

A Celebration of the Life and Ministry of

Richard A. Rhem

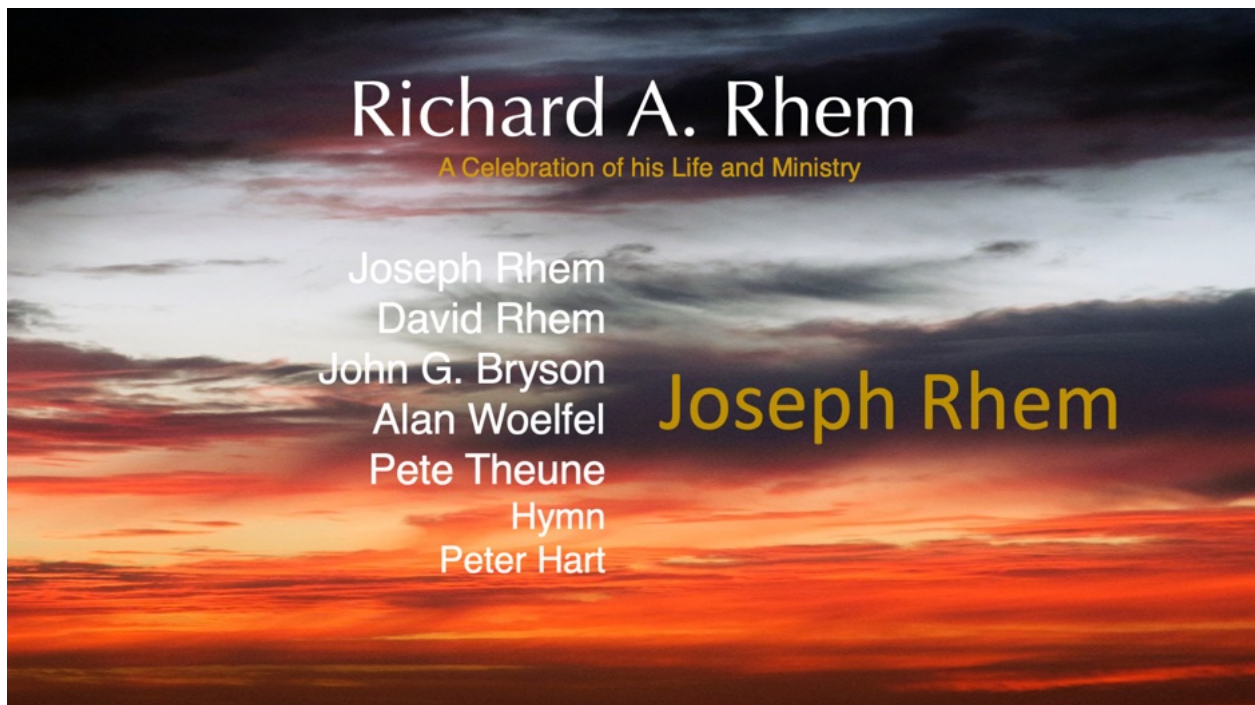
1935 ~ 2020



Welcome family and friends to this remembrance and celebration of the life and ministry of Richard “Dick” Rhem.

When the discussion among friends turned to funerals, we all agreed that no one does a funeral better than Dick. We all wanted Dick to do our funeral – although not right away, of course. We even suggested Dick make video recordings in advance. Well, that never happened, so now it’s up to all of us to honor and celebrate Richard Rhem’s life & ministry as best we can.

He did have one request for this occasion: please make it a joyful celebration for a life full of love and grace.



We lost a wonderful soul last Sunday.

A Father, Grandfather, Great Grandfather, Husband, Theologian, Scholar, Professor, Activist for Compassion and Justice and the Minister of Christ Community Church where he nurtured the lives of thousands for 33 years.

After my Grandma Rhem bore three daughters, my grandfather, Richard Rhem, a very religious man, resigned himself that a son was not to be... then, late in life my Grandmother was pregnant once again to everyone's surprise.

My Grandfather prayed to God that if it were to be a boy, he would cultivate his son, my father as a minister to do God's work ... and he meant it. From the day my father was born he was told that he was going to be a minister.

My Grandfather was a deacon in the church and took my father with him to visit those in the hospital and to help the elderly, the destitute and the poor. The next-door neighbor died leaving a widow and my Grandfather mowed her lawn and took out her trash along with his own for the rest of her life without mentioning it.

