

Forrest Church's Response
to the 2008 Annual Award for Distinguished Service
to the Cause of Unitarian Universalism
presented by
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Thank you, Bill. On first reading your lovely, oh-so-generous words, I knew that anything I might say following such an encomium could only diminish its impact. Fortunately, at times like these, a taste of humble pie is high on the theological menu. After all, if pride is the number one sin, humility holds equal honor among the virtues.

The problem is, I am proud of this award, and don't feel particularly sinful for being so. I do on occasion, I must confess, embrace the convenient Emersonian tradition of unabashedly—pridefully if you will—contradicting myself, but this is not one of those times. For there are two very different kinds of pride. Black pride, Gay pride, even, in its way, Unitarian Universalist pride, are not sins when they bring people together. By its very definition, sin tears us apart. Sin divides us within ourselves, estranges us from others, and isolates us from the ground of our shared being.

The sin of pride functions in the second of these three categories. By lifting ourselves above others, almost certainly on insufficient grounds, we serve as agents of divisiveness. In truth, we are far more alike, in almost every way, than we differ. We certainly are more alike in our cosmic ignorance than we differ in our knowledge. With the staggering ratio of 1,500 stars in the heavens for every living human being here on earth, anyone who boasts privileged insider information on the creation or creator is, from a cosmic viewpoint, stretching presumption to its outer limits. When we die, none of us is going to have but the faintest notion what this mystery was all about. Even three score years and ten is barely time to get our minds wet. All of which confirms my favorite etymology: Human, humane, humanitarian, humility, humble, humus. Dust to dust.

When pride brings us together, however, far from being a sin, it is cause for celebration. Our distinguished service award demonstrates this principle better than almost any other I know. It sets its recipient not apart from but a part of the great Unitarian Universalist tradition, testifying to a lifetime of shared effort and shared accomplishment. In my case, it honors a lifetime of learning, and no one learns without teachers. I have had thousands of teachers, many of them sitting

here in this hall right now. You and they, co-members of our chosen faith, have been my lifelines; you have trained me in my lifecraft. and recommitted my energies to repair this great country by invoking the elevated principles of the American creed.

Above all, at least on a personal basis, you have helped me bring God home when my faith was homeless. When I was down you have taken my hand and lifted me up, guiding me, walking with me, kneeling with me when I could only kneel, and lifting the fear from my heart. When the question "Why?," which it often does, admits no answer, we need only ask, "Where do we go from here?" Part of the answer to that question must always include the word, together. My wife Carolyn and our four children have taught me this lesson particularly well, as has my splendid colleague and successor in the All Souls pulpit, Galen Guengerich, but you have too.

Your teaching and my learning continue to this very day. As I negotiate the final chapter of my life, you, especially my All Souls parishioners, have, by your own great strength and courage, taught me the lessons of love and death. With those who have traveled this path before me at my side, I find myself journeying with growing wonderment through the valley of the shadow.

So I thank you this morning, not so much for this award, but for making it possible. I ask you to accept it with me, on all of our behalf. In times of frustration, let us never forget what a privilege it is to be part of this great movement and to pronounce its saving faith: one Light (Unitarianism) shining through many windows (Universalism). Let us continue our quest together, with awe and humility, with saving openness and saving doubt, never forgetting to honor those who charted our way. And let us invest our ongoing quests with a single goal: to live our lives in such a way that they too will prove worth dying for.

I love you, and thank you very much.

