
TRIBUTES & HOMILY *from the*
Memorial Service &
Celebration of Life for
Michael J. Gerson



Michael J. Gerson

1964 - 2022

TRIBUTE FOR MICHAEL GERSON

Joshua Bolten

When Dawn offered me the great privilege of speaking at this service, my first reaction was a feeling of inadequacy. How could I possibly write a tribute worthy of the best writer I have ever known?

My second reaction was a selfish one. “Dammit,” I thought; “I wanted Mike to speak at my memorial service.”

What a gift Michael Gerson had. And what a gift Michael Gerson was.

Mike’s passing engendered beautiful, powerful tributes in, among others, The Atlantic and the National Review. In the Washington Post, where Mike’s columns appeared for 15 years. From the ONE Campaign, where Mike served as a Fellow for 10 years. On PBS, for which Mike was a frequent commentator.

I commend to you all of these superb tributes. Each reflects on Mike’s passing from a different angle, but they all tell a similar story of one of the finest writers and thinkers of our time – of a gifted man with a great heart, who lived a consequential life.

Let me tell you about my experience of Michael Gerson:

We met almost exactly 24 years ago, in early 1999. Mike and I were among the first non-Texans to decamp to Austin for the nascent George W. Bush 2000 Presidential Campaign. I was policy director. Mike was chief speechwriter.

Most of that period is a blur in my memory, but I still see in my mind’s eye crystal clear pictures of Mike: I remember a brilliant artist, profoundly passionate about his craft and deeply invested in its success.

I remember that the best place to look for the artist was a coffee shop near campaign headquarters. There Mike would be, gracefully disheveled and oblivious to his surroundings, attacking a yellow pad with bold slashes, like an angry calligrapher.

When done with his work, Mike would eventually appear at the office, unaware that his lips had been stained blue by the ink of a pen whose top he had chewed too hard.

I remember a man confident in his beliefs and his ability, yet too nervous to watch candidate Bush deliver the speeches he had crafted. This was awkward, because shortly after each speech, Gov. Bush had a habit of calling Mike to compare notes on how it went.

I was touched when Mike confided this secret to me and asked that I call him immediately after each speech to give a readout that might make his post-speech conversations with Gov. Bush a little more credible.

I remember on occasional Saturdays, two beautiful little boys with lots of hair, rolling down the halls of 301 Congress Avenue like noisy tumbleweed. Mike tried to be stern but was too soft and loving to enforce discipline. Dawn, fortunately, was there to keep order.

I remember a time, early in the 2000 campaign, when Mike's job might have been in jeopardy. Yes, the words Mike was composing for candidate Bush were elegant and powerful, but they did not sound like Bush. Too intellectual, some said. Hifalutin. Inauthentic.

Having learned of this discontent, Mike came to me with a copy of a memoir by Ted Sorenson, John F. Kennedy's renowned speechwriter. Mike showed me a passage (which proved compelling when shared with our campaign leadership) describing a similar period in Sorenson's early relationship with JFK. Though Sorenson's words did not sound like JFK or really any natural person, Sorenson argued – successfully – that he was helping JFK find his presidential voice.

Indeed, over the ensuing 7 years, Mike did precisely that for candidate Bush and then President Bush. He helped Bush find and elevate his presidential voice – at times practical, at others poetic; at times defiant, at others healing. And always hopeful, always authentic.

If history is fair, I believe it will record their partnership as among the finest between a president and speechwriter.

As compelling as Mike's words were, he was always much more than a wordsmith. He was an ideas guy – an advocate for justice, an activist with deep moral convictions.

Long before he crafted the language to announce some of President Bush's boldest policies – including on education, immigration, and global health that collectively came to be known as compassionate conservatism – Mike had championed the ideas.

Nowhere was Mike's mark more important than on President Bush's PEPFAR program, the global AIDS relief initiative that, 20 years on, has saved 25 million lives in Africa.

President Bush himself, in his affectionate statement on Mike's passing, said this: "Mike harnessed the power of the pen to not just write about good policy, but drive it. He was a key catalyst behind the lifesaving PEPFAR program."

Rockstar Bono – a dear friend of Mike's and coconspirator in radical good works like PEPFAR – captured the essence of Mike's role. In Bono's words: "Mike not just invites our better angels . . . he enlists them."

A close White House colleague likewise captured Mike's influence this way: "I found myself striving for my actions to be worthy of Mike's words."

Though not exactly a party animal, Mike was usually very entertaining to be around – often hilariously caustic. But make no mistake, Mike Gerson was always on a mission, enlisting everyone's better angels in a greater cause.

Over the years that we served together in the White House, Mike and I agreed on most things. But when we disagreed, he gave no quarter.

I recall one bitter argument in particular. In December of 2004, Chief of Staff Andy Card convened in his West Wing corner office several of the President's most senior advisors to hear the Budget Director (me) present highlights of the budget I was proposing to the President.

Mike exploded. While the President's signature global health programs would be expanded, much larger domestic programs for the underprivileged would be limited. Mike called it a heartless and shocking betrayal. He demanded revisions, which, in the name of fiscal and political prudence, I rejected.

After the meeting, I had hoped to catch Mike for a calmer conversation, but couldn't find him. That afternoon came the distressing news that Mike Gerson (barely 40 years old) had suffered a heart attack. We waited anxiously for a report from the hospital, but no word came.

