



Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow

Forrest Church

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On a February day in 2008, Forrest Church sent a letter to the members of his congregation, informing them that he had terminal cancer; his life would now be measured in months, not years. In that remarkable letter, he wrote: "In more than one respect, I feel very lucky." He went on to promise that he would sum up his thoughts on the topics that had been so pervasive in his work-love and death-in a final book.

Church has been justly celebrated as a writer of American history, but his works of spiritual guidance have been especially valued for their insight and inspiration. As a minister, Church defined religion as "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." The goal of life, he tells us "is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for." This last book in his impressive oeuvre is imbued with ideas and exemplars for achieving that goal. The stories he offers-drawn from his own experiences and from the lives of his friends, family, and parishioners-are both engrossing and enlightening. Forrest Church's final work may be his most lasting gift to his readers.

Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow Details

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From Reader Review Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow for online ebook

Richard Magahiz says

I've been wanting to read this since the time it was published in 2007 when I used to hear the author's sermons on the radio preaching at All Souls Unitarian in New York. His combination a forceful personality and broad acceptance of everyone appealed to me, so it was with dismay that I heard of his final terminal illness. This is at the center of of this book, read by the author himself in his last months.

In the first part, he discusses how he has come to view love and fear as opposite poles in human emotion, starting with his early childhood, the loss of his famous politician father, and on through adolescence and his many years of ministry. The sermon he gave the day after the September 11th 2001 disasters is included, a little jarring in the light of what the country has become since that time. In the second part, he brings us on his personal journey at the end of life, taking stock and ultimately embracing the fact that he would be leaving his family in a short time. His story is both tragic and life-affirming in the way it emphasizes what he has come to know as the most important things that endure past a person's death. He repeats his personal mantra 'Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are' a number of times, and this is probably his main piece of original pastoral thought here.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion that does not let itself be confined to Christianity, though he speaks much of christian role models he feels to have been emblematic of his theme. In the end, I think his summation of what matters at the end of life would speak to secular people coping with the same kinds of trials and search for meaning.

Tabitha says

"Love and death are allies. When a loved one dies, the greater the pain, the greater the love's proof. Such grief is a sacrament. Sacraments bring us together. The measure of our grief testifies to the power of our love." (p10)

"The opposite of love is fear." (p14)

"Just where you think that the grass would surely be green, it may be dying. I am no longer startled by this. What startles me still, though it no longer should, is precisely the opposite. Often, just where you'd think that the grass would be dying, it is green." (p39)

"We do what we can, want what we have, and embrace who we are." (p41)

"For me, religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." (p51)

"We cannot embrace our life fully until we find a way to accept our death." (p91)

"Don't throw yourself against the wall. Walk around it. You can't do the impossible, but so much is possible. So many of the things you haven't tried you still can do." (p96)

"Until life ends, no destination is final. In fact, the best decisions are those we look back upon as new beginnings. Good journeys always continue. So don't be driven by desire (that empty place within you), never to rest until you reach your goal. Invest your joy in the journey." (p97)

"Greater than all and yet present in each, no less mysterious than the creation itself, God is not the cause of our undoing but the cosmic ground of our being. I've never needed biblical miracles to confirm my faith. It's not the supernatural, but the super in the natural, that I celebrate. I draw strength and insight from the Bible and embrace Jesus's two great commandments (love to God and love to neighbor) as my own, but following the spirit, not the letter, of the Scriptures, my abiding touchstones are awe and humility." (109-110)

"In trying unsuccessfully to be who we aren't, we fail to become who we are." (p111)

"Let us awaken to the saving grace of forgiveness; where we can, in a single breath, free ourselves and free another." (p142)

Sarah says

I first heard about this book when I listened to Terri Gross interview Forrest Church on Fresh Air while I was abroad. I was struck by him immediately. I had never heard anyone facing terminal cancer sound so positive, warm, realistic and truly accepting of their disease. I decided to read the book to hear more about how he dealt with his illness, and am so glad that I did.

Forrest Church has spent his career as a minister developing his thoughts on two great themes of life: love and death. In the introduction he describes this book perfectly, "at once a summation of my life's recurring theme and my personal journey down the road of love and death."

Church focuses on death's unique ability to give life meaning. He turns a frightening, unavoidable mystery into a natural, beautiful thing. While the idea of dying seems so final, he believes that love is the only thing that can survive death and stresses that everyone should give as much of it as they can in the years we are given.

Usually I would be hesitant to read a book about death written by a minister (assuming that we wouldn't agree about a lot of things in it), but I was comfortable with the way he brought up religion. He seems to focus on the aspects of Christianity that I really admire: loving and respecting each other.

This personal book was a wonderful experience. His open heart was apparent throughout, and every chapter felt like a conversation with an old friend or beloved mentor. On one hand I'm sad that he passed on last fall, but at the same time I'm so glad he was able to live his life in a way that was "worth dying for".

