

HOLDING THE LIGHT

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC
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On Sunday, October 22, after preaching the Sunday service here at All Souls and conducting several meetings, I headed to the gym for a late Sunday workout. I'd originally been scheduled to fly to Tel Aviv that evening, but because of the outbreak of war between Hamas and Israel, I had changed my plans.

I had instead decided to fly to Seattle early Monday morning and spend the week with my parents on the Olympic Peninsula west of Seattle. They are in their late 80's, and while both appeared to be reasonably healthy, they were showing increasingly prominent signs of aging.

As I was completing a set of overhead barbell presses, my phone rang. Caller ID announced my sister, who lives less than a mile from my parents. I answered the call, and my sister informed me that dad had suffered what turned out to be a catastrophic stroke. As it happened, I was already on the first available flight out of New York to Seattle.

During the days that followed, my brother, sister, and I made provisions for dad to come home from the hospital on comfort care and hospice care. We set up a hospital bed in the living room and arranged for regular visits by nurses and other caregivers. By prior arrangement, my sister and her husband are taking primary responsibility for caring for my dad and, to a lesser extent, my mom as well. It's the kind of attentive and compassionate end-of-life care that all of us hope for and few of us will probably receive.

As you might imagine, the past few weeks have been a difficult time for me — a time to reflect on my relationship with my father, both as a parent and as a ministerial mentor. My very first recollection as a child — I was three years old at the time — is my father's ordination to the Conservative Mennonite ministry. Because Mennonites held worship services three times a week in those days, I have probably heard more of my father's sermons in my lifetime than I have preached of my own. The story of my father and me as ministers, however, is a story of two roads increasingly diverging.

More than thirty years ago, I called my father and asked him to participate in my ordination to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. He hesitated, doubtless for theological reasons, but I told him that his presence would not — to me at least — endorse Unitarian Universalist theology. Rather, it would indicate the role he had played in my ministerial formation. I told him that no one had played a more significant role than he had. He said he would consult my mother and let me know. The following day, he called me back and agreed to participate.

Early in my Unitarian Universalist ministry, my parents needed to explain to themselves why I had departed from the Conservative Mennonite ministry. They seized upon the view that God had sent me on a mission to the Unitarian Universalists to save them. Eventually, they apparently believed, I would bring us all back home to the Christian faith.

While I agree that Unitarian Universalists need saving, I don't believe we need saving in the way my parents understand the term. Over the years, as my parents occasionally attended worship here at All Souls, and as my mother surreptitiously read my sermons, I believe it became apparent to them that I was on a very different path than they had hoped. There would be no joyful homecoming.

It wasn't clear to me how dramatically our paths had diverged until I spent time at my parents after my dad's stroke. My siblings and I had occasion to see firsthand what my parents were watching on television and on YouTube, and what my dad was reading on the Internet and in magazines. My father's increasingly right-wing approach to theology had become allied with an increasingly right-wing approach to politics. I feel profoundly sad that my father and I now have nothing of substance to share on either front — and even if we did, he is now beyond reach. In this sense, there will be no deathbed reconciliation between us.

This is not to say that my father didn't provide well for his family in other ways, nor that the role he played in my ministerial formation has been invalidated. Many years ago, my father told me about the circumstances surrounding his ordination. The lead minister of the church that ordained him was in a tussle with the bishop of the region over whether to permit congregants to adopt certain changes in lifestyle. Someone asked my father whose side he was on. My father replied, "I'm on God's side," indicating his ultimate loyalty to the ultimate good of the congregation. It is an example I have tried my very best to follow in my own ministry.

All of which is to say that I approach Anniversary Sunday here at All Souls with a profound sense of gratitude for this congregation and all it has achieved over the past 204 years. I'm also deeply grateful for the support you have shown to me in my ministry, as I have tried to serve the ultimate good of this congregation. These are times of profound change and of significant challenge — for us as a congregation, for the United States as a nation, and for a world riven by conflict and convulsed by disasters.

Which is why I couldn't be more deeply grateful that Thanksgiving has finally arrived. I have never needed it more, and my guess is that you may feel the same.

The story that gets told about the first Thanksgiving may be historically fanciful, but it's no less compelling for being partially made up. Besides, the first Thanksgiving didn't take place because people had managed to find meaning and fulfilment when times were good. Rather, it took place because they had managed to survive even when times were bad.

During the winter of 1621, more than half of the hundred-plus settlers in the Plymouth colony had succumbed to disease and cold, sometimes dying at the rate of two

or three a day. But over the following summer, the growing season had been generous; and the settlers had confidence that they would bury fewer of their number during the winter to come. Remembering their loved ones who had died, the settlers gathered on what came to be called the first Thanksgiving to give thanks for what they had.

There may well have been some Native Americans at this potluck meal. Like many Thanksgiving scenes in the modern era, however, there were tensions around the table. The Native Americans at Plymouth didn't know how tragically their interactions with the settlers would eventually turn out. But they knew enough to be wary, which is why the harvest meal probably wasn't the celebration of friendliness depicted by Jennie Augusta Brownscombe in her iconic but misleading 1914 painting of the so-called first Thanksgiving.

Rather, the scene revealed two weaknesses leaning into a strength. The settlers had been weakened by disease and starvation, and the Wampanoag had also been weakened by disease and by their losing battle against the Narragansett. Given their bleak circumstances, the settlers and the Wampanoag realized that together they would be somewhat less weak than each would be alone.

No matter the reason, bad times and bleak circumstances will eventually come to us all. There are many distressing and destructive forces at loose in the world, and we can't protect ourselves from all of them. The question is how we respond when they come.

Over the past few days, I have been drawn to a poem by the contemporary American poet Stuart Kestenbaum, author of six volumes of poetry including one titled *House of Thanksgiving*. This is his poem titled "Holding the Light."

Gather up whatever is
glittering in the gutter,
whatever has tumbled
in the waves or fallen
in flames out of the sky,

for it's not only our
hearts that are broken,
but the heart
of the world as well.
Stitch it back together.

Make a place where
the day speaks to the night
and the earth speaks to the sky.
Whether we created God
or God created us

it all comes down to this:
In our imperfect world
we are meant to repair
and stitch together
what beauty there is, stitch it

with compassion and wire.
See how everything
we have made gathers
the light inside itself
and overflows? A blessing.

On this Anniversary Sunday, as we approach Thanksgiving Day, this poem sums up both how I feel and how I want to respond. The heart of the world is broken today — by hatred and violence, by bigotry and anti-Semitism, by inequality and injustice, by misunderstanding and malice, by disasters both natural and human. My heart is broken as well — by losses both apparent and impending, by the realization of what might have been or could have been, by the recognition that some losses will endure always.

Even so, the poet says, some of the things that have fallen in flames out of the sky, or tumbled through the waves into the deep, or callously been discarded into the gutter — some of what remains still glitters. Find those sources of life and light, the poet says, and gather them up. Use them to stitch the world back together.

Whether we created God or God created us makes no difference. We are meant to repair and stitch together whatever beauty we can find in our imperfect world — stitch it with compassion and wire, with our feelings and with our fingers, with our openness to the suffering of others and our commitment to doing the best we can to alleviate it.

As we repair the world in this way, the beauty we have rescued and the light we have preserved will overflow into our lives and into our world. For us and for everyone around us, our efforts will be a blessing.