Finally, much later in the afternoon, an email popped up on my screen. It was from Mike. There was no subject line, but the text was short and clear: "I told you the Budget was too shocking."

Two weeks before Mike died, I had the privilege of visiting him in his hospital room for a private, farewell conversation. I asked Mike: "In your entire body of work – speeches, sermons, columns, essays, books – of which are you most proud?"

As Mike mulled the question, I ticked off a few of my favorites:

- a 1999 campaign speech on education (for which Mike coined the phrase "the soft bigotry of low expectations");
- President Bush's speech in this Cathedral, 3 days after 9/11;
- the 2003 State of the Union address, with its surprise announcement of the PEPFAR program;
- President Bush's speech by the Door of No Return on Senegal's Goree Island;
- President Bush's Second Inaugural Address;
- Mike's recent Post column in praise of dogs;
- his 2013 column reflecting on dropping Bucky off at college (which, to my knowledge, no parent has ever read without weeping);
- Mike's 2019 sermon from the pulpit across from me, addressing his own struggle with depression.

To my surprise, Mike did not bite on any of my suggestions of greatest hits. No, he said, at that moment, he was most proud of 4,000 words the Post had published just two months earlier. Mike called it his “Jesus of Nazareth” essay.

Later, after reading the essay, I realized that Mike may have chosen it not as his most important work, but because it was his immediate mission: the culmination of his intense preoccupation over the last half decade with persuading evangelical Christians to abandon the angry populism of Trump and return to the loving populism of Jesus. Mike remained on task. It was his closing argument.

Before I left Mike on our last visit, I asked “How do you feel?” He knew I was not asking about the discomforts of the moment, but rather about dying. Mike replied: “I feel grateful.” Grateful.

“Grateful,” it turned out, was a word Mike used often in his final conversations with friends. President Bush reported that Mike told him “he felt not fear but gratitude – for all that he accomplished; for his dear wife Dawn; for his wonderful children, Bucky and Nick; and for his faith in a loving God.”

In my faith, Judaism, we are instructed to say two things of the dead. First: *Alav ha-shalom* – may he rest in peace. I believe that Mike does rest in peace. He told us so himself.

Second, we say: *Zichron l'vracha* – may his memory be a blessing. On this second point, there can be no doubt. Mike’s family and friends will always hold close the blessing of a remarkable and loving father, husband, colleague, and compatriot.

For the rest – the hundreds of thousands of readers and listeners who never even met Mike – he leaves behind the blessing of brilliant, timeless writings that will continue to teach, amuse, comfort, and inspire.

To the two traditional Jewish prayers, I’d add a third – this one for all of us who mourn and of which I hope Mike would approve: May we ever strive to make our actions worthy of Michael Gerson’s words – and worthy of Michael Gerson’s life.

Alav ha-shalom, v'zichron l'vracha.



Michael J. Gerson

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TRIBUTE FOR MICHAEL GERSON

John Bridgeland

That was beautiful, Josh. I want to thank Dean Hollerith and his wonderful team at the Washington National Cathedral. When Dawn, Pete and I were deciding where to hold this service, we first thought of the smaller Bethlehem Chapel downstairs, but the Dean said, “let’s do the Nave, they will come.”

And here you are. What an outpouring for Mike, and for you Dawn, Bucky and Nick – we know public service is a family enterprise.

Like Josh, when Dawn asked me to say a few words in tribute to Mike, it was completely intimidating – and my first reaction was, but Dawn, I need Mike to help me summon the words!! So, I’m left to my own poor devices to honor someone who gave so much to his family, his friends, and his country.

The beginning of my story with Mike wasn’t so auspicious. When I first met Mike on the 2000 Presidential campaign in Austin, he was behind his desk ...chewing nervously on the cap of a Bic pen... and

writing in what appeared to be Elvish runes. He didn't say much. It prompted me to ask Policy Chief Bolten if he had hired the right guy. Josh responded, "just wait."

To this day, I remember reading Mike's draft speech on Compassionate Conservatism, and the spine-tingling feeling his words gave me. "Our country must be prosperous. But prosperity must have a purpose. The purpose of prosperity is to make sure the American dream touches every willing heart. We are a wealthy nation. But we must also be rich in ideals – rich in justice and compassion and family love and moral courage." Mike was rich in all of these things.

Weeks later, I remember an all-staff campaign meeting Governor Bush attended. The room was packed. When the Governor entered, he B-lined straight to Mike, hugged him, and affectionately tousled his hair. You could tell how much he respected and loved Mike. Ironically, as Josh noted, Mike didn't stay around to hear the Governor's speeches Mike helped to write.

In fact, at the 2000 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, as Governor Bush was giving his acceptance speech, Mike was nervously walking the streets of Philadelphia. It was raining; the neighborhoods in which Mike found himself got rougher; and he had to ask a policeman for directions back to the hotel. Mike arrived damp, but safe, and received a call from Governor Bush asking, "Well, Gerson, what'd you think?" Not having seen or heard any part of the speech, Mike nervously paused and said nothing. Governor Bush then jumped in, "well, it seemed great to me."

