

## A HARD-EDGED HOPE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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Ten days ago, I had the privilege of speaking at a graduation-like celebration for the Global Fellows Program at Acumen, a 15-year-old organization started by Jacqueline Novogratz. Her goal was to create a venture capital fund to invest in entrepreneurs committed to improving the lives of the world's poor. To date, their work has benefitted the lives of more than 100 million people.

The Acumen Global Fellows Program is a 12-month leadership program created, as Acumen puts it, "for individuals committed to serving the poor who possess the skills, determination, and moral imagination to drive social change." After two months of intensive training here in New York, the Fellows spend ten months working in one of Acumen's portfolio companies around the globe. Laura Ruiz helped with admissions and curriculum development at Amal Academy in Lahore, helping poor Pakistani youth develop their learning and business skills. Lorenn Ruster headed up a new marketing team at a fledgling solar company in Kampala, Uganda. Navin Muruga worked in Bhopal, India with Sahayog Dairy, which provides India's small dairy farmers with market access. And so on.

At the celebration, Navin talked about the biggest change that occurred during his fellowship. It wasn't sharpening his business skills or increasing his cross-cultural competence, though those things happened. It was learning that he needed to reconcile the ways he wanted to change the world with the person he actually was. He said, "I learned how to balance my ambition with self-awareness... I learned how to balance 'who I want to become' with 'who I am.'" He added, "It taught me to look inward, to identify my strengths, and to understand the unique role I could play in changing systems of inequity."

Acumen's manifesto reads (in part): "It starts by standing with the poor, listening to voices unheard, and recognizing potential where others see despair... It thrives on moral imagination: the humility to see the world as it is, and the audacity to imagine the world as it could be. It's having the ambition to learn at the edge, the wisdom to admit failure, and the courage to start again. It requires patience and kindness, resilience and grit: a hard-edged hope... Doing what's right, not what's easy. It's the radical idea of creating hope in a cynical world."

Hard-edged hope starts by standing with, listening to, and seeing potential. It thrives on moral imagination: the humility to see ourselves as we are and the world as it is. It thrives on the audacity to imagine ourselves as we could be and the world as it could be.

In my address to the Acumen staff and Fellows, some of whom had families attending from around the world, I spoke about social entrepreneurship as spiritual practice. Changing the world requires a deep awareness of how we as individuals are constituted by the very world we wish to transform. Our utter dependence on the people and world around us also entails our responsibility for them in return. Because we personally take what we need from the people and world around us, we need to take personally what the people and world around us need. Our lives are made up of relationships and reciprocity. Living in light of this reality establishes a spiritual practice.

This is not the way most people view the world, nor is it the way most institutions — whether political, economic, or religious — are set up. We're used to thinking of ourselves as self-sufficient and self-reliant individuals, whom the world is there to serve in various ways. It takes a leap of moral imagination to see beyond the narcissistic spirituality, economic greed, and political isolationism that follow from an undue emphasis on the individual, and see the possibility of a different future, one based on reciprocity and dignity.

Changing the world requires not only transforming political, economic, and religious institutions, it also requires changing the self-centered mindset that has mostly built the world as we now know it. Hard-edged hope acknowledges that the hardest part of changing the world is often changing our own attitudes and reshaping our own commitments.

There is perhaps no better example of hard-edged hope in this sense than former Israeli president and two-time prime minister Shimon Peres, who died in Tel Aviv on Wednesday at the age of 93. The outpouring of acclaim for Peres from world leaders has been remarkable — and not surprising. After all, Peres was a chief architect of the raid on the airport in Entebbe, Uganda in 1976, when Israeli Defense Force commandos rescued 102 hostages held by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Eighteen years later, Peres was one of the chief architects of the Oslo peace accords between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, along with then-Israeli President Itzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In his graveside eulogy, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose elder brother was the only Israeli commando killed in the Entebbe raid, called Peres one of Israel's greatest leaders and called the large turnout of world dignitaries for his funeral "a testament to his optimism, his quest for peace."

Writing yesterday in Quartz magazine, Gideon Lichfield notes the irony of Peres being eulogized as a "warrior for peace." Peres spent much of his career as one of Israel's chief hawks, building up the country's defense industry, creating its nuclear program, and for years championing the settlements in the occupied territories.

Lichfield writes, "His rebranding as a dove is thanks in no small part to his country's rightward shift since the peace process collapsed... If in his prime he was Israel's Hillary Clinton — competent, experienced, but not much liked — by the time he

assumed the ceremonial role of president in 2007, he was its Nelson Mandela, a grandfatherly embodiment of the country's best, most noble self."

As it happens, I was in Tel Aviv on Wednesday when Peres died. I spent several days at Tel Aviv University, where I have been asked to help develop the "Humanities in a Conflict Zone" initiative at Minerva Humanities Center. The explicit goal of the initiative is substantially to increase the number of Palestinian scholars studying humanities at Tel Aviv University, a predominantly Jewish institution.