Diane says

I had no idea who Forrest Church was and am not sure how this book ended up on my reading list. It turns out he was a very well known Unitarian minister and the son of Frank Church, one of my heroes. The book is a collection of sermons and parts of sermons with comments that Forrest wrote after he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer - a bit like The Last Lecture, but better. I tend to dislike platitudes and "meaningful" sayings and quotes, and sermons tend to devolve into just that, but there was quite a bit in this book that I liked. I particularly like his approach to death and his recognition that your death really isn't just yours but belongs to those you love and who love you.

It was simply by chance that I requested this book a few weeks ago - it's time had come and it was either read it or take it off the list. It arrived and I began reading it before Roy was diagnosed with colon cancer or

pancreatic cancer or whatever the final diagnosis is going to be. It probably was a good thing to read right now.

Christine says

Somehow, after finishing Smash Cut, I naturally gravitated to this book which had been on my bedside for years. I really appreciated Church's head on, reflective and calm approach to his own imminent mortality. I'll keep the book on my shelf for later consultation, to tap into his wisdom.

Want what you have.

Do what you can.

Be who you are.

All that survives death is love.

Ann Evans says

This was written by my minister, who took his congregation by the hand and led them through his last couple of years (which were only supposed to be a few months) as he died from cancer. He died a few weeks ago, in September, 2009. It was an inspiring journey for all of us, and some of it is recounted in this book. It is put together a bit haphazardly, but has many insights, a good deal of humor (though he was always much funnier in his sermons than in his books. the humor doesn't always come through), and is a good guide to anyone contemplating death for whatever reason.

Ladan says

"the one thing that can't be taken away from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go." pg x

"The opposite of love is not hate. It is fear." pg 15

"He did not spend his life, he invested it in things that would ennoble and outlast him... Cast out thy fear with love. And then - this I know - it will be somehow easier for us to do the things that need to be done, and to let the things that do not matter go." pg 16

Thornton Wilder: 'The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude.' pg 19

"We are mysteriously given life, and for a brief time blessed with opportunities to love and serve and forgive one another as best we can... not to settle for who we are, but to stretch and become who we might be." pg 20

"Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are. Wanting what we have mutes the pangs of desire, which visits from an imaginary future to cast a shadow on the present, which is real. Doing what we can focuses our minds on what is possible, no more, no less, thereby filling each moment with conscious, practicable endeavor. And being who we are helps us reject the fool's gold of self-delusion. It also demands integrity - being straight with ourselves and one another." pg 34

"It is tempting to seek meaning not in what we have, but in what we desire... Of the enemies that frustrate our search for meaning, this is perhaps the most traitorous. It places fulfillment forever beyond our reach, in what we do not have, in what we cannot do, in who we shall never be." pg 39

"Meaning doesn't emerge from longing for what we lack, things we have lost or will likely never find. We should wish to think instead for things closer at hand, like the sun's kiss good morning when it breaks through the blinds to inaugurate another miracle, another day." pg 40

"Life is not a given, but a wondrous gift. That gift comes with a price attached. One day something will steal it from us. That doesn't diminish our lives; it increases their value." pg 43

"the opportunity of an afternoon and evening we almost surely have in front of us matters - not to hide in, not to sleep through, but to savor and to share." pg 47

"The harder we work to get things exactly right, the more cautious we become, the more careful not to fail. Risking nothing, we stand to gain little beyond the security of a battened-down existence." pg 48

"the purpose of life is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for." pg 64

"Ultimately, the courage to be requires the courage to let go." pg 72

"When people tell me proudly that they don't believe in God, I ask them to tell me a little about the God they don't believe in, for I probably don't believe in him either. 'God' is not God's name. 'God' is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each." pg 80

"Death may come as a thief in the night, but it cannot steal from you the love you have given away, the strength you have shown in facing life's hardships, or the courage you have proved in quelling your inner demons... Today's works of love and acts of conscience weave themselves into a plot that will continue long after you are gone, yet be changed for the better by your deeds when you were here. Life may not be immortal, but love is immortal. Its every gesture signs the air with honor. Its witness carries past the grave from heart to heart." pg 95

"The more questions we have, the farther we can see."

"Until life ends, no destination is final."

"So don't be driven by desire (that empty place within you), never to rest until you reach your goal. Invest your joy in the journey."

"Soul work needn't be strenuous to be high impact. You can begin transforming your life with a single phonecall. Or by writing a kind letter. Or by opening your blinds to let the sun flood in. Don't say it's nothing. It's everything." pg 97

"Think about it. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born."

"A valiant stretch run may not make you a winner, but I can promise you this. It will make your heart and the hearts of those who love you beat faster."