On 9/11, Mike and I were evacuated from the White House together, sat stunned together, and shared ideas for the response together – and for weeks and months, tried to generate initiatives to help the President keep the spirit of national unity alive. On countless policy initiatives, I would enter Mike's office thinking our ideas were decent, and I'd leave his office thinking we would move a continental nation. It was the privilege of my life to serve with Mike and then work with him for 15 years after we left the White House.

Mike also cared deeply about the vulnerable around the world. Over some opposition, he was the one who urged the President to create the President's Malaria Initiative to save the lives of mostly mothers and children in sub-Saharan Africa, even though malaria control had no domestic constituency since it had been eliminated in the United States in 1951. And of course, as Josh mentioned, Mike was forceful in his advocacy for AIDS Relief. A White House official wrote me yesterday saying, given Mike's Memorial Service today, how apt it was that PEPFAR was featured in the State of the Union. Both AIDS and malaria initiatives have saved tens of millions of lives. That's Mike's legacy, too.

I remember being with Mike in Zimbabwe on a trip to examine malaria control. As wild elephants were literally walking in the fields by the Victoria Falls Hotel, Mike didn't look up from drafting his column. Even my pleas – "Hey..., hey Mike, there's a herd of elephants in our front yard" -- didn't disturb him from the words he was writing. Perhaps that was better for the world, because his column the next day said, "In much of sub-Saharan Africa, the American image is now defined by the Peace Corps, by PMI and by PEPFAR. It is a

form of influence that is hard to measure or weigh. But people remember when you help to save their children.”

Later that same day in neighboring Zambia, Mike, Steven Phillips and I each went up in a microlight – basically a hang glider with a lawn mower-style motor on the back of it – thousands of feet above Victoria Falls. I was terrified. Mike’s expression as he took off looked like he was flying into the hands of God... trailing clouds of glory. I can still visualize the smile on his face.

In another trip we took together with Tim Shriver to Lilongwe, Malawi for a Special Olympics summit with African leaders, Mike seemed to bond most with a 200-year-old Aldabra Tortoise we saw in a national wildlife reserve. Another plea: “Mike! we’ve got to get the summit, Mike. You’ll have to leave the Aldabra behind for now.”

Mike finally came to the summit and wrote in his column entitled Praise These Olympians, “honoring the dignity of the most vulnerable strengthens the ideal of human dignity itself. And nation’s that adopt this non-utilitarian ideal cannot view the rule of law, cultural norms or economic justice in quite the same way again.”

Beyond the marvel of his capacious mind and remarkable pen, Mike was a person who adored his wife, Dawn, and his sons, Bucky and Nick, who have each been a tower of strength during this difficult time. Mike also loved dogs --and would send videos of the puppy we gave him softly touching the porch window with its paw. One of Mike’s last requests to me was to get our dogs together for a reunion.

Mike also made himself vulnerable, opening his heart and soul to share his bout with depression and his relationship with a loving God at this very pulpit in February 2019. There are so many people, including young people during the pandemic, who have been moved and helped by Mike’s Sunday sermon. He had a way of channeling literature, philosophy, religious teachings, and personal experiences to help us all cope better and live better lives together.

Mike was in our book group, with Tim, Tom and Ted. We never read any books, but we did retreats together in monasteries around the country. One morning on retreat in Bon Secours in Maryland, as Mike came back carrying the large stack of Starbucks drinks for everyone, he delivered them to us with shaking hands and quipped, “fellas – it takes a lot of hutzpah to ask the guy with Parkinson’s to get the coffee.” His humor transcended illness.

In the final days of Mike’s life on Earth, some of you were able to visit him -- others wrote moving notes that Dawn, Pete, and I read by his bedside. He laughed through his pain, was often moved to tears, and used the word “love” a lot. You could see that those notes – and your friendship -- meant the world to him. His colleagues from the Bush Administration, Senator Coats, Washington Post, ONE Campaign, faith community, doctors, admirers -- on and on, they wrote.

And then, one sad day in Georgetown Hospital, he left us.

Mike's words -- in speeches, columns and sermons -- give him an unusual and enduring legacy, prompting warm statements and letters from the President he served and the President who now serves -- and thank you notes from friends and strangers across the country. Mike was a deeply compassionate person, who through his words and ideas literally moved the world toward a more compassionate stance.

