

The Life and Work of F. Forrester Church

A Sermon Delivered on January 24, 2010
by
Sam Beshers and the Worship Committee

*“Religion is our human response to the dual reality
of being alive and having to die.”
-- Forrest Church*

Unitarian Universalist Church
of Urbana-Champaign
309 West Green Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801-3221
(217) 384-8862
uucuc.org

Opening Words: from *Life Lines* (Introduction p. xvii)

During twenty years as a pastoral counselor, I have seen people hold on for dear life through every manner of personal crisis. It is humbling to be asked to assist another who is in pain. Often crises that other people struggle to endure, I can hardly imagine enduring myself. Sometimes they succumb. Sometimes they survive. In both cases, I have witnessed—and this is perhaps the greatest privilege of ministry—remarkable displays of human courage and resilience. I have witnessed something else as well, the thing that inspired me to write this book. Surprisingly often, my parishioners emerge from their struggles not only intact but with a more profound appreciation for life's meaning. The same trial that destroys one person can actually strengthen another.

Over the years, my parishioners have taught me two lessons. When cast into the depths, to survive we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can.

Introduction

Today's service is a celebration of the life and work of the Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church. Until his death last September, he was minister at All Souls Church in Manhattan, where he had been for thirty years. During this time he rose to national prominence through his writings and public speaking on liberal religion. Journalist Dan Cryer, who is working on a biography of Forrest, says "Much more than a parish minister, he was a writer, thinker and public intellectual of consequence. In the '80s and '90s, he was a key national spokesman challenging what he depicted as the religious right's hijacking of flag, family and Bible. He was an eloquent public speaker and commentator on radio and television who also wrote books of enormous spiritual power and who, as a historian, showed great insight into the nuances of church-state relations in American history." I grew up in All Souls and joined the church as a young adult, soon after Forrest did. Thus this service is both my own public tribute to Forrest and my personal farewell.

Meditation: from *Lifecraft* (pp. 44-45)

Sportswriter Christine Brennan tells the story of professional quarterback Mark Rypien of the Washington Redskins. Rypien was voted the Super Bowl Most Valuable Player in 1991. Long after his glory days, he was playing for the Los Angeles Rams in 1997 when his three-year-old son was diagnosed with a brain tumor. During the day, Rypien practiced with his team; at night he slept on a cot at his son's bedside in the hospital. The following year, his son's tumor returned with a vengeance. When he and his wife learned that their child was dying, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

"Why is this happening?" Mark Rypien asked in his conversation with the reporter. "But at the same time," he said, "you've got two people in need, so you

make the decision you need to make and move on.”

To be with his wife and take care of his son during the last months of the boy's life, Rypien quit football and returned to his Idaho home. His son's favorite restaurant, Chuck E. Cheese, was twenty miles away, but he took his family there every day for lunch. On August 22, 1998, having fallen asleep on his parents' bed, lying between them, Rypien's son died.

When Christine Brennan called to see how the family was coping, Mark Rypien told her that his wife's cancer was in remission. There was laughter in the background. They were having a party. He was thinking of going back into football.

As life challenges us to do, when tragedy struck, Rypien dropped some projects and concentrated on others. Not that he could change this sad chapter of his life. To save his son was beyond his mortal power. But by focusing on his father project and his husband project, Mark Rypien tackled those things that had the best chance of redeeming whatever was left of his loved ones' days.

Reading: From *Love and Death* (chapter II, The Diagnosis, pp. 77-78)

On October 17, 2006, I sent a letter to the members of my congregation to inform them that I'd been diagnosed with cancer. It read in part:

Dear Friends,

With apologies for sending this word out so impersonally, I'm writing to share with you the news that I have esophageal cancer. A bank of tests conducted over the past two weeks has confirmed the existence of a malignant tumor high in my esophagus, and we shall determine a protocol for treatment (radiation and chemotherapy or surgical removal) before the end of the month. Unhappily this is a particularly fierce form of cancer; happily, it apparently has not spread. More important than any of these cold medical facts, I am in good spirits and more grateful than ever for the gifts of life and love. All four children have descended on the household, and Carolyn is girding herself for the struggle ahead. She'll be the general, I'm relieved to report; I'll simply be the battlefield.

