

## **How Will You Be Remembered?**

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Once there was an old rich man who was afraid of dying and leaving all his wealth behind on earth. So, he took up the matter with God. He pleaded day and night to be able to take all his earthly possessions with him.

Finally, God conceded. He said the man could take as much as he could fit in one suitcase. The old man immediately went out, bought a huge suitcase, sold all he owned and filled the suitcase with gold bars.

Shortly after that, the old man died. Awkwardly dragging the big, heavy suitcase, he approached St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter stopped him, asked him to open his luggage, and then told him he couldn't bring his gold bars into Heaven. The man was irate. "You don't understand," he said. "I got permission directly from God himself for this. He told me whatever I could fit into one suitcase, I could bring with me."

St. Peter, shrugged his shoulders and simply said, "Fine with me. But we've already got plenty of pavement here."

This story illustrates a couple of points that I'd like to consider this morning. First, it reflects the fact that we humans are the one species - that we know of - that is aware of our own mortality, and that is concerned with what comes after this life. The other point is that we really don't know what, if anything, comes after this life. If there is something more, we are very likely to be surprised by it.

In the face of this lack of knowledge of what is to come, many of us choose not to dwell on what might be, but to focus more on what we can know about. And the one form of immortality that we can be certain about is the ripples of influence and memory emanating from the stone of our life dropped in the pond of the world.

If something we say or do sets in motion changes – however tiny – in the course of the future, then we live on. If there are those left behind whose lives we have helped to shape, whose actions we have helped to inspire, then we live on. If there are those who remember us – for good or for ill – then we live on.

And so, as we ponder our mortality, and wonder about what comes after, we might wonder not so much what will become of us as what we will leave behind. What will be our legacy? How will we be remembered?

We typically take time on this Memorial Day holiday to think about and remember those who went before, and who had an impact on us. And I invite you now to take a few moments in silence to call to mind some of

those whose memory holds special meaning for you. And as you do that, reflect particularly on what it is about them that makes them memorable. That makes them worth remembering. . .

I hope that exercise can be helpful as we think about how we will be remembered by those we leave behind. As I reflected on this, a number of things came to mind. First, I believe that the fondest and most meaningful memories come not from accomplishments, but from character. That is, it is more about who you are than it is about what you do.

Of course who you are influences what you do. But it's being who you are, day after day, and living out of that reality with integrity that builds a legacy day by day, and person by person. A couple of anonymous quotes come to mind here. First:

Watch your thoughts, for they become words.  
Watch your words, for they become actions.  
Watch your actions, for they become habits.  
Watch your habits, for they become character.  
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Indeed, it also becomes your legacy. Another oft-cited quote asserts that "character is doing what's right when nobody's looking." As Will Rogers once said, "Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip."

And so, paradoxically, if you want to leave positive memories and influence behind, you probably shouldn't dwell too much on doing so. If you cultivate your character, and develop habits of selflessness and compassion and caring for those around you, the memories will take care of themselves.

Another important point is that it is not just the big things you do that make a difference for other people. It's the consistency of little things that add up to a memorable whole. And it's the "how" more than the "what." Helen Keller put it like this:

I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. . . for the world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.

Another reason for not dwelling on the future, and what place memories of us might hold there, is that to do so can get in the way of being

fully present in the here and now. David Rockower, in his “This I Believe” piece in yesterday’s Centre Daily Times, explored this lesson. He wrote of the life lesson that came through a childhood woodworking project guided by a wise neighbor. The lesson of slowing down and paying attention to the piece of life you’re living right now. He sums it up like this:

There’s a reason I remember my afternoon with Mr. Lovett so clearly when thousands of others have been lost from memory. I paid attention to the process.

This is how I’m trying to live now. I pay attention on a new level. . . I believe in slowing down and enjoying the process of living.

When I first became a parent, I thought that quality interaction meant reading a book or throwing together a cushion fort.

But my kids needed more from me. They needed me to create the fort and join them for a tea party inside. They needed me to read the book three times instead of just once.

So I did, and I do. When I sit on the floor and listen, build, laugh, read, and sing, I am paying attention.

And when, later that evening, my son says, “Dad, that was really fun today,” or when my daughter slams me with an impromptu hug and says, “I love you, daddy,” I know I’m creating a masterpiece.

May we each invest the time, the patience, and the attention that it takes to create a masterpiece, one person at a time.

This sermon would not be complete without reference to the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, long-time minister of All Souls Church (Unitarian Universalist) in New York City. Forrest is living in the late stages of cancer, and has shared that experience in his final book, *Love and Death*. But life and death, and the challenge of living appropriately in the face of death, have always been at the center of his ministry. He has boiled down his theology to a few simple assertions that fit our message this morning quite well:

- Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing we must die.

- The purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.
- The only thing that can never be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.

And Forrest's mantra for living well is: "Want what you have; do what you can; and be who you are."

And so, if you care about the legacy you leave when you depart this life, simply work at living well while you're here. Give away your love whenever the opportunity arises. Love is not a finite resource that is depleted by sharing it. To quote Unitarian Universalist songwriter Malvina Reynolds: "Love is something if you give it away, You end up having more." And once set loose in the world, love can be a powerful force for good. And finally, never forget that last phrase of Forrest Church's mantra: "be who you are." Let your character shine through. No one can ask for more than that.

I leave you, this morning, with one last set of advice on living with integrity and character. It is attributed to Mother Theresa, who herself left a mixed, but largely positive legacy. I believe it reinforces some of what I've said this morning.

People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.  
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish  
ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and  
true enemies. Succeed anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be  
honest and frank anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.

The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot  
down by the smallest people with the smallest minds.  
Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.  
Fight for some underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed  
overnight. Build anyway.

So may it be.