

## A LETTER TO THE FUTURE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt won election for the first time in 1932 as our nation's president, the US economy had fallen deep into the throes of the Great Depression. An affable, witty, and optimistic man by nature, Roosevelt met the somber mood of the nation head on in his inaugural address. He said:

*This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.*

As it turned out, Roosevelt was right about our nation. It endured, and it revived itself. Eventually, it began to prosper once again.

Whether or not Roosevelt was right that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — well, that's a more complicated question. The British novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley, whose book *Brave New World* was published the year Roosevelt was first elected, had more specific fears about the future. Set in London in the year 2540, *Brave New World* imagines a future society completely given over to consumerism and pleasure. The state controls everything, but mind control and drug-induced euphoria leave the citizens too happy to care.

Seventeen years later, the British novelist George Orwell presented a different set of fears about the future in his novel *1984*, published in 1949. With the specters of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin as a backdrop, Orwell also foresaw a totalitarian future, but one suffused not with pleasure but rather with government propaganda and secret surveillance. Orwell taught his readers to fear being stalked by Big Brother, being accused of *thoughtcrime*, being taught to *doublethink*, and being told that two plus two equals five.

In 1985, one year after the year in which Orwell's novel was set, the media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman contrasted these two visions of the future in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman notes that Americans were pleased that the year 1984 had come and gone, and

Orwell's nightmarish prophecies had not come to pass. But in their smug satisfaction at having proved Orwell wrong, Postman says, Americans forgot about Aldous Huxley's older but equally-chilling prophecy in *Brave New World*. Postman writes:

*Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.*

*Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.*

*Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture... In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.*

Other than the obvious relevance of Postman's analysis to life in a nation headed by a reality television star, you may be wondering what else may have led me down this path of prognostications past. Here's the answer: in preparing for my sermon last week about, among other things, climate change as viewed from the perspective of Emily Dickinson, I came across a poem that stopped me dead in my tracks. I've been thinking about it ever since. It's written by the contemporary American poet Matthew Olzmann, and it's titled, "Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now." Olzmann writes:

*Most likely, you think we hated the elephant,  
the golden toad... and all variations  
of whale harpooned or hacked into extinction.  
It must seem like we sought to leave you nothing  
but benzene, mercury, the stomachs  
of seagulls rippled with jet fuel and plastic.  
You probably doubt that we were capable of joy,  
but I assure you we were...  
Absolutely, there were some forests left!  
Absolutely, we still had some lakes!  
I'm saying, it wasn't all lead paint and sulfur dioxide.  
There were bees back then, and they pollinated  
a euphoria of flowers so we might  
contemplate the great mysteries and finally ask,*

*“Hey guys, what’s transcendence?”  
And then all the bees were dead.*

My guess is that some part of Olzmann’s letter to the future will turn out to be true, as did parts of Aldous Huxley’s and George Orwell’s letters to the future. I wonder what letter you and I would write to Americans living in the year 2067 — or to citizens of the world, for that matter. About what would we express fear on their behalf? What would we feel a need to apologize for — to express regret for something we and our contemporaries did or didn’t do? For now, I’m going to leave these questions for each of us to ponder on our own.

My focus during our remaining time together this morning will be on this question: what would we express in a letter to a member or friend of All Souls in the year 2067? After all, we are in the middle of a capital campaign, and capital campaigns are about the future. They reflect how we view our institutional strengths and weaknesses in our time, and they express our commitment to strengthening All Souls in certain ways, based on our convictions about today and our fears about the future.

One conviction that animates this capital campaign is the conviction that, no matter what the future holds 50 years hence, the need for All Souls to be strong and vital will be at least as great as it is today. One fear that animates this campaign is the justifiable fear that this building, our fourth as a congregation in nearly 200 years, will continue to fall into disrepair and become unusable, which is the fate our three previous buildings suffered. We have resolved that this building will not suffer the same fate, at least not on our watch.

I’m deeply grateful for your generous and visionary response to this campaign thus far, which to date has raised nearly \$8 million of its \$10.85 million goal. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Over the past several months, teams of engineers and architects have scoured our facilities from top to bottom, creating a thorough and comprehensive picture of what’s needed to restore and renew our sanctuary and other facilities for the next 50 years. Perhaps not surprisingly, their findings have been somewhat worse than expected. Some of the difference has to do with the natural decline that has occurred since the last engineering study about 15 years ago.