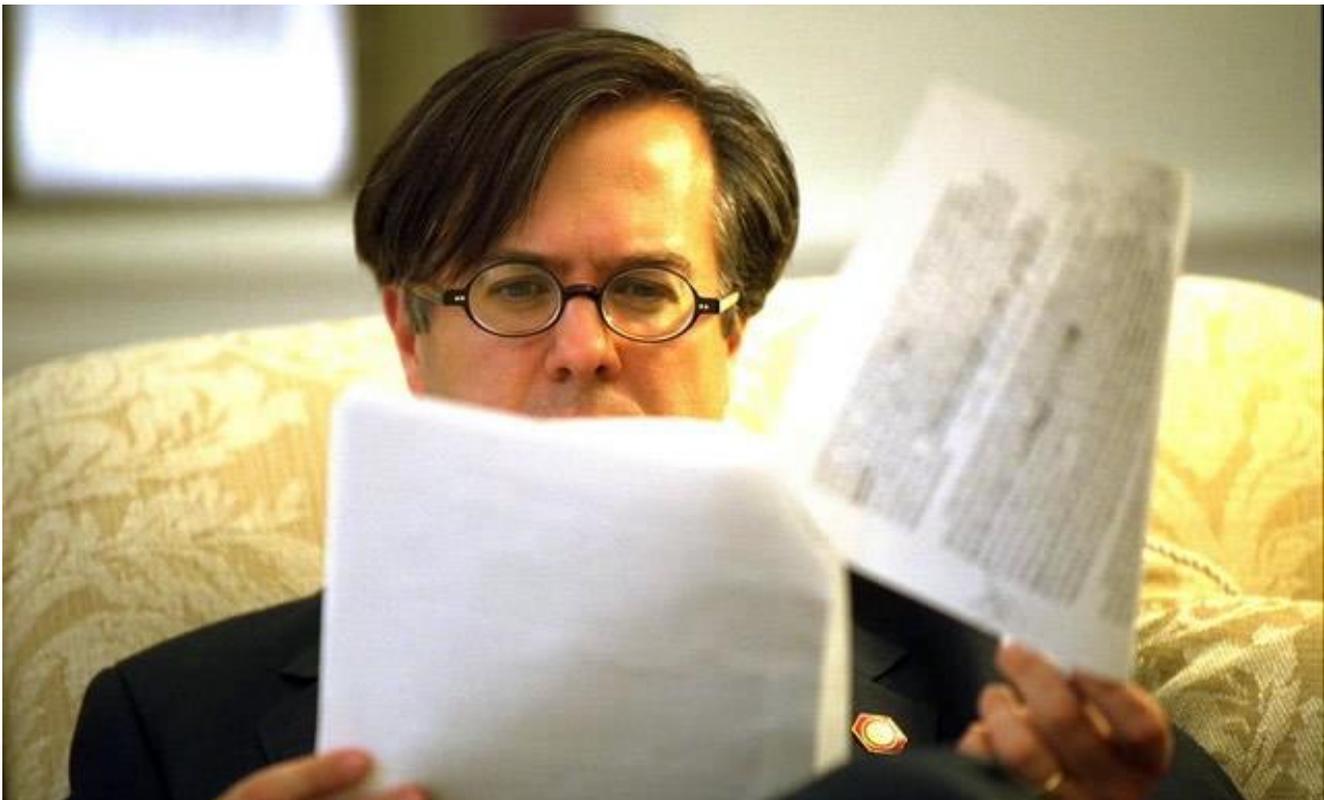
One of Mike's gifts late in his life was to share these words in his Sunday sermon from this Cathedral, which he viewed as his spiritual home:

"we know that transcendence sparks and crackles around us, in a blinding light, in a child's voice, in a fire, in tears, in a warmed heart, in a sculpture just down the hill, if we open ourselves to seeing it. Many, understandably, pray for a strength they do not possess. God's promise is somewhat different. Even when strength fails, there is perseverance, and even when perseverance fails, there is hope, and even when hope fails there is love, and love never fails. So how do we know this, how can anyone be so confident? Because we are Lazarus and we live."

As John DiIulio told me yesterday, Mike had faith enough for all of us. And our dear Mike Gerson lives.

Tribute for Michael Gerson

John Bridgeland



Michael J. Gerson

1964 - 2022

TRIBUTE FOR MICHAEL GERSON

Peter Wehner

Thank you, Josh and Bridge, for those lovely remembrances; and for all of you who have come to give thanks for the remarkable life of Michael Gerson.

I want to begin by expressing my condolences to Dawn, who Mike first met when he was 10 years old; to Bucky and Nick; and to Vic and Chris on the loss of your husband, your father and your brother, whom you loved for so long and so well.

One of the great gifts of my life was that it was so intimately intertwined with Mike's. He was my colleague and co-author, a confidant and role model, an intellectual and spiritual companion. But above all he was a first friend.

C.S. Lewis described a "first friend" as a person's alter ego, the individual who reveals to you that you're not alone in the world. They share all your most secret delights. "There is nothing to be overcome in making him your friend," Lewis wrote. "He and you join like raindrops on a window." What an exquisite gift Mike's friendship was to me; and to so many of you.

* * * *

Mike loved movies, Disney World, and T.S. Eliot poems; the writings of Henri Nouwen, the life of Frederick Douglass and the practical theology of William Wilberforce. He loved the television series House, his dog Latte -- and of course Russell, who was his footman when he visited Buckingham Palace on a state visit in 2003. (Such are the perks of working in the White House.)

And oh how Mike loved words. He was a magnificent craftsman who devoted extraordinary care to them. Because Mike wrote with incandescent beauty, most people might not know all the effort that he poured into his writing. For example, when he was in the White House, Mike would sometimes arise at 3:30 in the morning in order to work on speeches. In all he wrote -- speeches, essays, twice-weekly columns, books -- he aimed for elegance and intellectual seriousness, for words that would move hearts and minds. And he never missed the mark.

But the thing to understand about Mike is that the words were not "mere" words. He viewed them as a way to convey knowledge and wisdom, to deepen empathy and understanding, to advance justice and beauty, to search for and to find truth. In that sense, Mike's words were inseparable from the man; they reflected his moral commitments.

Mike's favorite movie was "Chariots of Fire," a true story about Eric Liddell, a man of deep faith who won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics. In a scene with his sister Jenny, Liddell tells her he's decided to go to China as a missionary. Jenny is thrilled, until Liddell tells her, "But I have a lot of running to do first."

