

AMEN. I LOVE YOU.

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
September 27, 2009

In the 2½ days that have elapsed since Forrest's death on Thursday evening, a line from Albert Camus has persisted in my mind: "What does it matter what we have lost," Camus wondered, "when what we have left is enough."

For my part, it matters a great deal what we have lost. When we gather to celebrate Forrest's life on Saturday afternoon, we will consider in some detail the scope of his accomplishments and the depth of his impact, both of which were extensive. We've lost a lot. And it matters—not only to our community and nation, but also to us, Forrest's family and congregation. Carolyn has lost a devoted husband. Frank and Nina have lost a loving father and Jacob and Nathan a loving stepfather. The members and friends of All Souls have lost a minister of thirty years.

This is a time of sadness for all of us. We've lost a lot. The outpouring of love and expressions of loss on the All Souls tribute pages and on Facebook, as well as elsewhere, bespeak a grief that's far deeper than words. Here in the sanctuary and in the chapel, candles have burned brightly into the night, beacons of love to push back the dark. We've lost a lot, and it matters.

It matters to me as well. Over the past sixteen years, Forrest and I enjoyed a profound friendship and forged an unusually fertile partnership. The reason is simple: Forrest took me seriously as a minister and gave me room to grow. Over time, we found that each of us became a better minister as we were both challenged and supported by someone whose preaching we admired, whose intellect we respected, and whose judgment we took seriously. We were a good team—for All Souls and for each of us.

My last extended conversation with Forrest, just before his swift decline began two weeks ago, ended with his making a simple request: take care of All Souls. He knew I would, and I will. But I will not soon reconcile myself to his absence. I miss him fiercely. We have lost a lot, and it matters hugely.

Despite our loss, Camus says that what we have left is enough. What do we have left? Is it enough?

Jane Campion's poignant and heartbreaking new movie *Bright Star* tells about the final two years in the life of celebrated English poet John Keats. Born in London in 1795, Keats encountered tragedy early: his father, a prosperous coachman, died in a riding accident when the future poet was eight, and his mother died of tuberculosis when he was fourteen. Left impoverished and unable to pursue his medical studies, Keats subsisted on the largesse of friends and began writing poetry.

His early efforts were undistinguished; but by 1818, when he turned 23, Keats had developed a distinctive poetic voice. He had also developed symptoms of tuberculosis. Over the course of the following year, Keats wrote almost all of his major poems. He died in Rome at the age of 25.

Some of the similarities between Forrest and Keats are obvious. Both were bright stars "in lone splendor hung aloft" in their respective firmaments, whose light shone early and dimmed too soon. Both grappled with the formative counterpoint of love and

death—in their lives and in their writings. And both wrote with a zeal and perseverance that few writers can match. I can imagine Forrest saying, as Keats did:

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high-piled books, in characterly,  
Hold like rich garnerers the full ripen'd grain...

Forrest has certainly left us a rich garner of books, as Keats did poems. This we have left. But what the words of both capture, at their best, is not so much a way of thinking as it is a way of living. Their focus is on experience, rather than on ideas.

One of Keats' best-loved poems is "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," a lovely ballad about Keats' love for Fanny Brawne. Their relationship—passionate and enduring, yet ultimately unconsummated—provides the frame for Jane Campion's movie about Keats.

Early in the movie, Fanny comes one afternoon to the simple room where Keats boards with a friend. She has found his presence beguiling and his poetry intriguing, and she wants to understand his work. She asks him to explain the craft of poetry. His face darkens, and he retorts that the idea of poetry as a craft is a sham. "If poetry does not come as naturally as leaves to a tree," he says, "it had better not come at all."

Fanny is perplexed by this answer, and replies that she still doesn't know how to work out a poem. "You do not work out a poem," Keats insists, "That would undo its magic." He goes on to explain that poems are best understood through the senses, through "your capacity for being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts..."

"The point of diving in a lake," Keats explains, "isn't immediately to swim to the shore but to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of water. You do not work the lake out; it is an experience beyond thought. Poetry soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery."

Fanny replies, "I love mystery."

As much as anyone, and more than most of us, Forrest had the courage to dive into the mystery of life—to luxuriate in uncertainty and cherish doubt, to wrestle with paradox and embrace irony. In the pulpit as in the rest of his life, Forrest held up his failures as readily as he celebrated his successes; he acknowledged his errors as readily as he trumpeted his awards. He dove full in—nothing hidden and nothing held back.

This approach to life made Forrest an inspiring preacher and reassuring pastor—precisely because we saw him as he saw himself: as fully human. He could laugh at his own foibles, and often did. Time and again, Forrest recited his favorite etymology: "human, humane, humanitarian, humor, humility, humus. Dust to dust, the mortar of mortality binds us fast to one another. Truly we are one." This too we have left.

Beyond Forrest's eloquence on the page and in the pulpit, it was his humanity that kept him connected to the people and world around him. In a posting early yesterday morning on the All Souls tribute page, Forrest's son Frank made this same point in a more personal way. With Frank's permission, I share an excerpt from his deeply insightful tribute.

Frank describes his anger when his father would, from the pulpit, talk about things that most people keep private. But, Frank goes on to say, when Forrest discussed things in his life that were horrific—his divorce and his alcoholism, for example—these

painful experiences, Frank says, “were changed and altered in their sharing...from awful personal failures to incredible battles of shared humanity. And love.”

Frank continues: “My father wasn't beloved because he was a larger than life pulpit-legend; it was because he battled and accepted his failures, successes and his humanity with such transparency and inclusion that despite the obvious pain, suffering and trials he endured, he was healed emotionally, spiritually, and personally by everyone around him.”

“It's weird,” Frank says, “because he shared EVERYTHING. He was truly connected to all of you, and there was no stake or dividing line that wedged his personal pain away from anyone else's. So when a wedding, or a funeral, or a dedication, or a diagnosis occurred, it was his, as much as it was yours. And being there with you, as you were with him every Sunday, justified his life.”

We come to this place not because we are whole, but because we are broken. Only by confessing our brokenness can we be made whole. We come to this place not because of our strength, but because of our weakness. Only by admitting our weakness can we be made strong. We come to this place not because of our knowledge, but because of our ignorance. Only by declaring our ignorance can we become wise. This is true for everyone, even ministers. This too we have left.

One afternoon last spring, Forrest and I spent several hours talking our way around the world of everything that mattered to us. We happened upon the topic of how sermons end, and Forrest explained why he always ends by saying, “Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.”

“I think people understand what I'm trying to communicate when I say ‘I love you’ from the pulpit,” Forrest said. He listed the three kinds of love that are described in the New Testament: romantic love, friendship, and divine love—agape, in Greek.

“People know I'm not saying ‘I love you’ in the romantic sense,” Forrest explained, “or even in the sense that friends would say ‘I love you’ to each other.” He went on to say, in a typically self-deprecating observation, that he thought some people found him rather reserved in person.

“But when I say ‘I love you’ from the pulpit,” he said, “something connects—I get connected to the congregation and they get connected to each other. It's almost like, for a moment at least, we all part of each other—of something larger than ourselves. It's the human form of love divine, as Blake put it.”

“And besides,” he added, “someone once told me that I'm the only person in her life who ever says ‘I love you.’ She comes to church to hear someone say that she matters.” Forrest urged me to continue this tradition as part of my ministry at All Souls.

In the aftermath of Forrest's death, this is what we have left. We have the courage he exemplified by diving into life with abandon. We have the humanity he demonstrated in his living, the bravery he showed in his dying, and the wisdom he left in his writings. And one thing more: we have the love he gave all of us—to the very end. This too we have left. And yes, it is enough.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.