After almost three decades as your minister, I have been graced with so many teachers, whose courage in face of life's troubles has been a constant inspiration. I can also happily report that the theology I have hammered out in your good company—religion as our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die, and the purpose of life being to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for—offers the same comfort to me during my own time of trial that I pray it has given you in yours.

As for my mantra—want what you have, do what you can, and be who you are—I practice each every day, feeling myself blessed beyond measure. Please know that you live in my heart, an abiding presence that fills my life with strength and joy.

What appeared to be a death announcement had come by phone from my family physician, Dr. Marcel Laufer, at 12:30 PM on Friday, October 6. I had just returned

home from a barium esophogram. The doctor began, "There's no way to dance around this, Forrest. You have what appears to be inoperable esophageal cancer." "How long do I have?" I asked. "Months," he guessed.

Carolyn was on the other phone. In fifteen minutes, a car was slated to pick her up for the airport. She was on her way to India to launch a major business project. My first challenge was not my health. It was somehow talking my willful wife into carrying on with her life. Even months, I reckoned quickly, is all the time in the world if you take it seriously and fill it with love. It was far harder for her to get on that plane than for me to insist she do so. We had plenty of time, I told her. Besides, I thought to myself, my life might be ending, but hers had to continue.

Reading: "God's Son Jesus" from *God and Other Famous Liberals*

If God is the most famous liberal of all time, his son Jesus surely comes in a close second. It is not a question of sweetness and light. Jesus was often angry. He turned over the tables of the money changers. He scorned the religious establishment of his own day, branding them as liars and hypocrites.

Jesus's liberalism was founded on two principles that always distinguish religious liberals from their more traditional contemporaries: He was not a biblical literalist, and he disdained every superficial form of religious show, whether moralism, pietism, or doctrinal presumption. Jesus placed the burden of religious proof not in saving words but in saving works.

Both principles are important, and each is ignored by the more vocal and insistent of Jesus's so-called followers. In many Christian circles, biblical literalism is the key to salvation, and private, rather than public, morality is a litmus test of one's Christian sincerity. Nothing could less honor the memory of a man who so eloquently challenged the religious presumptions of his time. In contrast with the Pharisees, those good people who were the biblical literalists and moralists of their day, Jesus sought a far deeper proof of faith, one ratified by deeds not words. He was unimpressed by propriety and fearless in his advocacy of society's lost sheep: outcasts, untouchables, all the forgotten ones.

As for his disdain of biblical literalism, consider the Sabbath law, duly codified in scripture. Proclaiming that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," Jesus aligned himself with the spirit, not the letter, of the Bible. Those who wish to enact Christian laws in our own country must beware. The person in whose name they are acting would have cringed at the very thought.

Reading: "A story from adolescence" from *Lifecraft*

Let me share a story from my own adolescence. 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 eschatological vision.

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.

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Frank Forrester Church IV was the minister of All Souls Church in New York City for over 30 years. The son of the late Senator Frank Church, he was born on September 23, 1948 in Boise, Idaho. He was educated at Stanford and then at Harvard Divinity School where he earned a Ph.D. in early church history in 1978. His thesis was on the Gospel of St. Thomas, a gnostic gospel recovered from the sands of Egypt in the middle of the 20th century. He was headed for academia, but after a member of All Souls heard him speak on his research he was invited to interview for the position of minister, and won the job over 24 other candidates. The vote to call Forrest to the ministry was 130 to 2; when the Board chair called Forrest and told him of the result, he said that hearing of the two votes against was reassuring.

Forrest arrived at the end of the summer to take up his duties. He told frequently the story of how in his first few months in the pulpit he worked hard – following all the best models – to produce elegant sermons, and then the Board chair came to him early in the new year and said “Sir, you really must do something about your sermons.” Rising to the challenge, he cast aside formalities, returned to the natural style of the candidating sermons, and never looked back.

