

Unitarian Church of Calgary

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REFLECTIONS ON FORREST CHURCH – Lynn Nugent

I was deeply saddened last fall when I heard the news that Forrest Church had died. When I read “A Chosen Faith: an Introduction to Unitarian Universalism”, a book co-authored by Forrest Church, I felt confirmed in my belief that I would be at home in the Unitarian Universalist community. It is in this spirit, Forrest Church as inspiration to me on my spiritual path as a Unitarian Universalist that I have prepared this homily today. Forrest Church was a prolific writer, authoring 15 books and editing 10 others. I have tried to focus on the central teachings of his theology, although I expect that you will be learning almost as much about me from what I have chosen to highlight, as about Forrest Church. In any event, I will do my best to honour his thought and what his work has meant to me, as a Unitarian.

Forrest grew up in Idaho. He states that he always felt that growing up in Idaho was an accident as he was uncomfortable around guns and horses. This immediately endeared him to me. I grew up in rural Alberta, loved the landscape but was not into the horses or the guns! Forrest’s father, long time US senator Frank Church, was a lapsed Catholic and an atheist. His mother, Bethine Church was Presbyterian. Forrest attended Presbyterian Sunday school but ended up leaving the Presbyterian fold. He stated that “This was an act of kindness to the Presbyterians as much as to myself. After all, the Presbyterian church is full of bad Presbyterians. The last thing in the world they needed was another one.”

Forrest described his first religious experience at the age of 10 as typically Unitarian Universalist – he was reading a book! That book was the Jefferson Bible. Unitarian Thomas Jefferson “took all the supernatural references out of the 4 Gospels and put together what he believed were the essential teachings of Jesus”. There were 2 aspects of this that made an extraordinary impression on Forrest. First, Jefferson’s version ends with the death of Jesus, in other words, there is no resurrection, and secondly, the emphasis was placed on how Jesus lived his life. This was an “ah-ha” moment for 10 year old Forrest. How different this was from the creed emphasizing the supernatural aspects of Jesus as the Christ. The seed was planted that would grow to fruition as he explored religious thought to the doctorate level at Harvard Divinity School. He then went on to become a minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, where he stayed for some 30 years. Forrest never lost sight of the central message of the Jefferson Bible, namely, that what is ultimately of importance is not what happens to us after we die – it is how we live our lives. In the words of Forrest Church: “Death is not life’s goal, only life’s terminus. **The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.**”

In 2006 Forrest Church received a diagnosis of esophageal cancer. He received treatment, which bought him some time but early in 2008 the cancer had returned, and he was told he better get his affairs in order. How did he respond? One response was to write 2 books. First he wrote “Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow.” Then when he responded briefly to the treatment that gave him a little more time, he wrote “Cathedral of the World: a Universalist Theology.” I have appreciated his articulation of his UU theology, so close to my own theology and I have been deeply moved by his reflections on his “journey through the valley of the shadow”. I want to share some of his reflections with you today, not only

because they resonant with me, but because I think they have something to say to our congregation as well. I will begin with his definition of religion: **“Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”**

I recall mentioning this definition to another member of our congregation several years ago and she thought it was a very poor definition of religion. So I am expecting that some of you today are thinking the same thing and reflecting on your own definitions. Others may be having an “ah ha” moment. Forrest states in his introduction to Unitarian Universalism that: “in our circle of faith, when 2 or more gather, a loving argument is a sure sign that the spirit is moving among us”!

However, I digress! Let us continue with his explanation of the human religious response:

“Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Knowing that we must die, we question what life means. The answers we arrive at may not be religious answers, but the questions death forces us to ask are, at heart, religious questions:

Whether or not we agree with Forrest’s definition, these questions “Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life’s purpose? What does this all signify?”, lead many of us to reflect on the nature of ultimate reality. These are theological reflections.

Forrest describes his theological journey in his book Love and Death:

“Over the years I have traveled the long road from religious scepticism to an abiding faith. Back in the 1970s, even once I began preaching, I avoided invoking God almost entirely. It

embarrassed me. Above all, I didn't want anyone to mistake what I might mean by God for the tiny, judgemental, anthropomorphic God of so many true believers."

He goes on to describe how things changed for him:

"Challenged by the demands of love and death, I had to make room in my theology for a more capacious, if unfathomable power. I had to clear a place for mystery on the altar of my hearth, which before I had crowded with icons to knowledge...I needed something far more arresting and humbling, something more like Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*."