Jenny's upset, because she thinks her brother is neglecting his responsibilities before God. Liddell responds gently but confidently: "I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give that up would be to hold Him in contempt."

God may have made Eric Liddell a great runner, but he made Mike Gerson a great writer, and when Mike wrote, he felt God's pleasure. But that's only part of the story, for when Mike wrote, God felt pleasure. And how could He not? After all, Mike wrote like an angel.

* * * *

Mike was a person of integrity. He wasn't perfect, and he would be the first to say so. But he was utterly incorruptible. He was that rarest of individuals, in which the greater his proximity to power, the more he felt solidarity with the powerless, the suffering, the unseen.

Mike was a person of courage, too, including the courage to break with his party when he felt his conscience demanded it. In all of the various settings I was in with Mike, I never once saw him back down on a matter of principle; or fail to speak out when speaking out was what his conscience required.

Those of us who were closest to Mike knew of his absolute devotion to his boys. Bucky and Nick knew him, along with Dawn, as their source of unconditional love; as deeply empathetic and tolerant; and as authentic and uncynical -- passionate about his beliefs even if they didn't agree. And they recognized in their Dad what the rest of us who knew Mike did as well: He had a great sense of humor, which kept this man of deep moral passions from being insufferable. He was just very funny, and more often than not his humor was turned on himself.

* * * *

Mike's Christian faith was at the core of who he was. It was not compartmentalized; it touched every part of his life, like drops of food coloring in a water glass.

For some people, faith hardens them; it sharpens their edges. They become more judgmental, more arrogant, more unforgiving. But not in Mike's case. His faith made him more generous, more tender, more tolerant. When he wrote, in President Bush's first inaugural address, that "no insignificant person was ever born," he meant it. He wrote about his faith so easily because he was so at ease with it. Of all the topics we talked about over the last quarter century -- and there were a lot of them -- my conversations with him about faith, and all that flowed from faith, are the ones I will miss the most.

Josh mentioned how meaningful Mike's "Jesus of Nazareth" essay was to him. It was an extraordinary feat of scholarship; and he wrote it despite a body riddled with cancer. It was a phenomenal achievement.

Mike felt like the essay captured, even if imperfectly, the Jesus who had long ago captured his heart. When I asked him what he found most encouraging about the huge response to his essay, he told me, "All the people who find the Jesus of the Gospels so appealing." He added, "I feel like, whenever I go, I have written the most important words I am ever likely to write."

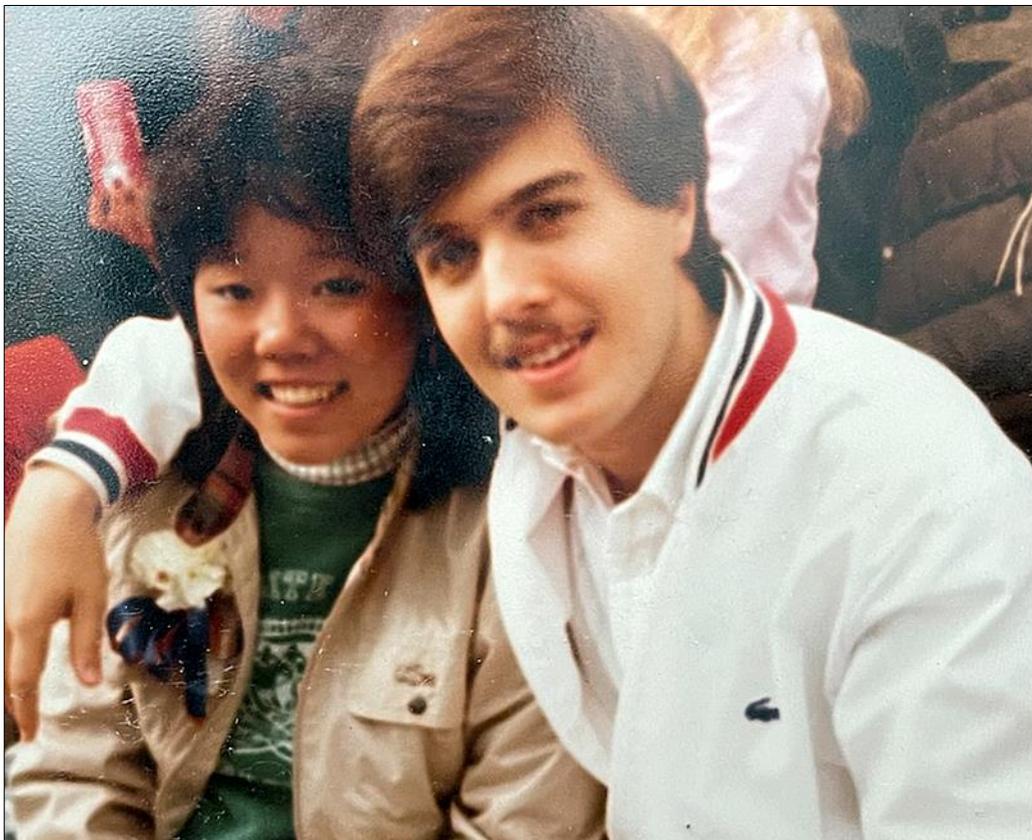
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At the end of his life, Mike was in pain, but he was at peace. As others have said, gratitude was the theme he kept returning to – gratitude for the life he was able to lead, the people he was able to meet, the wife he loved and the sons he was so proud of; gratitude for the chance to work for a president he came to love, to write words that are etched in stone, and to play a leading role in saving literally tens of millions of lives. He had gratitude, finally, for the glory that he knew awaited him.

