

# GENERATION TO GENERATION

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH

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## Readings:

Play by Play – *for Ernie Harwell, Detroit Tigers broadcaster, 1960-2002*

My Grandmother holds onto Ernie's words, a gospel  
of speared line drives, shoestring catches.

*Robbed of a base his:* she curses softly.

*Going, going, gone:* she watches it sail.

Even at the ballpark, she squeezes her transistor.

She sometimes cries after a tough loss.

Ernie calms her, talks about

tomorrow's game, the starting pitchers.

*Instant runs,* she says

in the middle of making tea,

wiping the table. Or *Pull up a Strohs*

*and stay a while.*

A small crowd on Ernie Harwell Day

cold rainy September. She stayed home –

applauded her radio. Ernie Harwell.

When he says *a man from Paw Paw*

*caught that one,* she sees that man spill

his beer, lunge across an empty seat.

She sees him driving west toward Kalamazoo

sipping coffee to stay awake, his son

asleep on his lap. Sees him smile,

palm the ball, check the runners,

throw a curve.

My grandmother turns up the radio

against her deafness, shoves the earjack in

a little deeper, wiggles it. *Ernie,*

*where are you?* she laughs nervously.

Tonight September wind breezes

in the open windows, a late west-coast game

drifting through the air. In the kitchen

I see the red glow of a burner she's left on.

I flick it off and peek into her dark room.

She is mumbling to herself

against the tinny static.

Let him hear her little prayers.

Rev. Forrest Church

My definition of religion is a simple one. *Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.*

Death is not the enemy here, it is the limit that gives meaning. To embrace life for all it's worth, we must measure it against death. Only by awakening, not just to the possibilities but also to the limits of our existence, can we begin to encounter who we are by discovering how much we have to lose and how precious it is.

## Sermon

A recent headline in the New York Times read, His Death Postponed, a Minister Repeats his Final Sermon.

The article began, "The Rev. Forrest Church gazed out from his pulpit on Sunday and, in a steady voice, delivered what may or may not be his last sermon — for the fifth time."

Forrest Church, minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, is one of the great lights of our ministry. Several months ago, his cancer made a comeback. His time is measured in months not years. Both his father and grandfather died at 59, and Forrest was holding out to make it to his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was last month. And so he preached his final sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> time. He is now scheduled to preach his next final sermon later this month.

He told his congregation last Sunday, "After two or three poignant farewell sermons, I'm almost embarrassed this morning to be seen in public upright."

Life, death and love have been the overarching themes of Forrest's ministry. This summer he spoke at General Assembly telling us how amazingly unique and precious we each are. "For us to be here in the first place, for us to earn the privilege of dying, more than a billion billion accidents took place. Even the one in a million sperm's connection with the equally unique egg is nothing compared to everything else that happened from the beginning of time until now to make it possible for us to be here.... The universe was pregnant with us when it was born."

Some might well call those billions of accidents, pairings and synchronicities that came together to create each of us the hand of God. Others may simply call it a great unfathomable mystery we can never fully know and never fully name. Either way, it inspires reverence and awe.

Yet within this mystery lies the reason we find it so difficult to deal with the emotions around caring for our beloved elders as they age and come to die. They are the product of a billion billion accidents who came together to create the billion billion accidents plus one that created us. They are precious and we are precious, and none of us are here for very long.

Dealing with our parents' aging, illness and death means we have to deal with our own mortality. And that's just hard.

But in many ways it's more complicated for us than it has ever been in human history. Shifts in demography, advances in technology, dramatic changes in longevity have changed the landscape of aging. We span many generations here this morning, but many of us are Baby Boomers, now sometimes called the Sandwich Generation, who are caring for elders and teenagers at the same time.