My Grandfather took my father to skid row to minister to those that were down on their luck or dealing with alcoholism. My father attending Church, Sunday school and even catechism classes from the Catholic Church to prepare him for his life as a minister. My father attended Hope College and The Western Theological Seminary and then studied for his PhD in theology at the University of the Hague. The promise of my Grandfather was realized with much intention, effort and commitment.

My father started his career as a minister on the conservative side of religion having been brought up in a conservative and pious home. In the early 1970's getting divorced was unthinkable for a minister and yet my parents found themselves confronted with unreconcilable differences and there was no choice. My father thought at the time that his career as a minister was over in the light of this failure. In his own conservative frame of mind, he would not even accept himself as a minister after having a divorce.

To my father's surprise and astonishment, he found acceptance and compassion in this community of Spring Lake where the First Reformed Church welcomed him as their minister despite his failure. This so moved my father that he began to see grace in a new way. God's grace was not for the perfect. It was to make the imperfect whole and complete in God's unwavering love. He was from this point forward a changed man.

My father was a deep thinker who would spend countless hours reading and contemplating God and religion. His favorite poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson was, "My little systems have their day, they have their day then cease to be, they are but broken lights of thee, and thou are greater than they" This poem is about struggling to understand God and then realizing that at best we catch just a glimpse of what will always be an incomplete picture of something beyond our understanding.

My father was a rare and courageous leader who took a stand for inclusiveness and inter-religious dialog. He wrote a controversial article called "The Habits of God's Heart" where he suggested that the Grace of God that he had come to know would not send his good friends the Jewish Rabbi, or the Catholic Priest he had lunch with every week to hell and damnation.

My father took a stand for the equal treatment and respect of all people. When a group of Christians from another church who were gay were not permitted to meet for bible study in their own church my father allowed them to meet in his church.

After this gracious gesture the denomination leadership started an inquiry into this action. The Reformed Church of America was threatened by my father's level of compassion as it threatened their perceived hold over their flock. They asked my father if he believed that anyone in any religion other than theirs was damned.

Dad knew that this question was a trap but he answered honestly speaking truth to power. My father was a courageous leader committed to break down the barriers between his religion and all other religions. Pointing to the stained glass of Notre Dame where religious figures from different religions are preaching to people in different panes he said, "There are many windows to God. God is the light coming through the window, I do not need to invalidate another religion to have my own."

He was celebrated on the front page of the New York Times and by other like-minded religious leaders from around the world for his courage while simultaneously chastised by his own denomination leadership out of their fear that they would lose control over their congregations if their people would lose their fear of damnation.

What my dad said was labeled heresy by his denomination so he left the Reformed Church of America with the support of his congregation to form an independent church. It was the second re-formation of the reformed church, Christ Community Church.

I keep thinking dad will show up in his robe and sit on that stool and hold his bible in his hand and say, "This is the day that the lord hath made. We will rejoice glory and be glad in it."

He would send his sermons to me every week and I would listen to them in the car while I was driving. One of my favorites was titled. "By Grace and Grace alone." Where he passionately articulated how God's Grace was all a church needed to thrive and if that was not enough then it was not meant to be. He saw the use of damnation, guilt and shame as tools of manipulation that had nothing to do with God's grace and no place in his church.

He received many awards for his truth telling. Among them he was the recipient of the Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award In 2014. Religious leaders throughout the world including Jewish, Muslim, Episcopal and Catholic reached out to support my father's brave stand.

My father was moved by the inclusiveness and grace that Jesus demonstrated over and over again in the new testament and my father lived his life this way.

This meant including all races, all religions, all cultures and all sexual orientations, welcoming them and treated them all with respect and decency.

It is my profound privilege to be raised by a father like this.

I was so proud of his courageous stand for truth and justice in the world that I named my first son after my father. My son Richard A. Rhem along with all 20 of Dad's other children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and scores of other family members have made the journey here this week to bury our patriarch. Our family is full of love and compassion that knows no limits.

I remember sitting in my father's his lap when I was very young. He walked me to kleuterschool (Kindergarten in the Netherlands) every day when he was studying for his PhD.

When I was a little older Dad taught how me to fish and we caught so many fish together and would talk and talk until the sun went down.

