

## WHAT DOESN'T CHANGE

A homily for Anniversary Sunday by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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The historian Ian Mortimer opens his most recent book with a story about watching the news on television one evening toward the end of 1999. After the presenter had delivered the main stories of the day, she began a review of past events, which Mortimer assumed would cover the highlights of the year that was ending. As it turned out, she had the whole twentieth century in mind. She began her retrospective by saying, “As we draw to the end of the century that has seen more change than any other...”

Wait a minute, Mortimer said to himself, is that assumption correct? “What makes this presenter so confident that the twentieth century saw more change than, say, the nineteenth, when railways transformed the world? Or the sixteenth, when Copernicus suggested that the Earth rotates around the Sun, and Luther broke the Christian Church in two?”

As Mortimer continued to watch the retrospective, black-and-white movies, a mushroom cloud, space rockets, cars, and computers began to fill the television screen. He concludes, “The presenter’s statement that the twentieth century had seen more change than any other was clearly based on the assumption that ‘change’ is synonymous with technological development – and that the twentieth century’s innovations were without parallel.”

Provoked by this declaration, Mortimer began to address the question of whether it’s true. His answer, which turns out mostly to be yes, appeared last year in the form of a book titled *Millennium*, which is subtitled, *From Religion to Revolution: How Civilization Has Changed Over a Thousand Years*.

Today we celebrate the 198<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of All Souls and the faithful members who have kept it strong and vital over the past two centuries. One of the convictions that underlie our presence here today is that experiences of transcendence, which we often refer to as spiritual experiences, will always matter. These experiences yield a profound awareness of our relationship to everything that is not us – an awareness that we depend on the people and world around us for everything we need, as well as an awareness that we are in some measure responsible to them and for them in return.

Beyond these individual spiritual experiences, we also believe that the practice of religion matters – the collective endeavor to transform our own lives and the world around us. We gather to help each other grow spiritually, to advance the spiritual formation of our children and youth, to share our joys and sorrows in small groups, to wrestle with the insights of great writers, to enjoy the inspiration of great musicians, to

feed our homeless neighbors, to advocate for justice and equity in our public policies, and so on. To make all these things possible, we attend board meetings on Sunday afternoons and finance committee meetings on Wednesday mornings, raise operating funds to pay for heat and capital funds to replace the roof, and so on.

In recent years, this commitment to the practice of religious community has been called into question by one of the most wide-ranging changes in our nation's culture. People today are abandoning the practice of religion at unprecedented rates, leading to the rapid rise of a cohort of people who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. They embrace the individual experience of spirituality but reject any institutional affiliation with a synagogue, church, or mosque. They may read to their children wisdom stories from ancient sources, for example, but they're not helping bear the cost of their children studying those stories in the company of other children under the guidance of trained religious professionals.

Do these changes bode ill for All Souls in upcoming years and decades? The overall answer to this question, in my view, is no. I believe All Souls will be even more relevant a century from now than it is today, which is why we need to keep it strong and vital. Let me give two reasons why.

The first reason for my confidence in the future of All Souls comes from a survey released earlier this week by the Public Religion Research Institute, which has been tracking the rise of people who say they're spiritual but not religious. As I've said before, I think the rise of the SBNRs is good news for us, because when people talk about what they mean by "not religious," they don't talk about not wanting roofs, walls, or heating bills, but rather not wanting dogma, doctrine, or an undue fixation on ancient scriptures. In this sense, we as Unitarian Universalists define spiritual but not religious.

The most interesting finding in the latest PRRI survey, however, tracks for the first time a cohort of people who describe themselves as religious but not spiritual. These are people who say they enjoy the social or the activist aspects of religious community, but don't care about the spiritual dimension – at least as expressed by their religious community. Here's the good news: people who describe themselves as either spiritual or religious, or both, constitute 69% of the US population – more than two-thirds. If All Souls remains institutionally adroit enough to respond to these spiritual and religious needs, it will continue to flourish.

The second source of my confidence in the future of All Souls is that the percentage of people who describe themselves as religious may well increase in future decades, rather than decrease. The reason itself bodes ill for our culture as a whole, but not for the importance of All Souls and other like-minded institutions.

After surveying the agents of change over the past thousand years, Ian Mortimer concludes that the future will, in some ways at least, involve a return to the past – and that the scale of change over the next 200 years may be even greater than in the past century.

He writes, “It might take a hundred years or more, but we are going to see a return to the extreme hierarchies of the pre-industrial age. Over the next thousand years, we will witness the downward curve of the common standard of living in the West and the increased power of the very wealthy. We will return to a point that, in terms of social structure, will have more in common with the world of 1800 than that of 2000. The only question is whether we will get there painfully and suddenly, or gradually.”

Because of these changes, he says, “I suspect that the consolations of faith and the communities that religions create will prove important again in the future... It seems to me highly likely that religion will become more prevalent in the West as the greater hierarchies take hold and the majority of people become comparatively poorer... As we return to such a hierarchy, I fully expect the world’s faiths to come into their own.”

When life turns hard, people reach out for help in integrating the realities of life with their deepest longings and their highest aspirations, both for themselves and for the world they share with others. You and I did the same at some point in the past, which is why we are here. The longing for constancy in times of change, for beauty in times of brutality, and for justice in times of inequity will never fade. All Souls will always be necessary.

Mortimer concludes his book by saying, “And at the end of it all, I find myself wondering what hasn’t changed over the last thousand years, and what won’t change over the next.”

He responds, “What doesn’t change is that we find so many things in life worthwhile – love, beauty, children, the comfort of friends, telling jokes, the joy of eating and drinking together, storytelling, wit, laughter, music, the sound of the sea, the warmth of the sun, looking at the Moon and stars, singing and dancing ... What won’t change? Everything that allows us to lose ourselves in the moment. Everything that is worth dreaming about. Everything that is without price.”

At its best, All Souls nurtures everything worth dreaming about in our lives and world, everything that is without price. It is my hope – and my commitment – that this will never change.