



“This I believe” Faith Statement

Stephen Jones

Since February 9 of this year, I have learned so much about my life and specifically the end of my life. During those four months I turned 72, and Suzy and I have celebrated our 49th wedding anniversary. You’d think that I could have learned more through those years of classes, teaching, coaching, living, through the many joys and sometimes tragic moments of family members, students, teachers, and friends. But I was rarely introspective, certainly not leading a contemplative life. I felt good, full of energy, and I thought that of course I’d live to be an old man.

But in fact, I received a whole new perspective on life at a hospital near Albuquerque, New Mexico. Packing our bags at the home of friends with whom we used to teach in Buffalo New York, I had a seizure; I lost awareness of who and where I was. I garbled my speech, felt dizzy, didn’t know what day it was, and didn’t know who was the President of the United States. The next day after an MRI, I learned that I had a brain tumor but in typically optimistic manner I convinced myself easily that it would be benign.

After it was surgically removed in Asheville a couple of weeks later, I learned that it not only was aggressively malignant but terminal as well. The median time of life after diagnosis was fourteen months.

Now that’s a wake-up call!

Long story made short, I have completed six weeks of radiation and chemotherapy and have remained mobile and relatively strong through the period. I’ve been told that instead of 6 to 14 months of life, I could have 2-3 or even more years on this good earth. But what does this have to do with what I believe?

It's almost a cliché to say that it's important to enjoy and appreciate each day we are given since we know that the future is uncertain. For eleven years in Manhattan's All Souls Church, Suzy and I listened to Reverend Forrest Church say, "This is the day you have been given. Make the most of it as we walk together in peace toward truths that set us free."

I didn't start to appreciate Forrest's "LIVE THIS DAY TO THE MAX, IT MIGHT BE YOUR LAST" message until after the surgery when I learned the tumor was terminal.

My anger toward the injustices that we are born with and that surround us in this state and country is growing, but I am getting closer to myself and to this deeply caring congregation and its social justice programs. As a result, when this sudden prognosis of terminal cancer came, I was ready and so were you. I said from the beginning that I didn't fear death and that I wouldn't take extraordinary steps to prolong my life. I had learned from Forrest Church:

Death is not a curse to be outwitted no matter the cost. Death is the natural pivot on which life turns, without which life as we know it could not be. When we can no longer hold on with purpose, to let go is to die with dignity and grace."

— [Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*](#)

I expect to stay involved in the congregation and am now in a Covenant Group and on the Earth and Social Justice Committee; also I intend to focus on environmental projects in the area to work with Asheville GreenWorks and the City toward the creation of a new park on Beaucatcher Mountain behind Mission Hospital.

With the diagnosis of a seizure, I lost my driver's license for six months, but Suzy and friends have driven me all over town. In addition I have my freedom and independence through the purchase of an electric bike. In addition to giving me much-needed exercise, it delivers me from Town Mountain to downtown, the River Arts District and even to West Asheville and Carrier Park. Maybe I'll get my driver's license back in August but I'll still use the bike when the weather is good.

The thrill of riding down Old Toll Road near the Grove Park Inn absorbing the aromatherapy scents of spring honeysuckle cannot be topped.

In his book *Life Lines*, Forrest Church recalls a childhood prayer his grandmother said to him: “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” As a former Episcopalian I remember those words vividly, kneeling with hands clasped beside my bed. However Forrest gave me a whole new take on it and on life by inverting the prayer to read: “What would it mean, if I should wake before I die.”

That is the bottom line of what I believe. I want to wake before I die, and I don’t have forever to do that.

I want to wake to the larger world, and believe that I am moving in that direction with the love and support of my dear Suzy, my larger family, my friends in Asheville and elsewhere, and this congregation. I believe that I can wake before I die by committing to intimacy and honesty in small groups, to deep trusting friendships, to even greater love within my family and to service within this congregation and within the larger community.