

Remembering Forrest Church

On September 24, 2009, Forrest Church, beloved husband, father, brother, son, friend, Minister of Public Theology and former Senior Minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City for nearly thirty years, died in peace, his life fully extended, his love now embracing eternity.

I met Forrest in the aftermath of 9/11. We made a connection in New York City while Priscilla and I were on the east coast leg of my sabbatical. How we actually came to meet in his office at the corner of Lexington Ave. and 80th St. was a mystery to us both, through a happenstance e-mail, as best we could figure. Regardless of the manner of our meeting, his gracious hospitality and kindnesses were, as they always would be, consistent and endearing, the stuff of which enduring friendships are made. I was glad to offer a poetic piece to a book he was putting together then (*Restoring Faith: America's Religious Leaders Answer Terror with Hope*). I was also glad when he began making stops at Community on his book tours, as he read from *Freedom from Fear, The American Creed*, and two years ago, *So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State*. But an even greater grace was the sheer joy one could share with Forrest, talking baseball, politics, theology, family dynamics, books, history, Idaho lore, the wonders of New York City, the glories of Kansas City barbecue, and the blessedness of the pastoral life.

Forrest's family will gratefully recall how his love and care were persistently, passionately present. Church members will surely witness how the love they shared with their pastor was exemplary and life-changing, the way all ministers hope relationships to be. Friends will attest that his open-hearted-ness was rare, fine, and a sacred source of encouragement.

In addition to leading the All Souls Church to become the flagship congregation of the Unitarian Universalists in the U.S., Forrest was the author or editor of 25 books. Throughout his ministerial career, he served in leadership capacities for various organizations, particularly in New York City, and offered commentary on religion and contemporary life on nearly all television networks as well as for National Public Radio.

Perhaps Forrest's most lasting legacy will be the manner in which he faced death, after learning that he had esophageal cancer in 2006. Joyful to the point of buoyancy, Forrest's posture of love and gratitude for daily grace afforded him enough time to

complete three more books. And good for all his thankful readers, each tome set forth a distinct aspect of his public life: a *tour de force* historian's assessment (*So Help God*), his overarching pastoral perspective (*Love and Death*), and his final theological statement (*The Cathedral of the World*, to be published in November).

Our deepest love and sympathies go to Forrest's wife Carolyn Buck Luce and their four children, Frank, Nina, Jacob, and Nathan. In honor of Forrest's life and in celebration of his amazing graciousness in the midst of life and death, I offer here a poem which was a gift on the occasion of his 60th birthday celebration last year.

In the World's Cathedral

(for Forrest Church)

And so we gathered, and so he made it,
as he said he could, as we knew
he would, to the hallmark birthday,
and all because of the radiance,
ablaze in his eyes,
which he borrowed fully
from the light, always slanting,
shimmering, with audacious freedom,
in the world's cathedral.

As son, brother, husband, father,
prophet, poet, priest,
all these, and friend, too, he said
what he had been saying
all along, the one thing
that always wins, always lasts:
our tears in another's eyes,
flowing from the source
that conquers every fear.

We told him good joy,
we returned to him what he had given
freely, a glad, grateful peace,
which he grants, even now,
to those here and to those coming
in a new legacy, and this too:
the best courage, the best oration,
the best oblation is love. Love. Love,
his for us all and ours for him, forever.

– Bob Hill