As minister of All Souls, Forrest saw the congregation grow from under 200 members to nearly 2000, he spearheaded numerous social action projects, and wrote or edited over 20 books, with titles such as *The Devil and Dr. Church, a guide to Hell for Atheists and True Believers*; *The Seven Deadly Virtues*, a similar guide to Purgatory; *Life Lines*; *Lifecraft*; and *God and Other Famous Liberals*. His final book, *The Cathedral of the World, a Universalist Theology*, appeared posthumously this fall.

In his first decade at All Souls, married with children, Forrest began an affair with a member of his congregation. Supporters of his wife brought a motion to dismiss him to the Board; the motion got about 25% of the vote and many of those voting in favor later left All Souls. Forrest apologized from the pulpit for both his adultery and in 2000 for his alcoholism, which he announced from the pulpit. His second marriage endured.

In the fall of 2006 he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and given at most months to live. After treatment it appeared that he might be cured, and he said that 2007-8 was one of the happiest and most productive years of his life. In early 2008 the cancer recurred and again Forrest recovered. During this time he quipped that he had given his last sermon about ten times. Last summer the cancer returned for the final time and Forrest died on September 24, the day after his 61st birthday.

Forrest wrote extensively about religion, God, Christianity, how to live, how to die, and the importance of liberalism in both religion and in American history and politics. You will hear about his writings and beliefs mainly in his own words.

In the 1980s, as liberalism was increasingly under attack and the religious right ever more vocal, Forrest fought back, arguing that liberalism is central to American values and history and even more important for our country's future. In his 1991 book *God and Other Famous Liberals*, he writes

(from *God and Other Famous Liberals*, xx – xxii)

To save [the soul of America] –though this may jerk the knee of many contemporary liberals—one must first remember that the liberal tradition of America is not merely a secular tradition. It flows along two streams that run parallel to one another and converge redemptively at critical moments in our nation's history. One is secular, but the other is decidedly religious.

From the outset, the American experiment was a religious venture, inspired by a search for freedom of belief and founded according to covenant, a religious agreement based on mutual trust, and not (like a contract) on law. The Protestants who first settled this country invested individuals with direct spiritual authority, to be supplemented but not supplanted by church law. Even before the Pilgrims shared their newfound religious freedom with settlers of different theological views, the covenant principle, central to Puritan theology, established a basis for participation that led naturally to democracy and mitigated against hierarchy. Children of the Reformation, the Puritans emphasized the principle of private judgment. Casting into question the exclusive authority of religious hierarchies, they replaced it with a new and far more democratic principle: the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. By stressing the autonomy of the individual conscience, this opened one door to liberalism.

Enlightenment thinkers who fashioned our government opened the other door. It too had a religious key, shaped according to the law of nature and nature's God. In addition, underscoring the primacy of private judgment and conscience, our founders' insistence on separation of church and state complemented their Puritan forebears'

spiritual aspirations.

In Europe, political modernization and democratization were unabashedly secular. Both met resistance from religious ideologues, who shared in the privileges granted by the monarchy and therefore remained faithful to the threatened ruling establishment. In contrast, our revolution was inspired by people of faith, individuals who, in the Declaration of Independence, appealed “to the Supreme Judge of the world for the Rectitude of our intentions,” expressed “a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence,” and drew from the religious tradition of natural law—today unnaturally feared by some liberals—to declare that all are “created equal and given certain inalienable rights.” That liberty which benefits each and should therefore be possessed by all is nothing if not a religious idea.

Throughout our country’s history these two liberal streams, secular and religious, flow in and out of one another’s channels. Abraham Lincoln regarded the Declaration of Independence as spiritually regenerative. Martin Luther King, Jr., drew both real and rhetorical inspiration from the “American proposition” that all people are created equal. Declaration signer Benjamin Rush, a Universalist from Pennsylvania, claimed that democracy “is a part of the truth of Christianity. It derives power from its true source. It teaches us to view our rulers in their true light. It abolishes the false glare which surrounds kingly government, and tends to promote the true happiness of all its members as well as of the whole world, for peace with everybody is the true interest of all republics.” As described by American church historian Sidney Mead, “the theology of the republic” reverberates profoundly throughout our history.

