

Celebration of the Life of Michael David Gergen  
Unitarian Church of Evanston  
Evanston, Illinois

by

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It is my honor to be here today to celebrate the life of my brother and friend, Michael David Gergen. In reflecting on his life, it's not possible to present his complete life story. There are many stories in Michael's life that I leave to others to tell. My purpose is to tell you something of my brother from the perspective of his younger brother. One who deeply admired and dearly loved him. I don't know that Michael ever knew how much I admired him, trusted him, and wanted to be like him. I don't know that I ever really told him how much he meant to me; how much his friendship, wise counsel, and love meant to me - not only in kinship as we were growing up but more important, in the friendship we shared in our adult lives.

Michael and I grew up in a large family. Our parents brought 12 children into the world over a period of 20 years. Most people tend to think of large families as one cohesive unit. Something like the ideal portrayed in movies and in television shows. The reality is that because of the age difference between the oldest and youngest children, our family was more like a series of smaller families allied by age, common interest, and popular culture.

Michael was the youngest member of the Dan, Mary Jane, and Michael group. I was the eldest member of the Tom, Ed, and George group generally referred to as the "Three Little Kids." For the most part, each group was closest to its own members. Those were the people you hung out with, fought with, laughed, and cried with; the people you trusted with your dreams and secrets; and to whom you gave mutual aid and support in times of need.

One of my earliest memories of Michael as a child is what I call his command performance. He used to perform an acrobatic routine to entertain the kids in the neighborhood. The routine's finale was unusual. It started with him sitting on his bed and crossing his legs in kind of a modified yoga lotus pose. He then flipped onto the floor with his legs still crossed and stood on his head supporting himself upright with the palms of his hands. He made it look effortless and easy. My friend Ricky Wolf bet me his bag of Fritos that Michael couldn't do it. The Fritos were delicious, and yes, I shared them with Ricky and Michael.

I have a distinct memory of Michael as an upperclassman at our grade school, Saint Luke's in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He wore a long dark wool coat. I would sometimes see him on the playground before school and at recess walking around breaking up fights. His actions as peacemaker reminded me of Spencer Tracy as Father Flanagan in the movie "Boy's Town." To my knowledge, Michael was never involved as a participant in a playground fight. He never had to be. He resolved disputes simply by talking. It was not a surprise to me that after Saint Luke's, he moved on to the seminary. Beginning with his third year he was a boarding student. Aside from holidays and occasional family visits to the Nazareth Hall seminary, I rarely saw Michael for the next four years.

From an early age, Michael found inspiration in the life of Francis of Assisi. I think it was that inspiration he interpreted as a calling to the priesthood. Even though he chose a different path for his life, the inspiration of Saint Francis remained with him and guided him throughout his life.

I've learned two things about Franciscan values. First, these values can be understood as a distinct theory of ethics and social responsibility. Second, my brother Michael was a living example of these values. That's just who he was. It's likely he may have studied Franciscan values as a seminarian. I may be wrong, but I don't believe he simply read about these values or sat through a lecture and suddenly decided he needed to adapt his life to these ideals. I think he may have been born with these values. They were

part of him his entire life: Well before he entered and well after he left the seminary. I deeply admired the man he was. He was the most genuine soul I've ever known.

My kinship with Michael began when I was born. My close friendship with him came much later. The year I graduated from high school; Michael left the seminary. We spent that summer together playing music, exploring the arts, discussing history, theology, politics, and world events. We experienced the basis of a friendship that would last the rest of our lives. At the end of that summer, we both found jobs and returned to school at the University of Minnesota. I learned a lot from Michael that summer. I believe the summer we spent together changed me much more than it did him. He had bigger changes coming over the following couple of years.

I don't recall the exact circumstances, but sometime during the following year, Michael met Margaret. I remember many good times in their apartment on Stevens Avenue in downtown Minneapolis. I liked Margaret immediately. They were different people but shared the same vision of their responsibilities to make the world better. I thought they were perfect for each other. They were both smart, committed, kind, and in love. They were married. They started a family with the additions of Paul and Teresa. They set off on an adventure that would take them across the country and to the other side of the world. I missed them during those years but was happy to reconnect with them in Chicago. We have remained close ever since. I am particularly grateful for the love, generosity, thoughtfulness, and kindness they showed to me and my family.

I have to say a few words about a dish my family refers to as "Uncle Michael Chop Suey." It was one of Michael's favorite dishes growing up. He made modifications to my mother's recipe and produced his own distinct version. "Uncle Michael Chop Suey" quickly became a favorite in my family. He graciously prepared and served it during visits he and his family made to Minnesota. It's my favorite comfort food. I often craved it between visits.

To satisfy my cravings, I thought I should learn to make it myself. It looked simple to me. Michael encouraged my efforts and over time I made many attempts to copy his signature dish. I was disappointed by my results but not discouraged. It's true he set a very high standard, but I had confidence that recreating the magic he worked with simple ingredients was still possible. I filmed Michael several times making this dish; took notes and questioned him at every step of his process; duplicated the exact ingredients, measures, and process he used. Something was still missing. My family refers to my results as "Dad's Chop Suey." I've never achieved "Uncle Michael" results in the kitchen and finally realized it was simply not possible. The secret ingredient missing in all my attempts was Michael.

I believe it is our capacity to experience great love that makes us vulnerable to suffer great sorrow. Our grief in the loss of a loved one is equal in proportion to the joy we experienced from loving and being loved by that person. Despite our sense of overwhelming loss, we can never truly lose those we love. They are an inseparable part of us. They are always with us. Their influence on our lives and in our memories makes us who we are and who we will be. Wisdom and experience tell us that, in time, it is our love that will heal the grief of our loss.

I've thought a lot about my brother over the past months. In celebrating his life, I struggled with the responsibility to find words to adequately express what he meant to me and to so many people - words that would do justice to him in truly celebrating his life.

I've been asking myself: What is the measure of a life well-lived? Where do you find it? It's not in the accumulation of material goods and money. Some people exhaust their lives and souls chasing riches. Many waste precious time living self-absorbed lives preoccupied with accumulating more. It's not on a resume of occupations, degrees, and titles. Neither is it simply a matter of noting a person's memberships, affiliations, and organizations.

All these things certainly provide the opportunity for a life well lived. By themselves, however, they reflect nothing of a person's character or values. They require no responsibility to make other lives better by providing resources, influence, and action. The true measure of a life well lived lacks a precise objective measurement.

It does reveal itself, however, in the hearts of those we love and who love us. It's in the memories of those we have touched and have touched us. It resides in that piece of a person's spirit inherited by our families and friends. It continues long after we leave this world. It provides an example to be remembered, cherished, and followed. A life well lived can never be forgotten. It continues to speak to us in tender words of remembrance that inspire and guide us.

Michael's life provides an example of how to live well: Follow your passions, be kind to people, take time to laugh and to cry, but not too much crying. If you get knocked down, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and putting one foot in front of the other, keep moving forward. Reach out and help people who need help. Affirm the unique worth of every person. Appreciate the arts, have reverence for the natural beauty that surrounds us. Have faith, and trust that God will see you through the rough patches. Remember that love can't fix everything, but it gives you a better chance to find solutions that allow you to grow and prosper. Always remember the good times but take time to make new memories. Have adventures, take reasonable risks, have fun, and most of all, love your family.

In Michael's honor, I wish to share with you the Prayer of Saint Francis. This prayer says more about my brother, and the life he lived, than anything else I could possibly say about him:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;  
Where there is hatred,  
Let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy;

And all for thy mercy's sake.  
O divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.