I cannot thank him enough for the wisdom and love that I am left with. One of our favorite things to do once I was old enough was to sit on the bluff behind his house with a couple of good cigars and contemplate the deep musings of what it means to be human and the meaning of life and all that is.

My father embodied and authentically lived in the spirit of God's grace and compassion.

My father's favorite musical was "Les Misérables". He said it was the best expression of the compassion of Jesus available in the world today. In that musical, his favorite lyric was "To love another person is to see the face of God"

He saw the face of God in us and we could see the face of God in him. You were in the presence of love and compassion when you were with my father. He gave his children the most amazing gift. The gift of being authentic, kind and Just. I have accepted this gift being true to myself and compassionate towards others, allowing others the freedom to be fully self-expressed as they are and as they are not.

There is a vast emptiness that I am almost afraid to face in his absence. Every once in a while, I feel an ocean of tears welling up inside me. I take comfort in the love of my family. That love is what he left behind for all of us and between all of us.

There are so many great and selfless souls whom serve others in my father's generation. I once said to myself. "Who will pick up the mantle when these heroes are all gone." It did not take me long to realize that the answer to that question. The answer is me and the answer is you. He has poured his love into each one of us and in that love his presence remains here with us. His love is God's love and as we live our lives in that light, we carry forward his very essence into rest of this world and pass it on to future generations through our actions and words.

Compassion, love, forgiveness, humility and service of something larger than ourselves. It is our turn to take up this mantle. To bring compassion to the people we encounter. To stand up for justice, equality and mutual respect for all people. It is our turn to bring kindness to those that are downtrodden. My father was but a vessel for God's grace. He has shown us how to follow in his footsteps. To love another person is to see the face of God.

I will miss my father very much but am so blessed to have had him in my life.

He is with his Father now.

Rest in Peace Dad.



I am son David.

On behalf of Nancy and the rest of the family, thank you for being here to honor my Dad and his ministry. We did not know how many people would show up today, so I hope that all of you were able to find a seat. If my Dad were here today and saw the size of this crowd, he'd say "We need to pass the collection plate!"

I also want to thank Peter Hart for organizing this service; Rev. Peter Theune for his participation; Alan Woelfel for his remarks, Greg Bryson for his music; and the Sytsema Funeral Home for all of their help this past week.

The messages of encouragement expressing your love for my Dad and support of his ministry have been overwhelming. My Dad loved being a "pastor," and that is reflected in the many messages we have received. Here's but one example: "Your Dad married us. Then he married our kids. He visited my husband in Grand Rapids after heart surgery. He visited the day before my husband died. Then, he did the memorial service. All of this, for one family. Multiply that by hundreds of others in the congregation!"

Being a pastor is what my Dad was all about. In a note to the CCC congregation on Sunday, June 27, 2004, the day he retired, he wrote:

“I have always, by your good grace, been able to be honest in the pulpit. I have trusted you with my deepest thoughts and most acute questions, the things I believe profoundly and the doubts that live in tension with my faith....I am convinced that regular preaching to same community over the years is the best place for theological reflection. Sunday comes once a week; I cannot demur. I must articulate my best understanding of the Gospel. But, because it happens in the community of faith, it means I have been with you through the week, sharing your joys and griefs, your questions and your rich experience. Out of the mix of reflection and human experience, faith formulation grows and finds expression.”

All of this, combined with a kind and loving heart, is what made him so special to all of us.

Now, a few words about growing up as a “Preacher’s Kid” in Spring Lake, Michigan. I used to cringe when my Dad would bring my name up in his sermons. I never knew what was coming. There was no “heads up, bro...”

On one occasion, in 1971, Dad wanted to change the name of the church from First Reformed Church of Spring Lake, to Christ Community Church. I do recall asking him why we needed to do that. The next Sunday, the day of the congregational vote on the name change, he brought up our conversation in his sermon. I started to sink lower in the pew, hoping no one could see me. He said that my question was “an example of negative thinking.” I kept trying to make myself invisible. He went on, “we need to think positively about this, not negatively.” I later realized he used me as a “straw man” to address the doubters in the congregation. He needed to address any doubt without directly confronting anyone. After the service, the congregation voted 120 to 4 to change the name of the church to Christ Community Church. I’m going to claim some credit for that name change!

