

Celebration of the Life of  
Michael David Gergen  
Saint Robert Bellarmine Church, Chicago Illinois  
by  
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First, on behalf of my family, I want to offer our most sincere thank you to all who are here today. Over the last week, in our shock and grief, my family and I have been humbled at the outpouring of love for us. It has reminded us of our incredible capacity to love and to be loved. We have found comfort in the calls, emails, texts, visits and shared tears. In the days, weeks and months to come, we will be looking to you for your continued support and we are confident that it will sustain us.

Many of you here today knew my father in some capacity—either personally or through my mom, brother or me. In times like these, we reflect on the person who has passed and the life they lived. As a teacher, it is my job to share what I know and so I would like to share with all of you what I know about my dad.

Michael David Gergen was one of 12 children born to Fred and Eleanor Gergen in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He was the 7th son of a 7th son. In historical terms, the 7th son had healing powers and was branded with a fleur de lis in France. My father embraced that symbol, which has many meanings both politically and religiously. Early on, my father knew that he wanted to be a priest. In fact, I have heard stories from his brothers that they referred to him as “Father Michael” because he would make them kneel down and pray regularly. As I found out just recently, my father had always wanted to join the Franciscan order. He had a deep faith and a commitment to social justice. For reasons no one knows, his path changed and he eventually met my mom and married what became the true love of his life, Margaret.

Young, in love and with that focus on social justice, he and my mom joined a movement that focused on building up communities around the world. This commitment found him and his young family moving from Minneapolis to Chicago, Atlanta and then to Taiwan. Living and working in the communities they served, my parents lived a life of service to others. In my early years, I learned from both my mother and father that the best gift

you can offer the world is to be of service to others. It fed his soul and gave him a sense of purpose.

In education we talk a lot about cultivating lifelong learners. My father was the epitome of what it means to be that. He loved to learn—nothing was off the table. He was constantly reading and learning anything that interested him. When we were growing up, anytime my brother or I asked him a question, his response was always, “well, you could always....LOOK IT UP!” He would never tell us the answer even when he knew it—and if our interest was high enough, we would look it up. His interests really had a broad range, but his passion was history—specifically European history. True to the quote by George Eliot, “It is never too late to be what you might have been”, my dad went back to earn his BA in his 50’s, then on to earn his Master’s in Medieval European History with a minor in Church History. In those years, I had never seen my dad so happy and so in his element. And I don’t think I had ever been so proud of him. Learning, for him, was as essential as food or water or even air. I am sure my love of history came from him and I loved discussing history and what I was doing in my classes with him.

Music and books and my mom sustained him. At any given point his nose was in one of the MANY books that line almost every inch of their home. Oftentimes, he would simultaneously listen to music and read books. The range of books varied as widely as his interests. A great number of them were history books that span various time periods and locations around the world. I am convinced there were enough books to fill a library. Music was equally important to him and he was gifted in that realm as well. His favorites were folk and jazz, but classical was his passion—including opera. Growing up the son of a musician, it was in his soul. He learned to play the piano and guitar by ear, only learning to read music later in life. At age 40, to mark this milestone, he wanted to learn to play the violin—and he accomplished this goal at the Poeple’s Music School in Uptown. I grew up listening to my father masterfully playing the piano. He was transported to a different world when making contact with those keys—and those of us who were lucky enough to hear him play were transported as well.

In addition to music, he was a gifted artist. For as long as I can remember and in virtually all places we lived, my dad had a place to create his art. If he wasn’t at a piano or reading a book, he was at a drafting table creating

beauty. He was a humble man and would probably not agree with me right now, but I think his ability to create, whether it was a sculpture, a drawing or some graphic art was second to none. Growing up, whenever I had some creative project I needed to do for school, he was always there with a helping hand. Over the years, I have asked him to tap into that creativity when Greta or Ellen needed something for school. SRB has never seen a better cow or Leonardo da Vinci costume before. He really was a true Renaissance Man!

My parents would have been married 52 years on June 6th this year. Their love and devotion to one another was something to behold. They weathered the many challenges life threw at them together and with a commitment and conviction that was unwavering. They doted on one another and cared for one another in a way that embodied their vows—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish—they lived those words everyday of their lives together. A close friend of my parents reflected on my father and my parents' partnership in a way that I could not articulate, so I would like to share her words with you. "In my experience, Michael was always quiet but present...He was extremely patient with a generous spirit. Michael had the wisdom to select a strong woman for a wife and then give her all the space she needed to soar. He was willing to share his wife with the world. Not many husbands could have supported a spouse in such a stressful job! At the same time, I'm sure Michael made that choice without hesitation. He was the indispensable anchor and the glue that held the family together through all the seasons of life. The rest of us were the beneficiaries of his selfless devotion to his family, community, and faith".

I want to tell you not just about my dad, Michael, but about my childrens' grandpa, better known as Papa. As many of you know, my father took care of both of my girls the first two years of their lives while I could focus on teaching other peoples' children. At age 62, he went back to changing diapers, wiping noses and soothing crying babies. This may have been his greatest gift to me and to my girls. The bond he forged with Greta and Ellen cannot be matched. He relished every moment he had with his "liebchens" as he would lovingly call them. He loved to take them to the park and explore the world through their eyes. He was able to participate in their growth without the common stresses of parenting. The bond that developed between my girls and my dad will always fill me with comfort and peace.

In the past few days as we have shared the news with family and friends, the word that keeps coming up as people describe my dad is KIND and THOUGHTFUL. They are simple words, but not always simple actions. To give of yourself without expectation of anything in return is what my father did. When a need arose, he was there. Often quietly and steadfastly, my father would roll up his sleeves and find a way to make things right and if he couldn't make things right, he would work to make things better. I know that is his legacy and one for which I hope people will remember him for years to come.