To neglect the mutuality of the democratic and biblical spirit, especially as perceived by many of our nation’s architects and social activists, is to strip American liberalism of its transformational power. In his book, *Under God*, Garry Wills says it well:

Religion has been at the center of our major political crises, which are always moral crises—the supporting and opposing of wars, of slavery, of corporate power, of civil rights, of sexual codes, of “the West,” of American separatism and claims to empire. If we neglect the religious element in all those struggles, we cannot even talk meaningfully to each other about things that affect us all.

In his religious writings, Forrest asked the basic questions. What is God? How should we live? How should we die? The answers to these questions define religion. For Forrest, God encompassed the universe and all of its possibilities; it represents an ideal of perfection that we can never attain, but in the search for which we find meaning. Again in *God and Other Famous Liberals*, he writes (p. 6)

People sometimes tell me they don’t believe in God. I ask them to tell me a little about the God they don’t believe in, because I probably don’t believe in “him” either. I don’t believe in the great father in the sky armed with a bolt of lightning aimed at the heart of his adversaries. I don’t believe in a God that saves some people from airplane crashes, earthquakes, or hurricanes, while grinding others to dust under his merciless heel. I don’t believe in a God who glibly chooses sides, and then brings in the heavy artillery. If the God they disbelieve in is anything like the God I disbelieve

in, their God is too small.

Love and death were both central to Forrest's religious thought, and after his cancer reappeared in 2008 he decided to write one more book that would capture what he had learned during his ministry and in his own personal struggle. Of his ministry, he writes

(from *Love and Death*, p. 21)

I didn't become a minister in any meaningful sense until I conducted my first funeral. Of all the things I am called on to do, none is more important, and none has proved of greater value to me, than the call to be with people at times of loss. When asked at a gathering of colleagues what gives most meaning to my work, I replied that, above all else, it is the constant reminder of death. Death awakens me to life's preciousness and also its fragility.

Many of the same guides who teach us how to live teach us also how to die. They may even do both at once. As her therapist told the writer Anne Lamott just before Lamott's best friend died, "Watch her carefully right now, because she's teaching you how to live." Lamott reflects, "To live as if we are dying gives us a chance to experience some real presence. Time is so full for people who are dying in a conscious way, full in the way that life is for children. They spend big round hours. So instead of staring miserably at the computer screen trying to will my way into having a breakthrough I say to myself, 'Okay, hmmm, let's see. Dying tomorrow. What should I do today?'"

And after his cancer diagnosis, he wrote

(from "Words to Live By", Forrest's sermon on October 28, 2007)

Every minister worth his or her salt spends a lifetime preparing for death's exam. A year ago this month, just how strong the theological foundation I had built for myself met the test. With compelling reason to believe that my number had been called, I finally had a chance to see if the balm I had brought over the years to the bedsides of your loved ones would salve my own fresh wound.

During the days after my diagnosis, through my brain, as if on a Möbius loop, cycled my theological mantras.

- Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.
- We are the religious animal; knowing that we must die, we cannot help but question what life means.
- We are more alike in our ignorance, than we differ in our knowledge.
- God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.
- Whether or not there is life after death, surely there is love after death.
- The one thing can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we die.
- The purpose of life is to live in such a way, that our lives will prove worth dying for.

One year later, each of these propositions stands unchallenged at the heart of my

faith. Yet they are not what got me through my time of trial. The consolation they offered was intellectual, not emotional. My soul needed something more bracing than my own soaring rhetoric. So I returned to the mantra by which I have attempted to guide my life since shortly after 9/11: Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are.