Growing up as a “PK” was easy. You just stayed out of trouble and did nothing wrong. It was as simple as that! I had to do that because being a PK in Spring Lake was like living in a never-ending episode of “Cheers,” where everyone knows your name. So, while all of you knew me, I didn’t know all of you. Ending up in the District Court report in the Tribune would not have been a good outcome for me. I’m not sure how much I understood about God’s grace at the time, but I wasn’t about test the limits.

What I am most proud of is how my Dad stood up for what he believed, despite the personal consequences. The way he did it, is even more impressive...

- He always took the high road;
- He never lashed out at anyone;
- He was gracious, always.

One of my favorite stories involves him being summoned to the Muskegon Classis to account for what was going on at Christ Community Church. It was the height of the AIDS epidemic. The CCC team had put together an educational forum. Physicians and other healthcare providers were invited to speak and educate the public and local clergy. My Dad was sitting in the audience when he noticed a man wearing a clerical collar whom he did not know. During a break, he approached the man. In my Dad's words:

"I introduced myself and asked where he was from. He told me he was starting a Metropolitan Community Church in Muskegon. I asked where they met, and he said in the basement of a bar on Sunday evening. I asked why such a setting. He said they had contacted a dozen churches in Muskegon but either they did not get a response, or had been turned down. I was shocked. I told him I would bring the matter to our consistory. I remember vividly the meeting when I put forth the request. One of our young deacons said, "What would Jesus do?" Issue settled. The Metropolitan group was offered our chapel on Sunday evenings and a classroom for Bible study during the week."

The Muskegon Chronicle learned of the Metropolitan group and Christ Community's hospitality. They ran a story about it about a week before the annual Spring meeting of the Muskegon Classis. My Dad was summoned to Classis to explain what was going on at Christ Community Church.

The Classis' meeting agenda listed a presentation by the group Promise Keepers as the first item of business. Christ Community Church was second on the list. Promise Keepers is an evangelical men's group that champions chastity, emphasizes marital fidelity, and helps men keep their promises to their spouse and family. The speaker told Classis what the group was all about, as well as their activities.

When the Promise Keepers presentation ended, the focus turned to my Dad and Christ Community Church allowing a gay congregation to worship in the chapel on Sunday evenings. My Dad explained the circumstances leading to the invitation to worship in the chapel. Keep in mind that the RCA's position on homosexuality is that it is a sin. Finally, the

question came: Reverend Rhem, do you believe that homosexuality is a sin? Without missing a beat, Dad said, "Not if they are Promise Keepers."

And, all hell broke loose on the Classis floor....

Let me end with this...

At Christ Community Church we celebrated Mardi Gras Sunday, which is the Sunday before Lent begins. Mardi Gras Sunday was a "Celebrative Sunday" at CCC, described in the bulletin as "overflowing with the sights and sounds of a celebrative faith."

And celebrative it was....

- The jazz ensemble took over the choir loft;
- Sacred Dancers danced;
- Masks and beads adorned the congregation;
- Greg Bryson on the organ;
- Multi-colored balloon balls were bounced through the air;
- Greg Martin played Beatles' love songs on his guitar;
- And, after the service, we all ate sticky buns.

It was a Festive Time.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of my Dad's heroes and favorite theologians once said that death is a festival on the way to heaven. Well, my Dad died just in time for Mardi Gras Sunday...