"Stripped of religious symbol, my attempts at poetry were at best prosaic. Of greater concern, without transcendental symbols to relate the sublime to the ordinary, my spiritual life was parched, my well of inspiration dry...So it was, haltingly at first and then with slowly gathering confidence, I began to employ God-talk"

For me, Forrest's journey illustrates one of the joys of being a member of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Recall Rev. Debra's *Born Again Unitarian* sermon, that we can develop and change our understanding of religion and still remain within the UU community. I love our diversity of religious positions. Our beliefs form a spectrum from theist to humanist, with many shades in between. However, there is a shadow side to diversity. I have observed that sometimes we have differences in understandings of the nature of ultimate reality, Truth, God or whatever term you would like to use. Sometimes these differences cause divisions within our congregation. Many of us are carrying baggage from prior religious communities that give us difficulty with the word "God" and the notion of religious experience. Divisions occur when people feel that their perspectives are somehow misunderstood or put down by others. We

are not unique in experiencing these difficulties in our congregation from time to time. Forrest Church had some useful observations about religious experience and the use of the word god that I expect he garnered from his own congregational experience. I quote:

“Religious experience springs from two primary sources, awe and humility. Neither awe nor humility is serviced by those who refuse to go beyond the letter – either of scripture or of science – to explore the spirit. Fundamentalists come in two basic varieties. Right-wing fundamentalists enshrine a tiny God on their altar. Fundamentalists of the left reject this tiny God, imagining that by so doing they have done something creative and important. Both groups are in thralldom to the same tiny God.

When people tell me proudly that they don’t believe in God, I ask them to tell me a little about the God they don’t believe in, for I probably don’t believe in him either. God is not God’s name. **God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.** Call it what you will: spirit, ground of being, being itself; it remains what it always has...an awe-inspiring, mind-bending mystery”

Forrest argues that theology is poetry, not science. Fundamentalists of all varieties take literally something that is metaphorical. Forrest means that they take literally poetic reflections on the mysteries of life and death, the pain, beauty and wonder of it all. Years ago, Forrest settled on the metaphor of “the cathedral of the world” in his attempt to describe his universalist theology. He describes it in detail in *A Chosen Faith*, he revisits it again in detail in his last book “*The Cathedral of the World*”. Here it is in summary:

“In what I call the Cathedral of the World, there are scores of windows, each telling its own story of who we are, where we came from, where we are going, each illuminating life’s meaning. In this respect we are many. But we are also one, for the one Light shines through every window. No individual, however spiritually gifted, can see the Light – Truth or God, call it what you will – directly. We cannot look God in the eye any more than we can stare at the sun without going blind. This should counsel humility and mutual respect for those whose reflections on ultimate meaning differ from our own. ”

Forrest is not saying that there is no truth. Rather, his message is humility, that we should understand that what we hold to be truth is partial. There are different world views, different cultures, different life experiences, all of which give insights into the nature of ultimate reality. But these insights are partial – we must hold them the way we hold any explanation or theory – to be changed or expanded upon as we receive new information. Forrest councils against throwing stones through other people’s windows! Remember Forrest’s description of “loving arguments” as a sign of the spirit moving in UU congregations? We don’t have to agree. In fact, coffee hour and small group discussions would be pretty boring if we all agreed with each other all of the time! For those times when we disagree, a loving, respectful argument seems a good way to go about it! Recall the third principle encouraging us to affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations and the 4<sup>th</sup> principle which states that we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. One of the ways that we do this is by drawing from the wisdom from the world’s religions, including Jewish and Christian teachings. In Forrest Church’s Cathedral of the World, Light or Truth shines through many different windows. We each see only a partial view

from each window. If we keep our hearts and minds open when we look through someone else's window, we may be able to expand the limited view from our own window and grow in understanding and empathy with those who think differently from ourselves.

The final piece of Forrest Church's theology that I would like to briefly touch on today, relates to that final chapter in his life, in all of our lives – meeting death. Forrest's view is agnostic as far as what happens after death but he emphasizes that the one thing we can be certain of surviving us is love. This observation was based on his religious readings and reflections as well as his experience as a minister with dying congregants and their families.

Forrest described how he was feeling pretty smug after he made peace and acceptance and felt prepared "to go gently into that good night". Years of deep reflection on love and death, he thought had prepared him to come to terms with his death sentence. However, his wife Carolyn soon humbled him. She informed him that his death was not his own to do with as he pleased. He was not going anywhere until their children had an opportunity to work through their unfinished business with him! We could think of this in terms of salvation. Forrest describes salvation as having three dimensions: " (first) integrity or individual wholeness that comes when we make peace with ourselves; (second) reconciliation, or shared wholeness, comes when we make peace with our neighbours, especially our loved ones; (third) redemption comes when we make peace with life and death, with being itself"

Forrest completed 2 of the 3 parts of the salvation process. He had made peace with himself and he had made peace with life and death. What his wife was pointing out to him was that he

had not yet made peace with his neighbours. He had not given his family and friends, including his congregation an opportunity to be part of the process.

I am moved by this beautiful Unitarian Universalist reclaiming of the term salvation – making peace with our lives, individually and with our families and friends. In Forrest’s words “not to be saved from life, but to be saved by life, in life, for life”. My heart has been touched by Forrest Church’s reflections on love and death as I watch the struggles of some of my beloved family elders and one of my closest friends as they face their own journeys through the valley of the shadow and as I face my fears around my own mortality.

One of Forrest’s gifts was his ability to speak and write about his theological reflections in a way that was easily understandable to a lay audience. He strove for language that would resonate in our everyday lives. I will conclude with Forest Church’s advice on living the life worth dying for. He distilled it down to this simple mantra:

**Want what you have, do what you can and be who you are.**

May it be so.

References:

Church, Forrest. “Awakening” in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Rev. Ed. Beacon Press: Boston, 1998.

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