

## THE BEST I HAVE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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My first memory as a child is the ordination of my father to be a minister at the Greenwood Mennonite Church in rural Delaware. I was nearly three at the time. For as long as I can remember, I've been a preacher's kid. Like most preachers' kids, I felt ambivalent about church—loved being on the inside track, but hated being held to a higher standard than my friends. Whenever I said or did something, everybody seemed to be watching.

One Sunday when I was six or seven, my parents decided I was grown up enough to sit in the third pew with the other boys my age. My dad was in the chancel with the two other ministers. I don't recall—or have repressed—what exactly I did that displeased my father, but at one point during the sermon (another minister was preaching) he came down from the chancel, took me by the arm, and led me back to the chancel to sit beside him. During the sermon! I was mortified: I wished I was dead. Let the record show, however, that despite my embarrassment, I must have liked the view from the chancel.

My daughter Zoe was three weeks old when I preached my first sermon at All Souls. She also grew up a preacher's kid. Since she's now off to college (and I speak about her with her permission), let me state at the outset that I never felt embarrassed by her behavior in church. She handled the often-challenging role of living in an ecclesiastical fishbowl with aplomb, even when held to a higher standard than her peers.

That's not to say that she didn't feel ambivalent about church, especially during her middle school years. Our deal with Zoe was simple: she had to participate actively in religious education through our ninth grade Coming of Age program. After that, she could decide for herself.

As Zoe entered the Coming of Age program, the trend lines were not favorable. She had become increasingly provocative in our conversations about church, saying she didn't believe in God and didn't think church was important. For the most part, Holly and I didn't take the bait. You'll need to decide for yourself, we said.

One evening in September of 2007, having completed her first assignment for the Coming of Age class, Zoe came tearing out of her room waving a sheet of paper. "Papa, Homhom," she called out, "I just took the religion test on Beliefnet, and I'm one-hundred percent Unitarian Universalist."

On the one hand, how could she not be—raised in this congregation, on what Holly likes to call a small exotic island off the coast of North America. On the other hand, as a preacher's kid, the odds were at least as great that she would rebuff the tradition as embrace it. Whether the religion quiz was the point of fulcrum or not, Zoe ended the Coming of Age program by affirming her connection to this congregation. She even signed the register to become an associate member of All Souls.

As it turns out, she also liked the view from the chancel. In addition to her Coming of Age credo, she delivered homilies in the high school services for the next three years, and she gave the commencement address at church school graduation this

past June. Zoe's enthusiasm about All Souls developed for a specific reason, which I find especially interesting in light of the difference between her upbringing and mine.

I grew up in a cloistered environment, socially speaking; and my friends at church kept me from feeling utterly alone. Zoe, by contrast, has always been connected to everyone. She has texted and emailed and Skyped and Facebooked and tweeted—to everyone she knows, and sometimes all at once. Nonetheless, the sense of community and shared purpose in her Coming of Age group drew her in. As she said in her graduation address, All Souls provided her with a refuge from the drama of school. “What I will take with me,” she said, “is the love and connection I have felt within this church... I learned how to love in OWL and how to question the world around us in Coming of Age. This is a wonderful and unique place, for every stage of my life.”

Last year, the Public Religion Research Institute conducted in-depth interviews with 25 young adults aged 18-29 from Middle Church in Manhattan, a progressive congregation affiliated with Marble Collegiate Church. In the interviews, these Millennials, as this generation is known, echo what Zoe says she loves about All Souls. In a typical response, one of the Middle Church Millennials said that “churches should be oases in a sea of noise. They should be places of healing and of peace... They're sites of tradition and belonging and feeling connected to a whole host, so that you realize that you're not alone, that other people care about you and about the things that are happening in your life and are interested in lifting you up. So then, in a world that's very I-centric, it becomes about a 'we' and about a community, and about an opening up, and about a place where you can be safely challenged, and not feel like you are going to end up alone.”

These Millennials also expect their religious community to make a difference in the world. “That's why I love religion,” one respondent said. “When people are like, ‘Oh, I'm spiritual but I'm not religious,’ [I think], ‘But where do you find the community to actually engage in doing stuff? How do you actually get together and have somebody that's actually holding you responsible for going out and doing something? This particular community made me feel like I had a responsibility to actually do something—that you couldn't just show up at church and not be actively involved in what's happening in the rest of the world.’”

These responses bode well for congregations like All Souls. Millennials are interested in the discipline of a tradition, but not the millstone of dogma. They value diversity and openness. They're not afraid of setting spiritual goals and being held to account for reaching them. They cherish a clear sense of individuality and a strong sense of community.

