

THE GREAT WORK

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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In August, 1971, a few months before Richard Nixon nominated Lewis Powell, Jr. to the U.S. Supreme Court, Powell wrote a memo that launched a revolution. He was alarmed by the progressive social changes and political transformations of the 1960's, which he saw as a fundamental threat to the American system of free enterprise.

In his memo, Powell argued that American business should make a long-term commitment to reverse these changes through persistent efforts on campuses, in the media and the courts, and in the political arena. Inspired by the Powell memo, beer magnate Joseph Coors wrote the check that initially funded the Heritage Foundation. Today, Heritage has more than 500,000 individual members nationwide, an annual budget of \$80 million, and a staff of more than 600 people.

Heritage has spent the past fifty years developing a network of conservative individuals and organizations united by their opposition to government regulations — from taxes to gun control to environmental protections — and socially progressive causes like same-sex marriage and reproductive rights. Over the past several years, Heritage has served as a conduit — both from within its ranks and among its supporters — for many of the 4,000-plus federal appointments made by the President of the United States at the outset of each new administration. It's hard not to look at the personnel and policies of the federal government these days and not conclude that Heritage has ably fulfilled its purpose. While I often find myself at loggerheads with the aims of Heritage, I also find myself wishing progressive organizations were as well-organized, well-funded, and cohesively administered.

Institutions get founded with a clear purpose in mind. They are not ends in themselves, but tools to get something done. An institution turns out to be successful if it achieves its mission.

All Souls was founded 200 years ago this month as an open-minded revolt against a culture dominated by closed-minded religious orthodoxy. The founders insisted that the residue of ancient revelation had to be overlaid with knowledge gained from human reason and our experience of the natural world.

No one gave clearer voice to this sentiment than William Cullen Bryant, who was an active member of this congregation from 1825 until his death in 1878. Trained as a lawyer in Massachusetts, Bryant came to New York at the invitation of Catharine Sedgwick, one of America's leading novelists and a member of this congregation.

For much of the 19th century, Bryant was easily the best known poet in the nation, his fame equaled later in the century only by Emerson and Longfellow. Bryant also

served for five decades as the influential editor and eventually part owner of the *New York Evening Post*, which he unashamedly used as a bully pulpit to promote progressive social and political ideas.

Bryant was the first truly American poet. He wrote poems that celebrated the American landscape, acclaiming the world of nature as a source of divine inspiration.

In his poem titled “The Ages,” Bryant writes:

Look on this beautiful world, and read the truth
In [its] fair page; see, every season brings
New change, to it, of everlasting youth;

Not only is the book of nature our primary source of truth, Bryant insists, but the book remains open. Each season brings new truth and new inspiration.

If you had asked the founders of All Souls about the purpose of this new institution, they would’ve talked about faith that didn’t rely on a traditional interpretation of the Bible. They would have emphasized reason rather than revelation. They would have described the ultimate touchstone of faith as science, not scripture.

It’s hard not to look at our culture today and conclude that All Souls has ably fulfilled its purpose. The percentage of people in our nation today who believe that divine revelation trumps human reason is quite small and rapidly getting smaller. Even those who declare their ultimate loyalty to an ancient scripture fully embrace the benefits of modern science in their daily lives.

If the purpose for which All Souls was founded two centuries ago has mainly been fulfilled, what purpose justifies our existence and animates our work today?

Truth be told, we’re trying to do many different things. We’re trying to find ourselves and save ourselves — both individually and collectively. We’re trying to make the world safe for women, and people of color, and gay people, and poor people, and people who have been oppressed politically and marginalized socially. These are praiseworthy activities, and we pursue them each and all as best we can. But there are many non-religious institutions engaged in these activities as well.

The question for us on the cusp of our third century isn’t what we do on a day-to-day or even year-to-year basis. The question concerns the long run. What’s the overarching purpose that justifies our existence as a religious institution?

After President Kennedy challenged our nation in 1961 to put a man on the moon by the end of that decade, he visited NASA to see firsthand the work of the space effort. As he was touring the facilities, the President stopped a janitor in the hallway and asked the janitor what he did at NASA. The janitor replied, “Mr. President, I am working on putting a man on the moon.”

