

## PROMISES TO KEEP

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
October 18, 2009

Last weekend, after an opening to the church year that was by far the most difficult of the sixteen I've experienced here at All Souls, I took a weekend off. My wife Holly Atkinson and I went to Kripalu, a yoga and retreat center near Lenox, MA. Originally founded as an ashram in Pennsylvania, Kripalu has expanded its scope to include a wide range of physical and spiritual disciplines. Nonetheless, the tempo and tone of Kripalu hew closely to its Buddhist origins. With an emphasis on yoga (up to four hours a day), meditation practice (including silence at breakfast), and various workshops that foster physical, emotional, and spiritual health, Kripalu is an ideal place for rest and rejuvenation. Last weekend was our fifth visit in less than two years. We've come to treasure our time there, both as individuals and as a couple.

Our first visit almost didn't happen. Two years ago, Holly and I spent Thanksgiving week—which included our wedding anniversary—at Kripalu. We had originally dreamed of going to Rome for the week, but when the time came to make plans, we decided to look for a destination that was less ambitious and less expensive. Holly had been reading the runaway bestseller *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, about the year Gilbert spent trying to put her life back together after a divorce. As the title suggests, she spent the year eating, praying, and loving—or at least trying. She ate her way through Italy, learned to meditate at an ashram in India, and finally went to Indonesia searching for love.

Holly found herself intrigued by the idea of learning to meditate and suggested that we find a suitable place close to home. I did a web search and discovered Kripalu, a mere three hours away. Described as being located on the former Carnegie estate, I pictured a stately Georgian mansion with expansive verandas, sweeping vistas, and a roaring fireplace. What could be better? With our anniversary in mind, I reserved a suitable room.

As we approached Kripalu, I was driving and Holly was navigating. "Turn left at the next drive," she instructed. As I began the turn, I looked up. What I saw was a brick structure that looked like either a psychiatric hospital or a low security prison: massive, monolithic, and vastly unappealing. There was nothing Carnegie about it.

"This can't possibly be Kripalu," I said.

"There's the sign," Holly responded.

As I turned into the drive, I realized to my dismay that I hadn't seen pictures of the Carnegie mansion on the Kripalu website. I later learned that the estate had been sold to the Jesuits after Carnegie's death. When the mansion burned down, the Jesuits built a vast monastery that could accommodate hundreds of monks. A dozen years after the Jesuits departed, the former monastery became Kripalu.

When we saw the particular monk's cell that would be ours for the week, Holly's eyes welled up with tears. The room had concrete block walls, fluorescent lights, linoleum floors, a metal bed, and mint green bathroom tiles. One of the things I love about my wife is that her idea of roughing it is traveling with an outdated hotel guide.

We debated about leaving straightaway, but since we had fully paid for our stay beforehand (a requirement, for now-obvious reasons), we decided to give it one day.

We ended up staying for the entire week. It was a glorious week, one we will always remember. We've been back to Kripalu four times since. We've learned to ignore what the place looks like and focus on what happens there. We unplug and unwind, and reconnect with ourselves and each other. We nurture our relationship and cultivate our aspirations. And it almost didn't happen.

We all need places of refuge and sources of renewal. For many of us, this Sanctuary is one of those places. We are inspired by the people who gather here—curious, compassionate, and courageous souls—and by the purpose of our gathering: to comfort each other when times are tough and challenge each other when our purpose fades. We are inspired by the music: soaring and celestial, it grounds our deepest sorrows and gives wings to our highest aspirations.

We are also inspired by the Sanctuary itself. The architectural style of this building is rooted in the classical design principles of ancient Rome, as developed in America during the early 1700s. This period coincided with the reigns in England of Kings George I, II, and III—hence the designation “Georgian style.” Formal and dignified, with its steady symmetry and balanced proportions, this Sanctuary creates a sense of reassuring calm. In various subtle ways, the design elements contribute to the sense of profound serenity and steady purpose.

Ironically, this Sanctuary almost didn't happen either. Minot Simons was called to be the sixth minister of this congregation in 1923. At the time, the Church was located on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in Gramercy Park. Most of the congregation had long since moved uptown, however, and many parishioners had to travel a great distance to attend. Besides, the Sanctuary on 20<sup>th</sup> Street had been something of an architectural laughingstock since its dedication in 1855. With horizontal stripes of red brick and limestone, the church had instantly been dubbed “The Church of the Holy Zebra.”

Simons had considerable experience in church construction. He had helped his former congregation in Cleveland build a new building, and he had also previously served as director of church extension for the denomination. Nonetheless, it took four years to find a buyer for the 20<sup>th</sup> Street property, since the area was in decline and demand for property, especially churches, was at low ebb. Finally, a buyer emerged, prompting the congregation to purchase a plot of land at 80<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue. They vacated 20<sup>th</sup> Street and moved Sunday services to the MacDowell Club on East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street. On June 29, 1929, they held a farewell service in the Church of the Holy Zebra.

Four months later, the stock market crashed, and things fell apart. The buyer of the Zebra Church lost everything and backed out of the deal. As a result, the congregation had no money to build a new building. Two years passed. The Trustees finally decided to demolish the Zebra church and create a parking lot. Early in the demolition process, the building caught fire and burned to the ground in one of the great fires of 1931. The land was finally sold for a pittance soon thereafter.

