

Complete Texts of Addresses at the Gomes Memorial Service

Derek Bok: “Someone who touched us all”

THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS AGO, I announced a search for a new Minister in Memorial Church, and listed the following qualities needed for the position:

- An unusually effective pastor who awakens a wide interest in religion.
- A gifted and inspirational speaker.
- A distinguished teacher and scholar.
- Someone with a genuine concern for the religious needs of a diverse and pluralistic community.

I remember adding that this combination could very well be impossible to achieve in full measure.

The odds of achieving it seemed especially bleak in the condition that Harvard found itself in in the early 1970s. Many students were sullen, at odds with the University, the society, and the government. The faculty felt bruised and divided following the upheavals of the late 1960s. Attendance at Memorial Church had dwindled to historically low levels. In these circumstances, it was much easier to see why ministers might fail than to imagine how they could succeed. The challenge seemed especially daunting for a young man just 31 years old and only five years out of Harvard Divinity School.

It would have been tempting to respond by trying to appeal to students by leading social protests. or arranging popular events such as jazz workshops in the church basement. Yet two seldom-noticed facts suggested that this would have been a fatal misreading of the student psyche. First of all, despite much student criticism of Harvard courses for their irrelevance to the burning social issues of the day, it was curious that by far the largest College course during this entire period was John Finley’s class on Athens in the fifth century B.C.

The second telltale item in those times of disaffection was that many more students than ever before had begun to attend Harvard Commencements with their families. These two facts seemed to suggest that students did not want a minister just like them. What they wanted more, even as they challenged so many prevailing customs, was to retain an anchor to the past, to tradition, to larger enduring values they could share.

Peter must have understood all this. Certainly, he never led a protest or held a jazz workshop in Memorial Church. What he did instead was remain completely and utterly himself. Of course, it helped that being oneself for Peter meant exhibiting a most unusual combination of qualities— a commanding voice and presence, a striking eloquence, a warm personality, a love of Harvard with its history and traditions, and, not least, his sheer improbable uniqueness: a Republican in a sea of Democrats, a gay clergyman in a straight society, a Puritan from Plymouth descended from slaves.

I remember two things in particular among Peter's many accomplishments. One was his service as chair of a committee to consider the demand that Harvard create a Third World Center. Black students were pressing hard for such a Center—an oasis where they could find a temporary respite from the white world in which they found themselves. Their plea was eloquent and would have been easy to accept. Yet Peter, knowing the University and its deeper purposes, realized that a Third World Center would contradict something fundamental to Harvard. He understood that the whole point of assembling a student body of great diversity—from cities and farms, from America and abroad, from every religious, cultural, and economic background—was to bring together people of all kinds to learn from one another. Appreciating this, he did not take the easy road; he called instead for a foundation to celebrate the many different cultures at Harvard, rather than a separate sanctuary for a particular group. Since then, under the leadership of Allen Counter, that is exactly what the Harvard Foundation has provided through its many projects and its exuberant yearly festival of dances, music, cooking, and much else from countries and cultures around the world.

Peter's second accomplishment was to try to build a community out of Harvard's vast collection of busy people intent upon their particular interests and ambitions. Such a thing was hardly possible, of course. But Peter came as close as any single individual could, not just through his ministerial duties and his role on ceremonial occasions, but through his service for Phillips Brooks House, for the Signet Society, for Lowell House—by his weekly teas, his Thanksgiving dinners for students, his open houses at Commencement. As the years went by, he became, as much as anyone, the ubiquitous presence, the face of the institution, an iconic personality, a unifying figure whose love of the University helped us all to appreciate our being here even more.

And so, in celebrating Peter's life, we honor a man who not only succeeded in fulfilling all of the exacting qualifications for his position, but someone who contributed to our community in multiple ways beyond any reasonable expectation. He leaves a void that will be very hard to fill—someone who touched us all and whose like we may never see again.

**Drew Gilpin Faust: “It is fitting that a man
who so relished tradition would become one himself”**

IT IS HEARTENING to look out and see so many people here, remembering a man who meant so much to us all.

Peter was an original in so many ways. Over the past weeks, we have remarked on his complexities. An African-American from Plymouth. A Baptist at Memorial Church. A Republican in Cambridge. Out of the closet and out of the box. I always sensed that he prized these antinomies, that he cultivated them. There seemed to be a bit of relish when, to someone perplexed by his character, Peter would simply say that he was who he was,

and it always made sense to him. There was a kind of music in Peter, a symphony of points and counterpoints. He rewarded close listening from a careful ear.

We also remember Peter's appreciation for tradition and his deep historical sense. Peter and I shared a love for the past.

