

## OTHERWISE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC  
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Earlier this week, my wife Holly Atkinson and I traveled to Takoma Park, Maryland, a near-north suburb of Washington, DC, to celebrate Zoe's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Some of you have known Zoe all her life. She was six weeks old when I preached my first sermon here at All Souls in June of 1993. In the early days, I would carry her around coffee hour draped over my arm like a sleeping tiger pup.

In many important ways, Zoe grew up here at All Souls. As a preacher's kid, she became accustomed to mingling among large groups of people, most of whom knew who she was and many of whom would pause to engage her in conversation. As a result, she learned to move easily through the world of adults — an ability that has served her well.

While being a preacher's kid has its advantages, it also has downsides. One Sunday morning when Zoe was in middle school, she came out of her bedroom to head off to All Souls dressed in jeans. Holly told her to go back to her bedroom and find something else to wear — jeans weren't appropriate Sunday morning attire.

"But my Sunday school teacher wears jeans to church," Zoe protested.

"I'm so sorry that he exercises poor judgment," Holly responded, "but you're not wearing jeans to church. You're the minister's daughter, and people hold you to a higher standard."

Zoe changed her clothes, and then she and Holly headed off to church.

Clothes weren't the only place the boundaries got pushed. Our deal with Zoe was that she needed to attend the religious education program regularly through the Coming of Age program in ninth grade, and then she could make her own decision about whether to continue. As Zoe progressed through middle school, it wasn't at all clear that she would do so.

Zoe entered the Coming of Age program with an attitude of decided indifference, intent on completing the program and gaining her freedom. A self-styled atheist (which to her dismay failed to provoke a negative reaction from me), Zoe's first assignment was to complete the "Belief-O-Matic" survey on beliefnet.com to discover which religion would best fit her beliefs. After completing the survey one afternoon, she came racing out of her bedroom holding a piece of paper high in her hand and shouting, "Papa, HomHom: I'm 100% Unitarian Universalist!"

Her experience in the Coming of Age class marked a point of fulcrum in her relationship to All Souls. Especially as part of the high school seminar, Zoe learned how important a community of support could be — one that had none of the competitiveness of school academics or the churlishness of social cliques. For several years, she anchored

the youth service with a closing homily. I must confess that when, unbeknownst to me, she appeared at the end of her first youth service dressed in my pulpit robe to pronounce the benediction, tears came to my eyes. I felt like an important bridge had been crossed.

From my perspective and Holly's as well, you as a congregation contributed substantially to the strong, capable, and confident young woman whose 30<sup>th</sup> birthday we celebrated this week. Today, as we honor those among us and around us who nurture the children of us all, I thank you for the part you played in nurturing Zoe. I'm especially grateful to Peter Green and Chelsea Vaughn, who led Coming of Age during Zoe's year in the program.

Of course, things could have turned out otherwise. When Zoe was three years old, her cousin Krista Beitzel — my sister's oldest child — died at age 11 after losing an eight-year battle with a brain tumor. For nearly a decade, our life as an extended family was defined by the rhythm of Krista's many surgeries. The experience remains a defining presence — and a defining absence — in our lives as a family and as individuals.

As those of you know who have read my books or listened to my sermons over the years, the experience of Krista's illness and death was also a defining point of fulcrum for me as a theologian. If God gets credit when things go well, then God must get blamed when things go badly. Theologians call this the theodicy problem — the problem of divine justice. I ultimately concluded that the course of human life is determined not by divine decree, but by forces of nature and consequences of human actions.

Truth be told, sometimes things go well in life, and sometimes they go badly. All too often, we don't get to make the call about which happens. We do what we can to influence outcomes, but nothing can insulate us from the vicissitudes of life.

I'm reminded of a poem by the late American poet Jane Kenyon, who was married to the poet Donald Hall for 23 years until her death from leukemia at the age of 48. The poem is titled "Otherwise."

Kenyon writes:

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.

At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

Earlier this year, Holly and I traveled to the Seattle area to visit my parents, now in their late 80's. They are slowing down — a euphemism we routinely employ to disguise the indignities of old age. My sister and her husband live nearby and check on them often and assist them as needed. When my sister and her husband plan to be away for an extended period, my brother and I now get asked to cover.

The University of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written about what she calls extreme dependency: situations in which children or adults have mental, physical, or social disabilities that require extensive and even hourly care from others. She points out that the way we think about the needs of children and adults with disabilities should not be treated as a special department of life, cordoned off from the needs of average people. Quite the contrary: when life as a whole is taken into account, dependency looks more like the rule than the exception.

Nussbaum concludes, “As the life span increases, the relative independence many of us enjoy looks more and more like a temporary condition, a phase of life that we move into gradually, and which we all too quickly begin to leave. Even in our prime, many of us encounter shorter or longer periods of extreme dependency on others — after surgery or a severe injury, or during a period of depression or acute mental stress.”

Most of us, especially those of us who are aging baby-boomers, don't like to hear that independence is a temporary condition, or that the payoff for being relentlessly self-reliant throughout life may be enduring loneliness in the end. Most of us would just as soon forget that freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. We long to be forever young, and free, and self-reliant, and independent.

Our physical dependence on others — whether intermittent in life or constant throughout it — serves as a reminder of our enduring emotional dependence. Occasionally we may be self-reliant and independent, but mostly we are not. We depend

on the nurture and compassion of others to help us make it through. None of us can survive alone, which is why our friends and family should never be taken for granted.

To be sure, most of this nurturing has traditionally been done by women — and still is, whether by family members, nurses, or elder caregivers. The gendered division of labor between men as authority figures and women as nurturers has historically been insisted on by patriarchy and buttressed by religion. The good news is that our recent progress to overcome the gender binary has begun to thwart this false construct. No matter your gender identity, you can either wield authority or provide nurture, depending on what's needed. It's everyone's duty to nurture those in need, whether at the beginning of life, the end of life, or somewhere in between.

In the words of our opening words this morning, we need others to nurture us and care for us throughout our lives: when we mourn and need comfort, when we are in trouble and afraid, when we are tempted and need to be recalled to our best selves again, when we wish to accomplish some great purpose and cannot do it alone, when in the hour of success we need someone to share our triumph, or in the hour of defeat to help us find courage, or at the end of life to prepare us for the journey.

Throughout our lives, we need to nurture the well-being of those around us. We also need to ask for help when we need it, which all of us do from time to time. None of us can make it on our own. When the time comes for you to rely on the strength of others, accept their support with gratitude.

Among other reasons, we gather as a congregation each week to remind ourselves of the elemental reality of our reliance on others. Our ability to walk the pathways of life on our own is, at most, a temporary condition. But even during the best of times, we need a community of people around us to support and nurture us. As a congregation of spiritual seekers, one created by values we treasure and ideals we pursue, we endeavor to hold each other in a divine embrace.