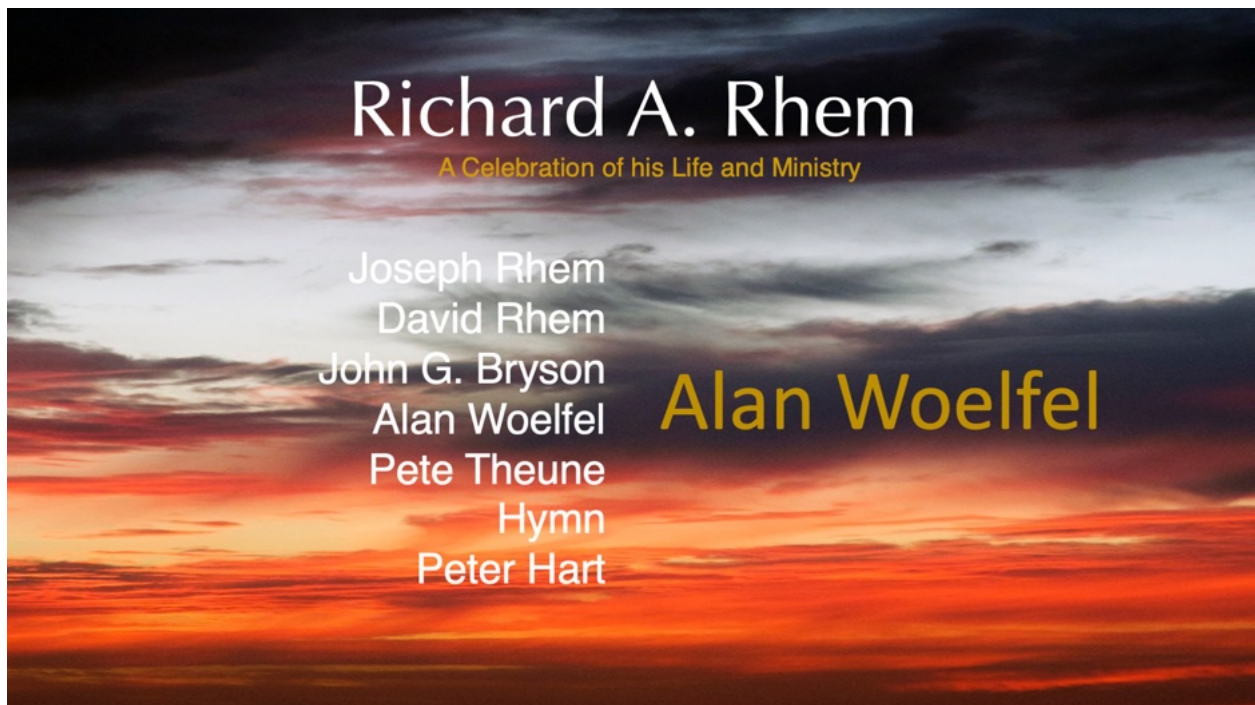
- the beginning of festival
- a festival on the way to heaven...

Dad, you were promised to God's service by your parents. You were blessed to be a blessing to all you encountered. And, you were steadfast, even in times of turmoil, in the belief that God's Grace knows no bounds.

We love you dearly. We will miss you beyond measure.

And all of God's people said, "Amen."





Dr. Alan Woelfel was a member of Christ Community Church, cardiologist and friend.

So, to echo Peter's words, how does one eulogize probably the best eulogist ever? You know, no one wanted to outlive Dick because they all wanted him to do their funerals. Part of me wishes that he had taken care of this himself rather than leaving it to amateurs. But then, his one blind spot was himself, so he wouldn't have done himself justice either. I don't believe he ever came close to realizing the impact he had on people, or the esteem in which he was held. And, even if he had, his humility would not have permitted him to speak of it. Of course, that was part of his charm. So then, maybe it's not such a bad idea after all to do his eulogy for him and, now that he's not here to stop us, we can have a little fun talking about him for a while behind his back.

Let's start with his intellect, a treasure chest of wisdom from his insatiable appetite to read and learn, not just about religion, but about any subject that shed light on the mystery of existence. An intellect that was open and malleable and responsive to what he learned no matter where it took him. He marveled himself at how far away

he ended up from where he started his adult life, a journey not to be taken for granted in a world where, for some, it is a matter of perverse pride to cling forever to principles formed in childhood.

And then there was his gift for imparting what he learned simply and succinctly so its value could be readily appreciated – an ability to seemingly read our minds and anticipate what we most needed to hear. What a treat it was, Sunday after Sunday, to hear a message from the pulpit that would resonate so deeply, confirming what we perhaps suspected might be true but weren't sure, articulating what we felt but couldn't express for ourselves, or even presenting a new way of interpreting the world for which we previously hadn't a clue.

Yet, no message was ever delivered with an air of authority or coercion. It was never, "This is what I found. You'd better believe it." It was always, "This is what I've learned. Decide for yourself what value it might have for you." What a refreshing contrast to today, when the truth seems to have become what is repeated the most or shouted the loudest.

There's a refrain from a folk song that brings Dick to mind every time I hear it. And it goes like this:

I am just a draper, in a room of wool,
Looking for a pattern, feeling like a fool.
Going to take this fabric, stretch it to the seams.
I want to find what's woven underneath these tailored dreams.