"Being alive to love and hurt, to fail and recover, to prove your grit and show compassion, that is life's true secret." pg 105

"It's not the supernatural, but the super in the natural, that I celebrate." pg 109

"We are born into a great mystery. We die into a great mystery. In between - in that little dash between the dates on our tombstone - what we know of God we learn from love's lessons."

"...Spun into webs of passion and stung with pain. Brought to life." pg 125

"Only our unspent love dies when we die, love unspent because of fear." pg 136

"I have had the experience over and over again that the quieter it is around me, the clearer do I feel connection to you. It is as though in solitude the soul develops senses that we hardly know in everyday life."
"What is happiness and unhappiness? It depends so little on the circumstances; it depends really only on that which happens inside a person." pg 137

"Let us awaken to the blessing of acceptance,
Expressed in a simple, saving mantra:
Want what we have; do what we can; be who we are.

Rather than letting wishful thinking or regret
Displace the gratitude for all that is ours, here and now,
To savor and to save,

Let us want what we have -
Praying for health, if we are blessed with health,
For friendship, if we are blessed with friends,
For family, if we are blessed with family,
For work, if we are blessed with tasks that await our doing,
And if our lives are dark, may we remember to want nothing more than the loving
Affection of those whose hearts are broken by our pain.

Let us do what we can -
Not dream impossible dreams or climb every mountain,
But dream one possible dream and climb one splendid mountain,
That our life may be blessed with attainable meaning.

And let us be who we are -
Embrace our God-given nature and talents.
Answer the call that is ours, not another's,
thereby enhancing our little world and the greater world we share." pg 143

Marion says

Forrest Church has a remarkable and very genuine outlook on his own death and on the mystery of life and death. In this spiritual book, he shares his theological views of death and dying, addressing the "why" of suffering. But, more significantly, he talks about living life fully, loving those around you. His simple (or deceptively simple) motto is: "Want what you have, do what you can, be who you are" and he unpacks this in a way that is incredibly meaningful.

Debra says

When I ordered this book I wasn't aware that the author was a Universalist minister, which means he doesn't take the evangelical stand on the Bible being the final word, and quotes other religious scriptures, such as Buddhism. He doesn't believe "God's pulling all the strings."

I disagree with him here, but there were wonderful insights in this book. The author is dealing with a cancer diagnosis that will ultimately end his life. Thus, the book is about dying and death. "When a loved one dies, the greater the pain, the greater love's proof. Such grief is a sacrament. Sacraments bring us together. The measure of our grief testifies to the power of our love."

Two months ago I lost my niece and this statement was comforting to me. He talks about the universal truth that everyone suffers, and that the shares are not allotted evenly.

In conclusion he didn't feel he could pray for himself for healing, nor did he feel for sure there was a heaven, which I thought rather sad for a minister who spent 30 years in the service of our Lord. But, I would totally recommend reading this book even if you have theology differences; there is still rich meaning in this author's book and something for everyone.

Want what you have
Do what you can
Be who you are

Fred Eisenhut says

I am using this book as a study book at our Methodist Church in West Dundee Illinois. The response is very positive. Folks are telling me that they like the fact that the book is not cloyingly sanctimonious. Instead it is very practical and filled with love.

If Forrest were still alive I would write to thank him for this gracious study. It is very helpful in trying to understand an event that happens to us all.

Chanita.Shannon says

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, Church defined religion as "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." The goal of life, he tells us "is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for." This last book in his impressive oeuvre is imbued with ideas and exemplars for achieving that goal. The stories he offers—drawn from his own experiences and from the lives of his friends, family, and parishioners—are both engrossing and enlightening.

"Love & Death is transformative. I was not prepared for the power of this splendid, soaring book. It totally captured me."

—Sylvia Ann Hewlett, author of *Creating a Life*

Lkking says

This is the book Forrest Church wrote when he knew his cancer had returned and he only had some months to live. It includes excerpts from some sermons and writings as well as original material related to his life. He is wise, calm and grounded in his own brand of spirituality. I read it for a class on living with death but is worth the read for anyone who questions, wonders and maybe even rails at the inevitability of it all.

Louise Rasmussen says

A book worth re-reading occasionally through life

This little book offers thoughts on life that sooth my mind and soul. Rev. Church offers wonderful ideas on living a meaningful life, facing difficulties, and celebrating our humanity. His mantra, "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are." This will be my mantra as I continue to seek to have a well lived life.

Jill Althage says

As a Unitarian Universalist, I found this to be a moving account of one who faces the end of life. I loved this quotation:

"We see little of the road ahead or the sky above. And the dust we raise clouds our eyes, leaving only brief interludes to contemplate the stars. All we can do, every now and again, is to stop for a moment and look. Look. Morning has broken and we are here, you and I, breathing the air, admiring the slant sun as it refracts through these magnificent, pellucid windows and dances in motes of dust above the pews, calling us to attention, calling us homeward."

Terri Naughton says

An important and comforting book. I found it invaluable after the recent loss of my mother.