Peter taught a course on "The History of Harvard and Its Presidents," and was one of the first to congratulate me on the announcement of my appointment as president of Harvard. He came to my office, then still at Radcliffe, dressed in full regalia. It was for him a very serious occasion. "Madam," he said in that voice of his, "madam, I come to pledge my fealty."

It is fitting that a man who so relished tradition would become one himself. It is so difficult for me to imagine Memorial Church, or spiritual life on campus, or indeed Harvard as an institution, without his presence.

Peter seemed made for his role. But as he knew, even the most venerable traditions are alive, shifting, ready to surprise us with something new.

The night Peter left us, I shared the sad news with Derek Bok. And Derek recalled, as he has today, the turmoil of Harvard in the early 1970s, which Peter lived through as an assistant minister. In those days, the future of Memorial Church was uncertain. Derek recalled to me just how radical a choice it was to put Peter in the leadership of Memorial Church. In the secular reaction to the faith of the 1950s, few could imagine a minister at Harvard who quoted the scriptures by memory—or who would dare assert the universal significance of their message.

Peter dared. He at once broke from tradition, and confirmed its power. Over the past forty years, under Peter's guidance, spirituality has flourished at Harvard. The number of different religious traditions represented in our community has grown rapidly, as has curiosity about faith—whether by seekers or by those interested in religion as a cultural phenomenon. Memorial Church is more central to the Harvard community than it has been in many, many years. Thanks to Peter.

Who was surprised, then, that when Harvey Cox asserted the Hollis professor of divinity's centuries-old grazing rights in Harvard Yard, that Peter would be there with Harvey and the cow? These were moments we had come to expect and to love. A moment that vindicated ancient liberties, but offered with joy and a bit of irreverence. Reverential irreverence.

In his appreciation for historical things, Peter would have told us that the experience of loss is universal, though its performance is deeply influenced by the times. I understand this as a scholar of the Civil War, but with Peter's loss the lesson was more poignant. After learning of his death, I found myself needing to hear Peter's voice. I found him online: archived interviews, sermons on YouTube, and his magnificent triumph on Colbert. To hear a friend at the moment of loss is something quite new.

I found Peter's interview with Charlie Rose especially striking. A bit into the conversation, he spoke of his memorial plans, and he wanted a day filled with hymns—the music of the Bible he loved so much. It is so comforting to hear those notes today. On Charlie Rose, Peter also spoke of the Bible's most demanding injunction: to love others. It is so hard to love other people, Peter said with a smile. They are so unlovely, so unlovable.

Peter loved so freely, and was so loved in return. We will miss him.

Deval Patrick: “Peter Gomes may have been the freest man I have ever known”

PETER USED TO RECOUNT a story about our first meeting. It was in 1977, when I was a senior in the College and an applicant for the Michael Rockefeller Traveling Fellowship, whose selection committee the Reverend Professor chaired. He used to joke about how each of the proposals from each of the applicants was wildly impractical, and that the committee's job was then to consider whether failure would be a useful growth experience for the candidate. He kindly observed that I had, as he put it, a certain “shining” quality that the committee felt they wanted to reward.

I love that account. But that is not actually the first time we met. That was just the first time Peter bothered to notice me.

The first time we actually met was two years before, when I was a sophomore and a guest at Sparks House for one of his famous Wednesday afternoon teas. A friend of mine had been to a Sunday service here in Memorial Church, where the general invitation to tea was issued from the pulpit every week. And my friend thought we should go, as a way of assuring that our Harvard experience was complete.

The scene was classic: lots of eager and awkward undergraduates in blazers and rep ties surrounding the learned professor. Yet there was Peter, utterly *original*. He was a black, Republican Harvard professor. Years later, come to find out he was gay, too. He wore tweeds and silk pocket squares; and was evidently a serious collector of nineteenth-century American and English landscapes. In time I learned that he loved antiques, long, multi-course dinner parties with sparkling conversation, and rich old ladies. He described himself as an Afro-Saxon.

Over the last 36 years of friendship, as Peter helped me grow into a man (and as he became the age I thought he was at that first tea), I have come to understand that Peter enjoyed confounding people. In a recent unpublished interview he said, “I’m a Republican but I’m not a reactionary, and I never liked George Bush.... Yes, I’m a Christian, but I’m not a fundamentalist.... Yes, I’m an African-American, but I don’t necessarily think that Jesse Jackson is all that there is. So that I have never in my own

mind been bound by any of these categories that others happily impose on me for their convenience, not my convenience.”

He firmly planted his spirit and his tastes in whatever disparate places suited him, mindful of what others thought, but entirely and stubbornly on his own terms. By refusing to be put in anybody else’s box, Peter Gomes may have been the freest man I have ever known.