Meanwhile, Simons had arranged with the son of the late George F. Baker for Baker's estate to pay the mortgage on a new sanctuary for a period of five years. Baker had started what became Citibank and had been a generous supporter of the Church for many years. With financing in place, the congregation gathered here on February 7,

1932 to lay the cornerstone of their new building. Eight months later, on November 13, 1932, this Sanctuary was dedicated. Despite the lack of a parish house and a chapel—those would come much later—the congregation once again had a home.

In his message of greeting to people in the congregation's new neighborhood, Simons wrote, "This Church is dedicated to religion but not to a creed. Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formula. Love to God and humanity and the perfecting of our spiritual nature it regards as the unchanging substance of the religion and the essential gospel of Jesus. Consecrating itself to these principles, it aims at cultivating reverence for truth, moral character and insight, helpfulness to humanity, and the spirit of communion with the Infinite. It welcomes to its worship all who are in sympathy with a religion thus simple and thus free."

The word "free" in Simons' message had special import, especially given the financial hardships of the Great Depression. For more than a century since its founding in 1819, the congregation had funded its annual budget by renting specific pews to specific individuals on an annual basis. Church was like the theater or the symphony: the more you paid, the better your seat. Herman Melville, who attended All Souls during the time he was writing *Moby Dick*, rented a pew in the back row, at \$14 per year. You can see a pew map from the Zebra church era displayed on the wall of the narthex near the north Sanctuary door.

Under Simons' leadership, the congregation moved toward a policy of being a "free church," in which all the pews would be open to everyone at every service. In the early 1930s, the Every Member Canvass replaced pew rentals as the congregation's principle source of funding. People sat where they wanted and gave what they could.

Somehow it worked. Eighty years later, we can still marvel at what they were able to accomplish in the middle of the worst economic crisis on record. They built a Sanctuary where all souls can gather each week for a precious hour of reflection and renewal. And it almost didn't happen.

Last Sunday morning, Holly and I walked in the brisk autumn air to a small lake set into a hill above Kripalu. It was the very hour you were gathered here in the sanctuary for worship. Amid the blazing-bright leaves reflected in the crystal clear water, I pondered the importance of times set apart: weekends to retreat, hours to worship, and moments stolen from an otherwise frenetic day.

A well-known poem by Robert Frost came to mind, perhaps because I sensed in the air an intimation of winter. The poem is titled "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep...

Let's stop here, mid-poem, and imagine the scene. A horse drawing a wagon—perhaps covered, perhaps not—has made its way along a deserted country track in the fading light of a snowy December evening. Unexpectedly, they stop between a frozen lake and a silent wood. The horse, eager for the stable, shakes its harness impatiently. But the driver remains unmoved, gaze fixed on the softly swirling snow. Why stop? To watch the woods fill up with snow.

It's a curious purpose, especially since the woods belongs to someone else. Maybe the time belongs to someone else as well. Who knows from what labor or errand the driver has come, or what task or burden awaits: a stable to be cleaned, perhaps, or a family to feed, or a sick patient to visit, or an unruly child to reprimand. No matter. For one brief moment, the past has faded and the future has not yet intruded. All is well.

With this tableau before us, the poet fills out the closing stanza.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

From time to time in our journey through life, we pause—for a weekend of renewal, or an hour of worship, or a moment of calm. Experiences like these spring from two sources: expectations and institutions. Expectations make them possible, and institutions make them durable.

We'll never discover that a woods filling up with snow is lovely, dark and deep unless we stop the horse and watch. When Holly and I walked into Kripalu for the first time, our preconceived idea of the place almost prevented us from opening ourselves to something different. It would not have been a tragedy if we had walked away, but our lives would be less interesting as a result, and more meager. We would have missed an opportunity to grow and develop.

My guess is that many of you had similar concerns before you walked into All Souls for the first time. You weren't sure you would like what you saw, or heard, or felt. But you took a chance and opened yourself to something new.

For all of us at All Souls, this period of transition and planning requires the same spirit of openness and discovery. If those who came before us had not lived in this spirit, we wouldn't have this Sanctuary to nurture our hopes and fulfill our dreams. Experiences that inspire and transform come only to those who live expectantly. Expectations make them possible.

And institutions make them durable—carry them forward for the benefit of other times and other people. This is why we craft poetic structures and musical compositions, create representations in art and monuments in stone, build schools for the young and

retreat centers for the weary, and construct houses of worship and temples of prayer: so that the experiences we value and the values we cherish will endure.

When we create institutions to keep alive what matters most to us, they create a demand upon us in return. We have promises to keep. The experiences we value and the values we cherish can thrive only as the institutions that nurture them thrive. In the calm of this sacred hour, we are surrounded by reminders of the toil and sacrifice that made possible this house of worship for all souls. In our turn, we have promises to keep—promise about the kind of people we want to be and the kind of congregation we want to become, promises about the kind of difference we want to make and the kind of world we hope to create. We have promises to keep. And yes, we have miles to go before we sleep.

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