Let me unpack these words to live by in reverse order. First, be who you are. Easier said than done, I admit, but essential to peace of mind and true success in life. Being who we are means embracing our God-given nature and talents. I, for instance, loved my father. I still love my father. I honor and admire him. Once, however, I wanted, more than anything, to borrow his ladder to the stars. I had more confidence in him than I did in myself. I wanted to be like him, not like me. Then the moment of reckoning arrived. Half way through my doctoral work, I was handed a political career on a platter. In 1976, at the age of 27, I had run my father's presidential campaign in Nebraska, a primary he won against Jimmy Carter. After the primary season ended, the Carter people invited me to head up their Nebraska effort that fall, sweetened by an offer from Nebraska's lieutenant governor to remain in the state as vice-chair of the Democratic party, with the promise of standing for Congress two years later if everything worked out. I might very well have done this, but my father interceded. He called me a quitter. Finish your doctorate, he said. Then go ahead and do whatever you wish with your life. So I persevered. And, in persevering, I found my calling. Two years later, I was installed as the ninth minister of All Souls. For thirty years I have been privileged to serve this congregation, fulfilling not my destiny—I don't believe in destinies—but answering a call that was mine, not someone else's. To envy another's skills, looks, or gifts rather than embracing your own nature and call is to fail in two respects. In failing to be who we aren't, we fail to become who we are.

No less important than being who you are is doing what you can. This too is more difficult than it sounds. How much wasted energy we spend trying to do what we can't. And how often we fail to optimize our efforts and thereby achieve the significant goals that do lie within our power. When we quit trying because we fail to achieve our pipe dreams, we overlook all we actually could accomplish by putting our shoulder squarely to the right wheel. To do what you can is to do all you can, not less, not more.

Finally, and most pointedly for me last year when I was diagnosed with cancer, want what you have. Did I want cancer? Of course not, but to obsess on the bad things that befall us squeezes out a just appreciation for the good. The time we waste on wishful thinking or regret detracts from the time we might devote to being grateful for all that is ours, here and now, to savor and embrace. For instance, if you are healthy today, don't take your health for granted. Want what you have. By the same token, when I was sick I remembered to want nothing more than the caring affection of those who loved me. Wanting what I had, my prayers were answered.

In each of our lives not only will some rain fall, but fires will burn, the ground will shake, and one day, life itself will be exacted in payment for the gift of life bestowed. By wanting what we have, doing what we can, and being who we are, our cup will forever be half full, not half empty. Do these same things with reverence, humbled by awe, and our cup runneth over.

These words and ideas had been tested many times. In the opening of *Life Lines*, Forrest writes

(from *Life Lines*, Introduction, pp. viii-ix and x)

Five years ago, on the first Sunday of Lent, I found the following anonymous letter tucked under the door of m minister's study.

Dear Mr. Church,

What is the meaning of adversity? I don't think I can handle it anymore. Nothing it seems has gone right in my life. I am very tired of this stupid life. If you can tell me the reason for suffering or pain or adversity, please tell me. I know people do not have an answer, and I know many people overcome adversity but I am tired of it. I feel absolutely hopeless. Is there a god or is there not a god? If I feel there is not a god what is the sense of going on? And for whom?

I know this letter sounds crazy, but I am tired of it. I feel absolutely hopeless.

A parishioner

P.S. Yes, I've had therapy and medication—now you must really think I'm crazy—but I remain hopeless. Please help me.

The next morning, I set out identify the anonymous, apparently suicidal parishioner who had slipped this heartrending note under my door. All Souls Church is relatively large, but I can match many faces with names. Through my counseling and the grapevine that winds up the walls of every community, I harbored some confidence that, with the help of my staff, I could somehow identify this individual. We sorted through the people we felt at greatest risk and made a few discreet calls. But we didn't find the person we were looking for. That's because we were looking for a piece of hay in a haystack. I should have known it without thinking. Any member of my congregation could have written that letter.

Whereas *Life Lines* is mainly about coping with suffering, *Lifecraft* is the art of finding our own meaning in life regardless of our situation, and our suffering or happiness.