The flights of angels have sung Michael Gerson to his rest. We love you, Mike. We miss you terribly. And we will see you again.

Tribute for Michael Gerson

Peter Wehner



Michael J. Gerson

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TRIBUTE FOR MICHAEL GERSON

Scott Baker

In the fall of 1984, Michael and I were midway through our college years.

We were living in a college apartment. I was the state College Republican president and I had a full-time job working for the Reagan-Bush campaign. Michael helped on a number of key events for President Reagan.

On election day, I got a surprise call from a contact in DC asking if I could deploy, the next day, to the island nation of Grenada for a few months to help a slate of candidates in their upcoming election.

This was a year after the military intervention. You'll recall that 19 Americans died and over 100 were wounded in the Grenada conflict.

The communist government that had imploded still had adherents. They were running a slate of candidates as well.

And I'd been given detailed and cautionary guidance. While there was a general and overwhelming positive regard for Americans, there were loyalists to the communist group. The Cubans had been involved. Not all weapons had been accounted for.

I talked this over with my parents, with Michael, other advisors. I decided to go.

I hit trouble right away clearing customs at the airport in Grenada.

A gruff official seemed highly skeptical of my declaration that I was a tourist.

Granted — I had boxes of paper. For making campaign posters. And a mimeograph machine!

I was detained for a bit then released with the help of a gentleman from the U.S. embassy.

When I got to my hotel room, right on a stunning beach, I tried to call my parents. Then Michael. 1984 phone service from Grenada wasn't great. After a few tries, I got through and shared my concerns.

The next morning, I got a call from the front desk at the hotel. There was a telegram for me.

I walked the path. Picked up the telegram. Which I read with increasing concern.

It was unsigned.

Dear Mr. Baker. We trust your visit to our scenic islands will be only as a tourist.

I went into my room. Closed the door. Shut the blinds. Called the guy at the embassy who pretended to work for the state department.

He came and picked up the telegram. Told me not to go anywhere. I complied. A few hours later he returned. He traced the Western Union pathway. From Grenada. To Martinique. To Chicago. To the campus of Wheaton College, where Michael Gerson thought it would be funny ... to send me a sinister telegram.

I vowed that someday I would have revenge.

And today is that day.

I first met Michael in a campus dorm. Not mine. Someone had told me I needed to meet this new sophomore who'd transferred from Georgetown.

In this particular dorm, the beds were in one room, and the desks were in a small room across the hall. This is where I found Michael. It was a disaster area. He had a small black and white TV that was tuned to, I believe, Spenser for Hire. He was surrounded by stacks of books and legal pads and chewed-up pens.

I remember nothing else about the conversation.

Other than, that over the next 39 years, it never ended.

Now, clearly, I was in a bit over my intellectual level. And this was a serious problem.

I actually had to study.

Michael would dash off a brilliant paper and insist that we take his vintage yellow mustang to the movies.

Vintage yellow mustang?

Mike Gerson?

There's a lot you don't know.

In a closet in our apartment, we had a picture of a naked Nastassja Kinski clad only in a very large boa constrictor.

This was for Old Testament creation narrative research purposes.

To be honest, the poster actually belonged to another of our roommates. Jordan Quick.

On campus, Jordan was the true star of our group. Who knows what he might have become.

Not too many years later Jordan would die of AIDS.

Michael and I made a number of trips to Florida to see Jordan at home and in the hospital before he passed away. A few years too soon for the drugs that might have saved him.

The fingerprints of those visits are all over the work Michael would endeavor to do for the rest of his life.

Michael once wrote me: “I find myself thinking a lot about Jordan. For me, he is frozen in that formative moment of college. I feel old. But he will always be the age when we knew him. He deserved better than he got.”

Oh, on one of those trips to Florida, Michael and I had lunch at new restaurant chain called — Hooters.

There’s so much you don’t know.

It becomes harder to stay close to friends after college.

Michael came to Washington and would never really leave. Do we count the time in Austin?

I moved nine times in the next decade as a TV journalist. But Michael was the one consistent and faithful friend throughout.

He’d stand with me at my wedding.

Sorry — several weddings.

Oh, I had a number of tumultuous relationship moments over the years.

Yet I would always count on Michael to answer my call.

His insight and counsel on these matters were — absolutely useless.

But it was nice of him to listen.

I remember vividly when he and Dawn were married. Such a lovely wedding.

Dawn has so many tremendous qualities.

And it's always good in a marriage that one of the partners is actually tethered to the planet.

I remember visiting Michael at his office at Prison Fellowship about six months after he started there.

He introduced his assistant as Mrs. So and So.

Later I pulled him aside and asked, "what's her first name?"

He said: "I don't know. And I've been here too long to ask! Can you find out?"

Michael loved humanity more than anyone I've ever known.

It was the individual people that seemed to throw him for a loop.

I'm betting everyone here has some version of that Mike Gerson story.

Michael had many flaws.

So, let's list all of them now!

Really, there all just some version of the absent-minded professor, right?