In other words, they want a community of faith that does what a community of faith ought to do. So do I. So do we all. At its best, a community of faith welcomes us as we are, connects us with others in shared purpose, and unites our efforts to transform ourselves and our world. It helps us focus our intention and clarify our purpose.

In the weeks that have passed since Steve Jobs died, I've been pondering his legacy and asking what it might teach us about our experience of religious community. To be sure, his legacy wasn't all positive. Even his friends concur that Jobs could be obsessive, condescending, and harsh. And he clearly paid far less attention than he should have to how his products were manufactured and at what physical and emotional toll to his workers. Even so, Jobs had a singular impact on our experience of technology.

In an essay in *Time* magazine, Walter Isaacson—whose biography of Jobs hits the bookstores tomorrow—notes that Jobs vehemently opposed the open architecture of the early personal computers: lots of plugs for cords and cables, lots of slots for memory and expansion cards, and an open invitation to developers to write their own programs for the machines. Jobs wanted none of that chaos. He wanted seamless integration, and he set out relentlessly to achieve it.

Isaacson writes, “This ability to integrate hardware, software and content into a single, Apple-designed system enabled him to impose simplicity. The astronomer Johannes Kepler declared that nature loves simplicity and unity. So did Steve Jobs... In a world filled with junky devices, clunky software, inscrutable error messages and annoying interfaces, Jobs’ insistence on a simple, integrated approach led to astonishing products marked by delightful user experiences. Using an Apple product could be as sublime as walking in one of the Zen gardens of Kyoto that Jobs loved.”

In religious terms, I want for people who come to All Souls what, in technological terms, Steve Jobs wanted for people who pick up an iPhone: a simple, integrated experience that makes sense of life. In a world where days can feel chaotic, and people can seem perverse, and life itself can sometimes seem pointless, All Souls is a place where we can unify the disparate elements of our lives and our experience. We take account of everything—the hard things and the wonderful things, the terrifying things and the exhilarating things, the boring things and the sublime things.

Here’s a different metaphor—one that I believe captures the clarity and simplicity of our experience of church at its best. And the metaphor doesn’t even involve cords. It comes from the celebrated American poet May Sarton’s poem titled “A Glass of Water.”

Here is a glass of water from my well.  
It tastes of rock and root and earth and rain;  
It is the best I have, my only spell,  
And it is cold, and better than champagne.  
Perhaps someone will pass this house one day  
To drink, and be restored, and go [her] way,  
Someone in dark confusion as I was  
When I drank down cold water in a glass,  
Drank a transparent health to keep me sane,  
After the bitter mood had gone again.

Here at All Souls, the refreshing water of our common purpose tastes of rock and root and earth and rain. It is the best we have—and better than champagne. As part of this community of All Souls, you and I are solid as a rock. When everything else in your life is falling apart, look around for something that isn’t. For nearly two centuries, through good times and bad, people have gathered here to make sense of the chaos around them and find solace for the fears within them. Many things have changed over the past 200 years, but our sense of gratitude for the strength embodied in this community of faith has not. We’re solid as a rock.

We’re also rooted in what is real. We’re not trying to convince ourselves of beliefs we know aren’t true; not are we trying to shield ourselves from realities we can’t escape. Together, we garner the courage to stand before life, full on, and take it all in. We’re rooted in what is real.

At our best, we're also humble as the earth, from which we have all wondrously come and to which we shall all mysteriously go. When it comes to the meaning of life, this community of faith reminds us to acknowledge our ignorance, which is profound. The difference between human and humus is as subtle in language as it is inexplicable in life. How did this all happen—this universe of infinite space and endless time, of Green Day and blue sky, of leaping lizards and lazy afternoons? All Souls is where we remind our souls to be humble as the earth.

And finally, we're nourished as with rain. Both in body and in spirit, we are nurtured by the people and the world around us, and we are responsible to nurture them in return. The discipline of gratitude transforms our lives and the ethic of gratitude transforms our world. At All Souls, we're nourished as with rain.

This is a wonderful sanctuary for us all—a community of faith to help us flourish and a point of fulcrum to multiply our efforts. Solid as a rock, rooted in what is real, humble as the earth, nourished as with rain. This elementally simple experience of worship and community is comprehensively satisfying as well—it helps us order the chaos and gives us a place to stand and a direction to head. As Zoe reminds us, this is a wonderful and unique place for every stage of our lives.

Our covenant with each other, this day and always, is simply and beautifully and eloquently this:

Here is a glass of water from my well.  
It tastes of rock and root and earth and rain;  
It is the best I have, my only spell,  
And it is cold, and better than champagne.  
It's good that you have passed this house today  
To drink, and be restored, and go your way.