Dick stretched the fabric of life for us every chance he had. And, although he would have been the first to acknowledge that the ultimate pattern was unfindable, the truths he discovered for us in the search made it a transcendent experience.

Okay, so he was a guy who could deliver a great sermon, but we've only started to scratch the surface. He had a great mind but, even more importantly, he had a great heart. Just to be in his presence was an experience. His warm smile, soothing voice, and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes served him very well to deliver the unconditional love that he spread so generously – the love that prompted so many to invite him, as you've heard, to share the greatest joys and sorrows in their lives; the love that kept long-time members faithful when perhaps they were a bit uneasy

with what they heard from the pulpit; the love and acceptance that so many found after being shipwrecked or even tossed overboard from another religious institution, and had the good fortune to be washed up on the shore of Christ Community.

And his heart wasn't just warm and accepting; it was also spectacularly courageous. Dick was never afraid to speak out in ways that went against the grain of convention. On the Sunday after 9/11, the sanctuary was packed to overflowing, everyone there clearly hungry to know, "What does Dick think about this?" and whether that might help them with their pain and anger and confusion. That morning he had the courage to preach love rather than hate, understanding rather than revenge. He received an ovation from a grateful congregation whose hopes of finding solace did not go unfulfilled.

Yet he did not shy away from being critical either when it was called for. He was fond of contrasting good with bad religion, and did not hesitate to denounce the latter. A year later, when discussing the three Abrahamic faiths that had been periodically slaughtering each other for centuries in the name of religion, he had the courage to proclaim in his own house of worship, "It's high time that we burn all the Korans and burn all the Bibles. We'd be better off without a text because, when a text literally interpreted makes me hate you, that text is wrong. And, when a religious community is bound to an ancient text that is leading it to destruction, to conflict, to war, to hatred, it is wrong." What wisdom! What courage!

But courage not just to speak. When the truth demanded concrete expression, he acted upon it despite clearly appreciating the gravity of the consequences. As you've heard, imagine the courage it took to make the facilities of Christ Community available to a gay organization at a time well before the gay rights movement gained a foothold, a time when gays were stigmatized by virtually every branch of organized religion.

And of course there is the defining act of his career. Dick always liked to say that he found the nature of God reflected in the life of Jesus. But he had also come to understand that that was a consequence of the Christian tradition that he was born into and loved, and that it could not possibly be true for the overwhelming majority of humanity born into other religious traditions. So, when asked to deny the validity of those other traditions, with his ministerial credentials and the lifelong

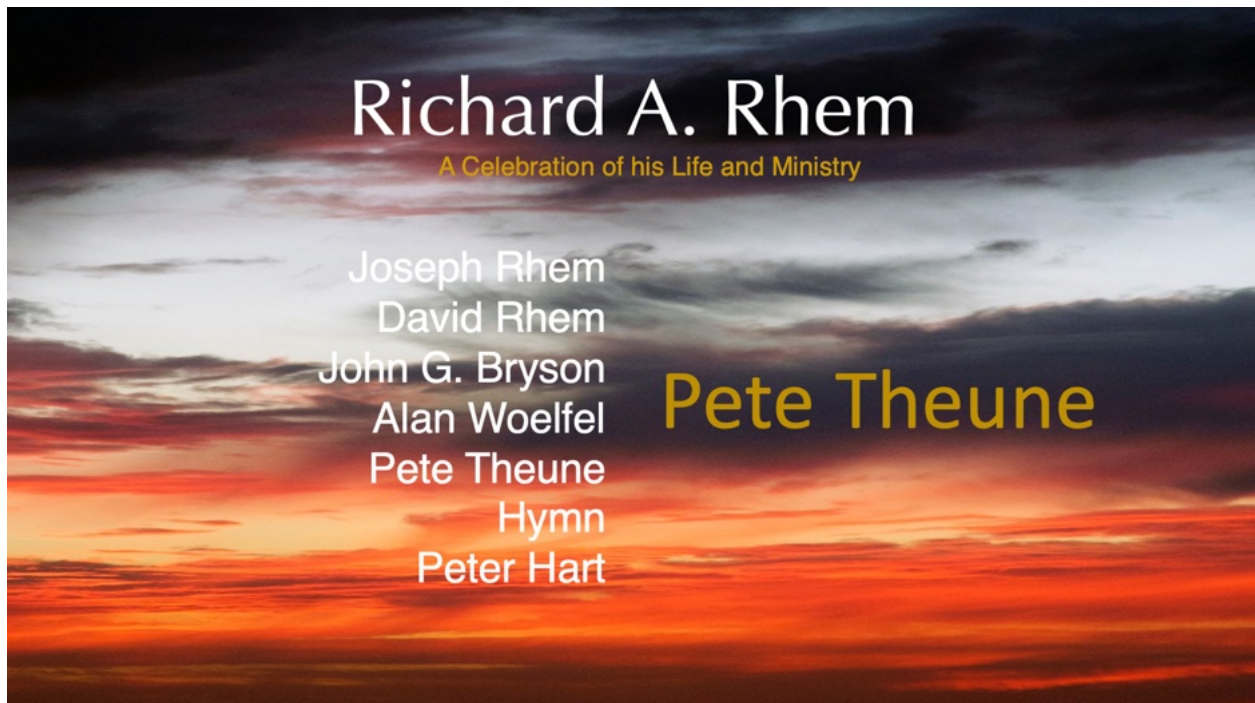
denominational affiliation of his congregation at stake, he became a modern Martin Luther and stood before the governing body of that denomination to declare, "I will not recant. Here I stand. The truth will not let me do otherwise."