As I ran around the country working at TV stations and building digital news operations, I'm pretty sure I was a friend of Michael's largely unknown to most of you.

I was and am jealous.

Jealous of the time you had with him. The work you accomplished together.

I would hear of it. And of you.

He spoke so highly, and fondly, of you.

Not all of you. Let me list those names now!

Look, a goofy line like that is actually the primary way I helped Michael.

Writing silly jokes for talks he would give. Speeches he would write.

Even one he famously gave in this very building in 2019:

“I’ve been given the job of lecturing people today on their faults in a tone of preachy superiority. It turns out, I already do that twice a week in my newspaper column. Apparently preachy superiority is my spiritual gift.”

C’mon. That’s pretty good!

Most of the really good jokes he couldn’t actually use.

He could, of course, write his own jokes.

We often bantered in a gallows humor about his physical maladies.

He once texted me:

“Forgot to bring my pills to MSNBC set. I am delayed. Going through withdrawal. Might be good TV.”

Michael had many notable friends.

I once went to a college reunion and people asked me, “Where’s Michael?”

I told them he had planned to come but that he was in northern India along the border of Nepal.

“What’s he doing there?”

“Oh, he’s at the Dalai Lama’s house.”

Where else would Mike Gerson be?

About a month before he went into the hospital, I drove from Pittsburgh to see him at home.

In part because the phone conversations had been difficult and labored. I was worried.

When I arrived, he shuffled over to a small sofa on the first floor, books, and legal pads and pens all around.

Ah. My glimpse of his life in those last days at home was such a mirror of the first moment I met him.

On my first visit to the hospital, about a week or so before he died, I was alone in the room with him for a few minutes before Dawn and Bucky and Nick came in.

He'd been sleeping and suddenly came to.

After gathering my presence, he said quietly but with bright eyes, "I've been given a special privilege."

I leaned closer.

He said — "A woman came to me and said I no longer needed to be a being oriented to the world of physical objects."

This was not the conversation I was expecting.

And I understood, to a degree, the role of medication and the stage of things. Some of you may have a scientific explanation for this. But I don't need to hear it and I won't believe it.

I said, using a Celtic phrase for those rare moments when heaven and earth seem to touch — "Michael, do you feel like you're in one of those thin places?"

And he said — "Oh, yes! Exactly!"

When I saw him a week later, he couldn't say much. But his eyes still had those moments of brightness.

I drove back to Pittsburgh and got home just before midnight.

Dawn texted a few minutes later that Michael had passed away. I did not see the text until I awoke about 5 am. Couldn't sleep.

So, I did what we do these days. I wrote a Twitter thread.

And I'll close with just a few sections of that thread.

I first met Mike Gerson in a college dorm 39 years ago.

He was busy infusing theological words into a legal pad with great intensity and semi-legibility.

That was pretty much the story of every day after.

Even, in recent years, through many, many days of terrible pain.

Writing day and night. Like he was running out of time.

And he was.

Michael died early this morning.

“Peacefully,” his wife texted.

Hours earlier in his hospital room, he would open his eyes, but couldn’t speak.

I was glad he could see me.

He’d already said enough.

“I’ve written everything I needed to write,” he told me a few weeks ago in the sunny garden of his home.

But I already miss the words from a future that will not be.

You can read the obituaries.

Famous speeches he wrote. Phrases he crafted.

Many were moved by his writing. Or angered by his invective.

I was a friend outside his DC circle. The political Mike mattered the least to me.

Though I did help get that started. Recommending him for a job as a writer for Charles Colson back in 1986.

I’d been approached about the job. But I knew instantly Mike was a far superior choice. I sent over a column he’d written in our Wheaton College paper.

My mother recalls that it was about Mother Teresa.

Mike’s heart for the suffering and those on earth’s margins will be what I remember most.

A week ago, there were four books on his hospital nightstand.

The 1662 book of common prayer.

Meister Eckhart's Book of Secrets.

A book of readings for advent and Christmas called "Watch for the Light."

And the new autobiography of a friend aptly titled Surrender.

But there was only one book on his bed tray.

A book of pictures of his dog Latte who died last year.

He made her famous in a recent column entitled, "Why I will never live without a dog again."

Michael died in his hospital room because the hospice was full these last awful days.

Forgive me if that's the part that makes me cry.

Maybe his new dog Jack could have come to the hospice.

For 39 years Mike would read things out loud to me as he crafted them.

One of the greatest speechwriters who ever lived.

The very echoes in my head are privileged indeed.

Decades ago, he'd had a heart attack while working at The White House. Suffered many years with cancer. Terrible pain. Depression. And other afflictions he didn't even bother to bring up.

Sometimes I would see him on a TV news show and couldn't figure out how he could be so lucid.

But in the suffering, I never heard bitterness or resentment.

Even on a call before he would enter the hospital for the last time.

After the doctor had told him more bad news.

"I'm okay with this," he told me.

Talk about teaching us how to say goodbye.

A wise person I know says the antidote to suffering is found in powerful meaning and purpose.

In speaking the truth despite the pain.

That was the story of Mike Gerson's life.

Today my heart is with his wife and sons. His two brothers are such fine men.

My mother had texted me a verse from Psalms to read to Michael.

And in the hours at the hospital yesterday — I forgot.