In the book, *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of our Elders*, psychologist Mary Pipher writes, "Adults have always worried about aging parents, but our current situation is unique. Never before have so many people lived so far away from the old people they love. And never have old people lived to be so old.... Many old people are living in a world designed for young people. They can't drive, walk through shopping malls or airports, or deal with rushed doctors in managed care systems. Many can't handle stairs, small-print books, or menus in darkened restaurants.... Modern technological advances ... keep people alive but create chronic problems of their own." (p. 5-6)

Her private practice spans generations. Pipher says, "I hear stories of conflict, frustration, guilt, and anger. While the old often feel abandoned and misunderstood, their younger relatives often feel unappreciated, stressed and guilty.... As a nation, we are not organized in a way that makes aging easy." (p. 7)

Precisely because of this, the church is holding a class on caring for aging parents. I'm signed up to take it, I hope you will join me.

I have found dealing with my parents as they have been aging and now that they are ill profoundly moving. Not only is our relationship deepening, but I am learning more about myself and my compassion has ramped up to a whole new level. There are things we can know *about*, but not really *know* until we've experienced them

I feel a different level of connection to being human. I find myself pitched into a quality of presence, moments that are thick with connection and relatedness. I feel profoundly present, so present that I feel like presence itself.

Not to suggest it's all Holiness and light. The last time I visited my parents, who live in a senior complex, my father came down to the entrance to greet me, and somehow we missed each other – twice. I'm still not quite sure how. By the time I

made it back to my parents apartment – for the second time – my dad was hopping mad. “Where the hell were you?” were his words of greeting.

Now when I was growing up, my father was often impatient and short-tempered. We four kids feared his sharp reprimands for what often felt like small infractions. He worked hard all day sometimes 12 and 14 hours, and he came home tired and more often than not he snapped at us. When he retired at age 56, he became a whole new person – a man who relished living, who loved to laugh and joke and kid around. It took me a good 5 years to get used to this new father.

Now that he has cancer and is undergoing chemo therapy, that impatient, short-tempered man often returns. Sometimes I feel like the frightened kid again, and sometimes I find myself acting in surprising ways. So when he yelled at me in greeting, I heard myself yelling back. “I was down there. Where were you?”

Then I thought, oh great, yell at the guy with cancer. I felt terrible, yet a part of me was secretly pleased. I’d actually stood up to him. Nevertheless, for the next couple of days we walked carefully around each other.

Then he came home from rowing in his shell on the lake – yes, my intrepid, short-tempered, willful father has been rowing once and sometimes twice a week throughout six months of chemo. This day his wrist hurt. Dad has an incredibly high pain threshold, but when he crosses it, the pain all comes crashing in. His usual stoicism evaporates and he winces and moans. And even lets his daughter care tenderly for him.

I wrapped his wrist in an ace bandage, filled ice packs. He accepted my ministrations gratefully. In the midst of it, my father came up to me in the kitchen as I was filling another ice pack. And this usually undemonstrative man put his arm around my waist, held me close and said, “You’re really wonderful, dear.”

It was one of the sweetest moments of my life.

For all of the adult perspective I now have, able to see both my parents shortcomings and gifts with love, I still am a daughter who wants her parents to be proud of her. His words were a balm to my soul.

Pipher speaks of how important relationship is in the last stages of life – relationships with family and friends, with doctors and care providers. Studies have shown that if an aging person has three contacts or more, they are usually not lonely.

And this is exactly what I hear from the elders in our congregation. What they really want is contact. They want to be included in our lives, in Life itself, to feel significant. They want us to understand that they are slowing down and have limitations. They want us to hold them tenderly as they grow old before us. And they want to hear from us.

Pipher writes, as a society, “We don’t have the resources, the rituals or the institutions to make our old feel like elders.” (p. 17) Now, this church is a community that spans generations, and I hope that we are an institution that honors our elders, but we are swimming against a strong current.

