redaction of the four Gospels (Jefferson cut out and pasted together only those passages that made sense to him), his Bible unlocked the Scriptures for me, opening up a whole new world.... With the gift of [this book,] a door opened for me that ultimately led to a vocation in religion. [And, to think,] I had no idea that Jefferson espoused a Unitarian theology, or that he once claimed that "there is not a young man now living in the U.S. who will not die an Unitarian."*

In A Chosen Faith Forrest Church writes about becoming a UU. (p. xix-xx)

*When I attended Sunday school – irregularly, I must confess – the difference between good and bad Presbyterians was clear. Good Presbyterians chose the right colors and stayed inside the lines. But I was a bad Presbyterian for more important reasons than my lack of artistic talent. I did not believe what I was being taught. So I left the Presbyterian church, wandered for a time, and then, happily, became a Unitarian Universalist. This was an act of kindness to the Presbyterians as much as to myself.*

Forrest Church was only three years older than I, so I understand some of what he is describing in this story of his adolescence. (Lifecraft, p. 30-31)

*To aid my search for life's meaning, thirty years ago, while interning at Stanford University's Memorial Church, I followed a strict ascetic regimen. I went to bed at one, awoke at five, and spent each morning drinking Lapsang souchong tea and reading Greek philosophy. Every afternoon I served as guru and guide to a few ragtag disciples. Evenings I listened to Mahler and read Milton, which together with the Vietnam War, were the primary sources for my budding vision [of catastrophic endings].*

*Should you doubt that I was taking my life too seriously, for a week or two in the late spring of that year, I took off my glasses when walking around campus, so as not to lust after gorgeous half-dressed women. Since I am almost blind, this plan proved impractical. I lapsed and returned to lust. But I maintained my other disciplines. My goal was to learn Latin and Greek and to read all of Western philosophy in two years. What better way to discover the truth! I cut off all my hair, grew a foot-long beard, lost thirty pounds, made it to the Stoics, and collapsed. Positive that I'd contracted consumption or some equally romantic nineteenth-century disease, I went to the university health service. My doctor was not impressed. She said that I had been behaving like an idiot. There was absolutely nothing wrong with me that a little more sleep and a little less tea wouldn't cure. She told me that she never wanted to see me again. I never wanted to see her again either, so I abandoned my quest for perfection.*

How many of us can identify with this? But how many of us would be willing to share the idiotic things we did when we were young?

I have learned a lot from Forrest Church about our nation's history, too, particularly as it is related to anything religious. I love his book called The American Creed. *America*, he writes, *is a union of faith and freedom, in which faith elevates freedom and freedom tempers faith.* (p. xiii) We were founded on precepts that are as sacred as they are secular, even if not specific to any one organized religion. *Though employing the language of faith, [our American Creed] transcends religious particulars, uniting all citizens in a single covenant. It treats believer and atheist alike, offering each the same protections, securing freedom of and from religion.* (p. xiv) *It is no exaggeration to say that America's cornerstone is religious liberty.* (p. 2) I came to understand the significant part that our Unitarian liberal religious tradition played in the formation of this country.

I also learned a few interesting facts from Forrest Church's books. For one thing I learned that *in 1833 Massachusetts was the last state in the union to disestablish religion, making Unitarianism – today steadfast in its devotion to church/state separation – the American faith last to hold government sanction.* (p. 8) For a long time many powerful Unitarians were not in favor of an amendment to the Constitution separating church and state because it was Unitarian churches that were still receiving a portion of the taxes being collected within each parish. (from So Help Me God)

These historical books by Forrest Church are very interesting and intellectually stimulating, but it is his book Freedom From Fear that has probably meant the most to me and to some of you as well. After a sermon using this book I ended up loaning it out to a number of you. Fear had played too big a part in my life and reading Freedom From Fear was, well, freeing, to say the least.

In this book, Forrest Church writes that fear and freedom are opposites, that a life ruled by fear cannot be free. Forrest Church has a penchant for making lists for us that are easy to remember. (p. xvi, xvii)

The five kinds of fear he defines:

- 1. Fright is instinctive fear, designed to protect us from physical danger.*
- 2. Worry is fear produced by our worst imaginings.*
- 3. Guilt is fear caused by a troubled conscience.*
- 4. Insecurity is fear prompted by feelings of inadequacy.*
- 5. Dread is fear generated by life's fundamental uncertainty.*

The three kinds of courage:

- 1. The courage to act – because performing is a gutsy thing to do.*
- 2. The courage to love – because open hearts break easily.*
- 3. The courage to be – because, all by itself, life can be frightening.*

Three short imperatives that make courage possible:

- 1. Do what you can.*
- 2. Want what you have.*
- 3. Be who you are.*

Then he lists ten keys, or useful devices, to free our lives from fear. For these you'll have to borrow the book.

Where did all this wisdom come from? How did it end up in this one man who also, fortuitously, had the ability to write it all down in a way that people actually enjoy hearing? I am in awe, but mostly I am grateful. If not for him and his "Turn the Page" sermon, I might not have found the courage to begin the journey that has brought me here to you, today.

He also taught me that we don't have to be perfect people, or have figured "it" all out, in order to move ahead and make a difference. Did you know Forrest Church thought his hands were too big, and every time he walked into a room he didn't know what to do with them? This was a man who was not afraid to talk about his vulnerabilities. Real people are vulnerable.

*So what gives our lives meaning?* he asks at the end of his book Lifecraft. (p. 117) *Here is my short list. Kindness does. Also forgiveness. Generosity. Enthusiasm. Ecstasy. Empathy. Above all love, given and received.*

Thank you Forrest Church, and may it be so.