How much easier would it have been to think, "I clearly can't win this one. Why fight it? I have a thriving church. Why jeopardize its future? I'll tell them what they want to hear, keep my heretical impulses under a little better control, and not rock the boat." Yet, fortunately for us, he capsized that boat and, of course, the result was the Camelot called Christ Community Church. And, in his words, the separation provided him a freedom that he hadn't realized he didn't have. And he made the most of it. Christ Community became a model of inquiry, openness, tolerance, even humor, and simply the best place on earth to be on a Sunday morning to connect with that mystery greater than ourselves.

Well then, little wonder that everyone wanted Dick to do their eulogy! And I mean everyone. Not just longtime parishioners, but community giants as disparate as Duncan Littlefair and Fred Meijer – a legendary man of the church and an agnostic, successful businessman. And, of course, he did them equal justice. Who else would you have wanted to put your life in perspective at its end, other than this unique combination of mind and heart that we knew as Dick Rhem?

And unique he was, because it did not take long for the church he had labored in for so many years to crumble without him. Tragic, yes. But at the same time, a tribute, the proof that he was one of a kind. The fact is that he simply could not be replaced. So Christ Community is gone, but our mourning should be tempered: nothing lasts forever. Dick himself was not all that fond of institutions anyway. Most important is the lasting impression it made on all of us, and here we are, the Christ Community diaspora, scattered but still permanently altered by the experience and eternally thankful for it.

Dick, we missed your leadership when you retired. We will miss your physical presence all the more, but we will never forget.



Reflections and prayer by Rev. Pete Theune - friend, fellow pastor and former Minister of Community Life and Spiritual Formation, Christ Community Church.

Before we turn our attention to prayer, I must turn my attention and a few words to Nancy Rhem. I want to say publicly and clearly that, Nancy, you have always, *always* been part of the team, the ministry team. Always! And it has been remarkable working with Dick, but also always being so mindful of you, of your graciousness, your kindness, your mindfulness. They were all an important part of your husband's ministry, for they were *your* ministry – your ministry of grace and inclusiveness. And you invited us, untold numbers of us, into your wonderful home on the Lake, overlooking the bluff. Sometimes there were small gatherings; sometimes, Nancy, they were *huge* gatherings!

And you – let me quickly add, I love appetite – and *you were wonderful* in the kitchen! You really were. And you didn't really have to stay there at all, but there was always a wonderful sampling of what you'd come up with each and every time when we would gather. But in the long and in the short of it, Nancy Rhem,

you have been pure gift. You have been pure gift. It just needed to be said, just needed to be said that you, Nancy Rhem, have *always* been part of the ministry team. Thank you.

In my office at the house is a wonderful poster with words written by Albert Schweitzer. It goes like this:

“Sometimes our light goes out and is blown back into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes our greatest thanks to those who have rekindled our inner light.”

And that’s what Dick did – again and again – for those of us gathered here and well beyond. He was a person who rekindled our inner light and gave us confidence and courage to be our finest selves.