Forrest Church speaks of this as well, “When grandparents, parents, even children died at home, death was an inescapable presence in our lives. Today, shielded from intimacy with death by the cold, mechanically invasive and antiseptic chambers of hospitals, we lose touch with how natural, even sacramental, death [and dying] can be. If we insulate ourselves from death we lose something precious, a sense of life that knows death, that elevates human to humane, that reconciles human being with human loss.”

Our elders, indeed all of us, long for human and humane relationship. We long for intimacy, and too often, as our beloved elders age, we shy away from it. Our system for caring for the aging certainly doesn’t promote or enhance it. It can be hard emotional work.

Being with the aging as they face their mortality means that we must face our own. When I am with my parents now, I watch these people whom I have known all my life and realize their time is ending and mine will, too. This makes the encounters all the more real, alive and poignant.

Caring for our parents as they age is really hard. It brings up all sorts of unresolved issues with them and the whole family dynamic. Just as the process has brought back my cranky father, the sister or brother who whined and complained all through your childhood and beyond will show up again. Most of us had parents who were fully human and loved us well most of the time, but some of us didn’t. Some had parents who did damage either emotional or physical. Yet all of us have

complex relationships with parents and family. As our elders age and come to die, it can bring out the best and worst in any one of us.

Forrest Church says, "Adversity doesn't always bring out the best in people. But the reason it so often does is because adversity forces us to work within tightly drawn limits. Everything within those limits is heightened. We receive as gifts things we tend to take for granted. For a brief, blessed time, what matters to us most really does. "

Some of you lost parents long ago and far too soon in their lives or yours. Whatever the emotional terrain you tread as your elders age, let the memory or the process be a calling to you to presence, to what matters most. Let what is Holy in this relationship and in the world arise and be present with you. Do your best to remain open and present and fully human. Sometimes you will be able to care for your parents tenderly, and sometimes you will yell at them.

And know that you'll never be able to do enough. I have been feeling remarkably inadequate lately. Sometimes I can't seem to put together a single direct, declarative sentence, and I've been trying to figure out what's wrong with me. I realized as I was writing this weekend much has to do with my parents. They are far away, ill and in pain. My mother was in the hospital again this past weekend, and I'm not there. I feel like an inadequate daughter, and like an inadequate minister, an inadequate friend.

Yet, Mary Pipher writes, even as these years "can be difficult, but also redemptive. As we care for our parents, we teach our children to care for us. As we see our parents age, we learn to age with courage and dignity. If the years are handled well, the old and young can help each other grow." (p. 10)

We need to do this work as humanely and possible, but we need to remember that we are human, and the work we will do will look supremely human. Glorious and inadequate.

Forrest Church preached his first final sermon in February 2006. In it he said,

"Religion does its best (and worst) work . . . n in the creation chapter or the Armageddon chapter, but in the middle of the story, when all the actors are thrown together, struggling for meaning, none knowing as much as we pretend, think, or wish we knew. The wisest of all teachers tells us, "Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself." Even, "Love your enemy." He instructs us to love our brother, even if he doesn't know that he is our brother. Love our sister, even if she doesn't know that she is our sister. Exchange pride for humility. Forgive without ceasing. And judge actions but not people, remembering... that somewhere they and we share at least one common ancestor who, with twenty-twenty hindsight, would do the same for us if she were here."

As Woody Allen says, ninety percent of life is just showing up.

So show up. Be there with your beloved elders whatever stage they are in aging. Be there too for the less-than-beloved elders and let yourself be human throughout.

Margi McCue recently told me that when she hears people complain about their aging parents she worries. "Will my children be complaining about what a pain I am?" I hesitated before I answered, but then it came out. "Yes," I said, "if you are a pain they will complain."

But that's all part of the humanity of it all. When as we age, we will all be cranky and bothersome and times. And even our most loving children will complain about us at times. And we'll complain about them.

We are all just actors thrown together, struggling for meaning, seeking redemption.

The redemption is indeed there for us, especially when we full engage in the depth of human relationship.

A Holy Presence arises within and among and beyond us when we do.