Driving home to Pittsburgh last night I texted the words to his wife Dawn:

“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.”

Tribute for Michael Gerson

Scott Baker



Michael J. Gerson *1964 - 2022*

“This world He [God] created is of moral design. Grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time. Goodness, remembrance, and love have no end. And the Lord of life holds all who die, and all who mourn.”

– *President George W. Bush*
National Day of Prayer & Remembrance
Washington National Cathedral
September 14, 2001

HOMILY FOR MICHAEL GERSON

The Very Rev. Randolph Marshall Hollerith

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was almost exactly four years ago that Michael preached a Sunday sermon here at the Cathedral, just about a month before COVID shut the world down. We had been talking about it for months, searching for a day that worked with his schedule and ours. I was excited about the prospect of getting Mike into this, the Canterbury Pulpit. I was and am a big fan of Mike's and an admirer of his faith. His gift with words awed and inspired me, and Michael was one of the few non-clergy types whose voice I thought needed to be heard from the pulpit of this Cathedral.

What I didn't know at the time was that Mike was struggling with deep and debilitating depression. I thought it strange that my emails would go unanswered for days if not weeks. I knew he was busy, but it wasn't until he began to preach that I understood the cause of his silence. Standing in the pulpit, Michael began his sermon by saying, "When your Dean and I were conspiring about when I might speak, I think he mentioned February 3rd as a possibility. A sermon by me on that date would have been considerably less interesting, because I was, at that point, hospitalized for depression. Or maybe it would have been more interesting, though less coherent." What followed was one of the most beautiful and powerful sermons I have ever heard. Michael, with incredible vulnerability, speaking honestly about his own struggles - not as a way of calling attention to himself, but as a means of pointing to the God of love - preached a sermon about the reality of suffering and the deep meaning, purpose, and hope one finds in a life committed to Jesus Christ. It is a sermon I will never forget.

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker once said that each of us faces two choices in life. "We can have a broken heart, or we can have a shriveled heart. If you give your love to anyone - a child, a spouse, a friend, a community - then sooner or later, your heart will break. There is only one way to avoid a broken heart. That is to be careful enough never to give your heart away to anyone. But if you choose that, then something worse than a broken heart will happen. Your heart will shrivel. It will not be broken, but it will become dried up, empty of love. Better that a heart be broken, so that love flows from it like rain on dry ground, than that a heart become shriveled and dry, with nothing to offer."

And so today we gather together with hearts broken. We mourn the death of an extraordinary man - an extraordinary friend, husband, son, father, and colleague. But we give God thanks for his life. Michael was very much a bright light who showed us what it means to live a life of service, a life of loving faithfulness. He showed us what it means to live with dignity and grace, how to face the world clear eyed and at the same time stand firmly on hope. In that same sermon preached here at the Cathedral, Mike went on to say, "In our right

minds – as our most sane and solid selves – we know that the appearance of a universe ruled by cruel chaos is a lie and that the cold void is actually a sheltering sky. In our right minds, we know that life is not a farce but a pilgrimage – or maybe a farce and a pilgrimage, depending on the day. In our right minds, we know that hope can grow within us – like a seed, like a child. In our right minds, we know that transcendence sparks and crackles around us – in a blinding light, and a child’s voice, and fire, and tears, and a warmed heart, and a sculpture just down the hill – if we open ourselves to seeing it. Fate may do what it wants. But this much is settled. In our right minds, we know that love is at the heart of all things.”

Love is at the heart of all things. That belief lies at the core of the Christian faith, of Michael’s faith. It is the belief that, as St. John says, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is love that moved God to create the world. It is love that moved God to create you and me. And it is love that empowered Jesus to lay down his life as a sacrifice for us all. As Christians, we believe that God always acts out of love. In fact, we believe that God is love. Therefore, love is the most priceless thing we have in this life. The love we feel for the people in our lives, and the love we receive from others is the most precious gift – because love comes from God. Michael loved deeply. He loved this country, he loved his God, and most especially, he loved Dawn, Michael and Nicholas. They were his heart.

There is a certain deep joy that comes from the Christian faith. It is a joy based on the conviction that God loves us so much that God will never let us go. No matter what happens, we will never be abandoned or forgotten. St. Paul says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and Jesus tells his disciples, “I will be with you always even to the end of the age.” To embrace this truth of God’s never-ending faithfulness is to discover deep personal joy and a wonderful sense of freedom. We are free to live our lives fully, free to love and serve and share God’s joy with others, because whether we live or whether we die - we cannot be lost.

Michael knew where he was going when this life ended. He knew that, because of God’s grace, beyond this life there is indeed more life. This deep confidence wasn’t because Michael thought he was so good. No, his joy and hope rested in the fact that he knew God was so good.

We have lost a great friend and a powerful voice for good. Michael has left us much too soon, but he is now free from the ravages of a cruel, cruel disease. So, while we grieve his death let us celebrate his life. We were blessed to have known him, blessed to call him friend.

During the last months of his life, Michael wrote in one of his final pieces for the Post, “God’s call to us – while not simplifying our existence – does ennoble it. It is the invitation to a life marked by meaning. And even when, as mortality dictates, we walk the path we had feared to tread, it can be a pilgrimage, in which all is lost, and all is found.” And so it was. Well done good and faithful friend, you have walked the path, you have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, and you have kept the faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.