In conversations during my time in Tel Aviv, I became more deeply aware of how much political landscape Peres traversed in his shift from military leader to peacemaker. And while it's true that the political climate in Israel has changed dramatically over the past 20 years, I believe that Peres also had to change his own self-understanding. The hard-edged hope with which he approached his role as president demonstrated a clear change in his own attitudes and a reshaping of his own commitments.

Four years ago, I met then-president Peres in his home in Jerusalem. I was visiting Israel with a small delegation of senior clergy from Manhattan, which included several Jewish rabbis, several Christian clergy, two imams, and one Unitarian Universalist. Peres was forthcoming about how his view of what was needed had changed over the years and how it was essential that Jews and Palestinians find a way to live together in peace. "We were not born to rule other people," he said.

The death of Peres represents the loss of a leader with moral imagination, who had the humility to see himself with honesty and the world with clarity. And he had the audacity to imagine how changing his own commitments would enable him to change his world for the better. Increasingly, the political world seems to favor megalomaniacs, whose view of reality is self-referential and whose tactics serve their own interests rather than the needs of other people.

Hard-edged hope thrives on moral imagination: the humility to see ourselves as we are and the world as it is. It thrives on the audacity to imagine ourselves as we could be and the world as it could be. It can thrive in Jerusalem and Ramallah, in Lahore and Kampala and Bhopal. And it can thrive at the corner of 80<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue in New York City.

Hard-edged hope begins with the humility to see ourselves as we are. For nearly two centuries, the members and friends of this congregation have become accustomed to thinking of All Souls as a notable congregation in Manhattan and a flagship congregation in our denomination. And while there is substance to both of these claims, they describe only part of the reality.

This is our fourth building as a congregation. And while the story that usually gets told is that we started in lower Manhattan and kept moving uptown as the population moved uptown, the truth is that we didn't leave our previous three buildings because the neighborhoods around them were empty. We left because we didn't take care of the buildings, and they started falling apart — and in one case, started falling down.

Our current sanctuary is 85 years old, and we haven't taken very good care of it either. It's not in danger of falling down, but the list of deferred building maintenance items, along with basic improvements needed to bring our sanctuary and facilities up to contemporary standards, now run upwards of \$5 million. The reality is that if we want to continue being a notable congregation in Manhattan and a flagship congregation in our denomination, we need to get serious about taking care of our spiritual home.

Hard-edged hope also requires the humility to see the world as it is. Many of us gathered here this morning grew up at a time when almost everyone regularly attended weekly worship, and people supported their houses of worship because that's what everyone did. But things have changed over the past few decades. According to a new poll published last week by the Public Religion Research Institute, the percentage of Americans not religiously affiliated has climbed to 25% overall and soared to 40% among young people. And many of those who remain affiliated don't regularly attend services or provide financial support.

Houses of worship across the country are feeling the devastating impact of these trends. While charitable giving by Americans has increased more than threefold over the past 60 years, giving to houses of worship has declined sharply. And while Unitarian Universalists rank high among religious communities in levels of education and income, we rank low in financial generosity.

On average, Unitarian Universalist congregations lag behind both their Christian and Jewish counterparts in congregational giving. And again on average, All Souls lags behind other Unitarian Universalist congregations in annual giving. By the way, I confirmed the accuracy of these statements with the Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, Director of Stewardship and Development at the Unitarian Universalist Association. Speaking of Unitarian Universalists, she said, "People with more give less, and we are people with more."

All Souls is in no danger of running out of money. But I've been working with our finance committee and executive directors over the past seven years to account accurately for our budget by not using capital funds to pay for operating expenses (thank you, Paige Daly, Ricardo Mestres, and Eric Lamm, among many others). It has become clear that All Souls has been running operating deficits for decades. We've made some progress toward reversing this trend, but not enough progress. The reality is that if we want to continue being a notable congregation in Manhattan and a flagship congregation in our denomination, we need to get serious about annual support of our spiritual home.

Hard-edged hope has the moral imagination to envision a different future, both for ourselves and everyone else. Through our capital campaign here at All Souls, I believe we can together meet the challenge of renovating this historic sanctuary so that it will be generously appointed, fully accessible to everyone, and suitable for year-round worship. Its climate will safeguard our Holtkamp organ and Steinway piano, which play vital roles in our worship. We can develop the capacity to provide for the spiritual

formation of contemporary seekers, who come through our doors looking for more of something, not less. They seek a welcoming community with a clear spiritual identity and a well-developed spiritual practice and ethical purpose. They seek a transformative community committed to gender justice, racial justice, social justice, and environmental justice. We can develop the fiscal strength to do all of these things, and do them well.

Hard-edged hope will happen here as we accept what is true, and from a place of honesty, envision the transformative possibilities of how we can grow and what we can become. To paraphrase Navin Muruga, our challenge is to look inward, identify our strengths, and understand the unique role we can play in changing what needs to be changed. Let us embark together on this great adventure.