There was a method (or perhaps he would call it a benefit) to this, too. In that same interview he said, “when I go to preach in black churches, they know very well that I am a distinguished black preacher, because I hold a distinguished post. But I am also gay, which is something the black church has not yet figured out how to deal with. So they will listen. Same thing when I preach in white pulpits. There’s no doubt that I’m black, but I don’t sound black in the sense that they have been accustomed to hearing black preachers, so they don’t quite know what to do with that. So they will listen. My anomalies,” he said, “make it possible to advance the conversation.”

I can hear him making that comment, just as I can see him in countless sermons from this pulpit, in dinner conversation, in his public and private life—with that twinkle in his eye, that mischief in his message and his manner, advancing the conversation. We all listened. We listened to the music of his voice, his beautiful choices of words. We listened to his stories, from scripture or from the Square. We listened to his tales from Cambridge, England, or his beloved Plymouth, about undergraduate anxieties, or the radical leadership of Jesus Christ. We listened and we learned, about life, faith, love and loss, but mostly about how to be better people.

By his example, Peter taught us all something about integrity. Not just in the sense of moral rectitude and doing right by others, but in the sense of knowing yourself and trusting your inner compass. In a world full of fraud and pretenders, of showmen masquerading as teachers or preachers, and panderers passing themselves off as leaders, Peter was a man of courage. He was himself, without labels and without apologies.

People of all types and kinds were drawn to that. And they listened.

He could be very funny, especially when he was being irreverent—which was often. Unless you know church people, Peter would shock you with how much he loved to gossip. I used to enjoy the way he would raise money for the church, by telling us how much better we would all feel about ourselves if we thought hard about the biggest contribution we could imagine making—and then add a zero.

He could also be sweet and protective, in a very private way, like the way he earnestly counseled me against running for governor (because he thought it would break my spirit), and then switched his registration to Democrat so he could cast a helpful vote for me in the primary.

He respected his father. But he adored his mother in the most generous, open, and infectious way.

Peter loved Harvard. He said, “This Harvard world is my world. I know it. I understand it. I’m a New Englander—I was brought up in this environment. I think I can navigate reasonably successfully through it. . . . I understand how this world works, and I’ve by and large made it work for me reasonably well. I’ve never felt either out of place or compromised by the position I hold in the institution in which I hold it, largely because I like the institution in which I work. I don’t feel myself alien or pressed by it no matter what others may think. And I think I can get it, through whatever small inputs I might have, to be slightly better than it otherwise might be.”

After a little interlude he added, “I am after all a professor, which is as immortal as you get in this place!”

Of course, what he actually believed is that graduates of Harvard never die, they just turn into buildings. Maybe. There seems no truly adequate way to honor his extraordinary life and contributions at this moment, with the depth of his loss still so fresh, still so unimaginable, and still so aching. A great son of this University and of Plymouth, a teacher and preacher for a generation, a leader, friend, ferocious fundraiser, lovely conversationalist. There will be plaques and maybe buildings in his honor. But there will be lessons about integrity and courage that may be more lasting, have greater impact, and matter more. They may be the things that leave us all “slightly better than we otherwise might be.”

I sometimes worried whether Peter was ever lonely. Yes, there were the rounds and rounds of dinner parties and book tours and lectures. There were lots and lots of meetings, for the church, for the Divinity School, for the University, for the Pilgrim Society. But as I grow older, and especially as I spend more time in my current job, I see how lonely public life can be. I love my job just as Peter loved his, but I understand the relentless demands, and the liberties others take on your privacy, the way you are sometimes made to feel that you are invited for the entertainment of others, rather than the pleasure of your company.

But he would have loved that so many friends, colleagues, and admirers turned out this morning. He would have appreciated being appreciated for his life and his service. He would have chided us for the relative austerity of this service, and made some comment about the fact that it was probably planned by Episcopalians concerned not to be late for lunch. But he would have loved having us all together, listening.

In that interview I have been reading from, Peter said, “I am not by nature an optimist, but I am by nature hopeful. And the distinction is one on which I spend a great deal of time in my life. An optimist is someone who expects everything to turn out okay and usually is destroyed when it doesn’t. Somebody who is hopeful has the long view, and is willing to work through all sorts of temporary misfirings and setbacks and difficulties,

because in the long run you are hopeful for a better outcome. So I am a creature of hope, rather than of mere optimism. And I think that's a transition, a mature transition.”
“Faith,” he said, is the conviction that hope works.”

For Peter's sake, for the sake of our dear preacher and teacher and friend, may we all continue to listen.