But most of the difference has to do with one element that didn’t even appear on the list of major concerns 15 years ago: the roof. Instead of needing to replace a few pieces of slate here and there, as the previous report indicated, the entire roof now needs to be replaced, because the concrete panels underneath the slate are beginning to deteriorate and weaken. The whole truth is that the cost of restoring and renewing our sanctuary and the rest of our facilities will be more than we had initially thought, perhaps several million dollars more.

More details will be made available as the architects finalize the costs and the board sets priorities. In the meantime, you can help safeguard the current vitality of All

Souls by contributing to the fall pledge drive for our annual operating budget, which begins today.

Earlier this week, I shared the poem “Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now” with Audette Fulbright, our associate minister, and Eileen Macholl, our executive director. I told them I was planning to preach a sermon about a letter to members and friends of All Souls 50 years hence.

Unbeknownst to me, Eileen contacted John Leeker, the archivist at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, where the All Souls archives are housed. She asked him whether he could find any sermons preached at All Souls 50 years ago that spoke about the future. A couple of days later, three sermons by Walter Donald Kring, who served as senior minister of All Souls from 1955 to 1978, landed in my inbox.

One of the three was preached in November of 1971, and it’s titled, “After 152 Years — Where Are We Going?” As some of you may recall, the situation at that time in our nation was bad and getting worse. Inflation had skyrocketed, and President Nixon had instituted a wage and price freeze. In New York City, the economic problems of the time had led to a massive exodus of families from the city to the suburbs. Teetering on the brink of insolvency, New York City had also become virtually ungovernable. Governor Nelson Rockefeller had appointed a commission, headed by All Souls member Edward Costikyan, to produce a new city charter. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and these were desperate times.

In his sermon, Dr. Kring acknowledged that life at All Souls had always been deeply enmeshed in the life of this great city. He said, “As we look forward to the future in these rather bleak days, we can readily believe that the future of All Souls depends in great measure upon the future of our city. If our city is to continue to decline until decay becomes rampant, then the future of All Souls is also problematic.”

On the other hand, he continued, “If in some miraculous way the life of the city can be revived, the exodus of families from the city stopped, and if the city can be governed, then our future may be brighter than it often seems in these dreary days of pessimism.”

Dr. Kring went on to talk about the role All Souls should play during that challenging time. He noted that interest in religion had ebbed and flowed over the life of our nation, and that in 1971, most people in the US didn’t take institutional religion very seriously. Nonetheless, he said, “it seems to me that one of the good things that institutions do is to stay alive so that when they are needed they will be alive to perform their tasks.” He continued:

*It seems to me, therefore, that the Church of All Souls has a duty not only to be a church and not something else, but also we have the duty to endure to be here when people need us, to continually be a witness to the liberal spirit in religion in this city for as long as we can. Just to persist is one of the functions of the church. There were periods in the building of*

*the great Gothic cathedrals when no work was done, and then suddenly there was a spurt of piety and interest. I believe our first duty to ourselves and to our community is to persist and to endure as a religious institution.*

Dr. Kring and the members and friends of All Souls in 1971 made good on his letter to the future. On Roosevelt's terms, they endured the low ebb of interest in religion, and they kept All Souls strong until interest revived and All Souls could flourish once again.

For my part, I'm committed to ensuring that the institutional strength All Souls has enjoyed for the past several decades translates into the physical and financial strength that will keep this congregation strong for the next 50 years. With Dr. Kring, I believe I believe our first duty to ourselves and to our community is to persist and to endure as a religious institution. I refuse to write a letter to the future saying we were too busy to do what needed to be done, or too distracted, or too worried about other things.

George Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Aldous Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. My prayer is that what we hate will stiffen our resolve, and what we love will expand our sense of mission.

Fifty years from now, they will see that we were not ruined by what we love. Rather, they will see that we and many who came after us were saved by what we love. An enduring commitment to All Souls and all it stands for: this will be our letter to the future.