Forrest writes in *Lifecraft*

(from *Lifecraft*, pp. 50-52)

...We discover meaning in what we have, what we can do, and in whom we are able to become. Successful projects are those over which we have at least some control. It is by filling in the lines of our own possibility, no matter how tightly drawn, that we discover and create new meaning.

Let me illustrate this with one final tale, the story of Corinna Marsh. Corinna lived in a tiny, gim, happily cluttered apartment in the Marquis Hotel in Manhattan. Back in the late eighties, when I visited her, I had to run a gauntlet of crack pushers. She had resided at the hotel for decades and loved it. She wouldn't move for anything. Not that she could. Corinna had almost no money.

In her last decade, Corinna was legally blind. She had trouble getting around and heard with difficulty. But she knew where everything was, the hanging plants, the teapot, and most important, her yellow pad on which she scribbled a remarkable body of acid, yet hilarious, verse.

*When all the malfunctions of old age assail me,
And skills that I've always depended on fail me,
The best way I've found to avoid thoughts of hearses,
Is putting my mind on composing light verses.*

We're not talking Hallmark card material here. No sentimental sunsets or rocking chairs on porches evoking the simple pleasures of old age, with Golden Pond in the background. Just humor and honesty, enough of each to make one wince.

How did she do it? How did she get up every morning and affirm life? In one couplet, she gives her own answer. "I am unusually blest: There's so much to laugh at, I don't get depressed." Corinna didn't develop her wit as a stratagem for coping with the pains of old age. It was her signature for years. Had you asked her about it, she'd have told you, "Don't despair. It's the only thing Bill Buckley and I have in common."

Over the years these remarkable people—Corinna and William F. Buckley—struck up a curious, very appealing relationship. Corinna was a lifelong liberal. To the end of her days, her political opinions remained as strong as they were salty. She had the force of her convictions; she didn't keep them to herself. Disproving the adage that thoughtful people grow more conservative (or more passive) as they get older, over the final twenty years of her life Corinna submitted several conservatively incorrect poems to William F. Buckley's *National Review*. To Buckley's credit, he published almost all of them. One day he invited her to lunch. "Well, Corinna," Buckley said. "I hope you will tell all your liberal friends that I don't bite."

"Sure," she replied. "And I hope you'll tell all your conservative friends that I do."

She certainly did. When I told her about the movie *Cocoon*, in which a bevy of oldsters recover from the debilities of age and rediscover the pleasures of youth, Corinna's comment was, "Nuts!" I know this cuts against contemporary pieties. In response to the "I'm not getting older, I'm getting better" crowd, Corinna invoked her own statute of limitations. When I made the mistake of telling her that she was getting both older and better, she told me to grow up. Then she sent me this poem.

*Though living too long can destroy like a pox
And fighting it can be like countering rocks,
There's one thing I must say on God's behalf:
He lets me find whimsy at which I can laugh.*

Corinna died at the age of one hundred. For her tombstone she chose the words "That's that." Never coming close to fooling herself, she created and discovered meaning in her life to the end of her days. Humor was her through line.

Forrest's own life, like those of his parishioners, included many ups and downs. His father's death from cancer at 59, his adultery and divorce, his problems with alcohol were serious issues for him. But as he used to say "I was born sunny side up". His colleague Galen Guengerich said "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. ... 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. Forrest's son Frank made this same point in a more personal way. ... 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." [He] 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."

Forrest's lifelong concerns were with the inevitability of death, and the question of how to live well. He spent his life giving us words to live by, though he would be the first to say that he did not always live by them himself – easier said than done. But in dying he did follow his own advice – to make the most of his time, to build bridges with those he loved. And he died peacefully at home with family and his closest friends present.

I will close with the end of the sermon given by Galen Guengerich, Forrest's protégé and colleague at All Souls, on the Sunday following Forrest's death:

(from "AMEN. I Love You", Galen Guengerich's sermon of September 27, 2009)

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. ... "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 are 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.