This past week, I participated in an academic conference on the life and legacy of Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest who was an historian of world religions. The conference coincided with the 10th anniversary of Berry’s death and the 20th anniversary of the

publication of his seminal book titled *The Great Work*. What Rachel Carson did for environmental science with her landmark book *Silent Spring*, Thomas Berry did for theology with his book *The Great Work*. Both saw a looming crisis ahead, brought on by the human devastation of planet Earth. Carson describes it mainly in scientific terms, while Berry describes it in theological terms.

He writes, “Right now, the human is a devastating presence on the planet. While ostensibly humans are acting for their own benefit, in reality they are ruining the conditions for their own survival and well-being.”

While Berry identified himself as a Christian and remained a member of the Passionist Order until his death, he became convinced that Christianity, more than any other world religion, had contributed to the destruction of planet Earth. The biblical mandate to subdue the earth and rule over it has had devastating consequences. Berry says, “The present disruption of all the basic life systems of Earth has come about within a culture that emerged from a biblical-Christian matrix. It did not arise out of the Buddhist world or the Hindu or Chinese or Japanese worlds or the Islamic world. It emerged from within our Western Christian-derived civilization.”

He continues, “When we first arrived as settlers, we saw ourselves as the most religious of peoples, as the most free in our political traditions, the most learned in our universities, the most competent in our technologies, and most prepared to exploit every economic advantage. We saw ourselves as a divine blessing for this continent. In reality, we were a predator people on innocent continent.” He adds, “In our efforts to reduce the planet to human control, we are, in reality, terminating the [present] era, the lyric period of life development on earth... There is now a single issue before us: survival.”

Because the Judeo-Christian tradition bears disproportionate responsibility for putting our survival at risk, Berry believed the work of saving the planet was first and foremost a religious task. Speaking of the work that lies ahead, Berry says, “The great work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.” In religious terms, he says, this means moving “from a purely human-oriented or personal-salvation focus in our religious concerns to one that embraces the universe in all its forms. This will require an immense shift in orientation, one that recognizes our emergence out of the long evolution of the universe and of Earth.”

According to Berry, this immense shift in orientation must include a number of features, among them the following four:

- Earth is a communion of subjects; it is not a collection of objects.
- The human is derivative, Earth is primary.
- “Progress,” to be valid, must include the entire Earth and all its component aspects. To designate human plundering of the planet as “progress” is an unbearable distortion.

- New religious sensitivities are needed, sensitivities that will recognize the sacred dimension of Earth and that will accept the natural world as the primary manifestation of the divine.

What am I doing at All Souls? I'm trying to save the world. Like the janitor at the space center, you and I accomplish this mission in various ways. But as we each carry out the particular tasks to which we have individually been called, we do so with a deep awareness of our collective great work — the work of literally saving the world.

All Souls seems particularly well-suited to this task, since we have seen the natural world as sacred and revelatory from the very beginning. We agree that, as Thomas Berry puts it, echoing William Cullen Bryant, “The natural world [should] once again become a scriptural text. The story is written not in any verbal text but in the very structure of the universe, in the galaxies of the heavens, and in the forms of the earth. These are phases in a great story that is the primary presentation whereby the ultimate mystery of things reveals itself to us. The sacred community will be recognized as including the entire universe.”

All Souls needs to thrive in its third century because our very survival depends upon it. We can't do this great work alone, of course, but neither can we assume that some other institution, made strong by some other group of people, will come along and do this work for us.

Berry concludes, “The great work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role we have chosen. It is a role given to us...by some power beyond ourselves for this historic task... The nobility of our lives, however, depends upon the manner in which we come to understand and fulfill our assigned role.”

Each human institution is sustained by people who believe in its purpose and give of their time, energy, and money to fulfill its mission. The \$80 million that will enable Heritage to pursue its purpose this year comes from individuals who remain committed to its work.

The same is true of All Souls. As we kick off our fall Annual Giving drive today, I hope you will support All Souls not only because it has helped you find yourself or save yourself, although I trust it has. I hope you will support All Souls not only because it has given you a spiritual identity and enabled you to become part of a caring community, although I trust it has. I hope you will support All Souls not only because it issues a prophetic call for human dignity at a time of increasing sexism, racism, bigotry, and xenophobia, although I trust it has.

Above and beyond all these necessary activities, I hope you will support All Souls because you know that together we have been called to accomplish the great work — the work of saving the world.