I have been asked to have a prayer – and to keep it relatively short. And let me just quickly add that I went to my friend and former colleague, Bob Kleinheksel, and I said, “Bob, I’m asked to do a prayer and he emailed to me some really good ideas and a few of them are laced into the prayer, but I did tell him that I would probably never acknowledge which ones were his. So, with that spirit, let us come to a time of reflection and prayer.

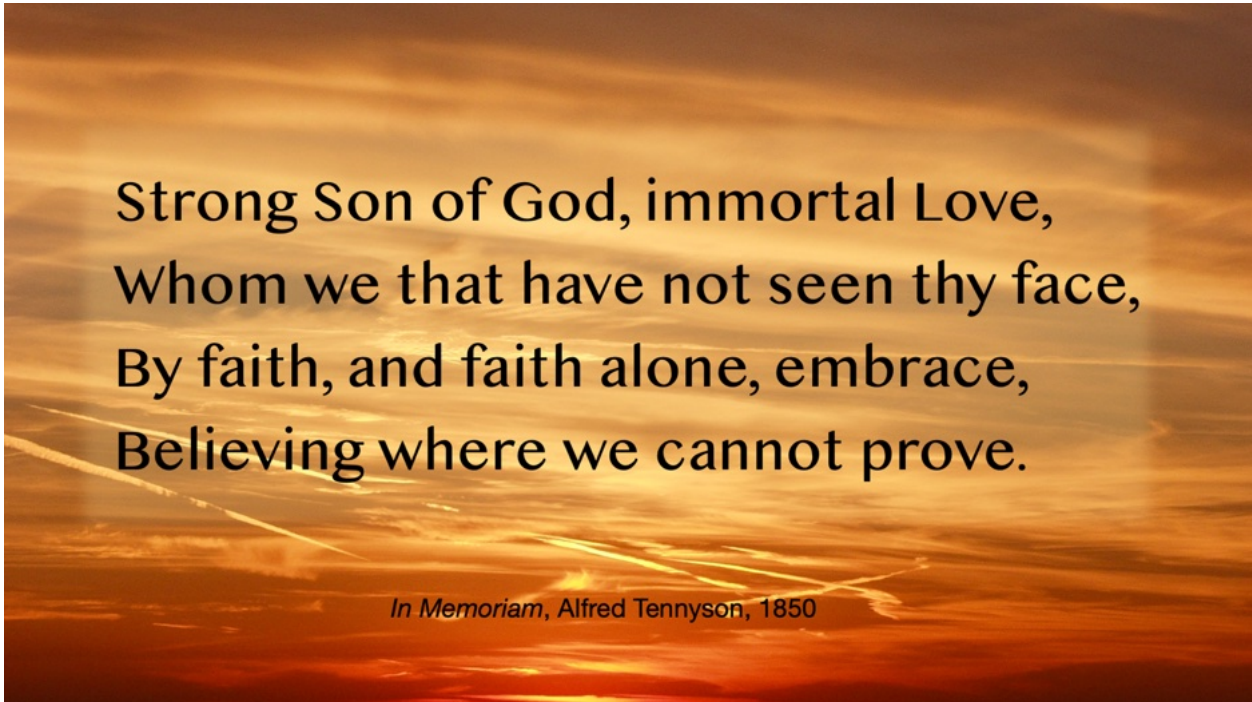
We gather here today in celebration of the life and legacy of Richard, Dick, Rhem. He had a full life. He was beloved as a child, he was incredibly smart and curious, and he was raised in the traditions of the Christian faith. And yet his curiosity grew and it expanded, and it invited – invited all of us to think things through for ourselves. He gave us, each of us, permission to challenge our conventional selves and to wonder, and wander, and believe that we could always, *always* come home to our better selves. That we, too, like the prodigal, are welcomed home and we are always welcomed into the very arms of the holy one.

Thank you, Dick. You were a mentor for all of us here. You were brilliant in a practical, theological way. Sometimes your messages were even a little over my head, but I think that’s why you kept me on team. You were always, always enjoyable and you trusted your team.

And in the end, as in the beginning, grace can and grace must be the final word because it *is* our eternal hope. And, as much as Dick cared for us and believed in our individual and collective goodness, he was moved by the solidarity of his family: Nancy, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. And, Nancy, he acknowledged that it was you – Grammy – who held that tribe of people together, with love, with incredible grace.

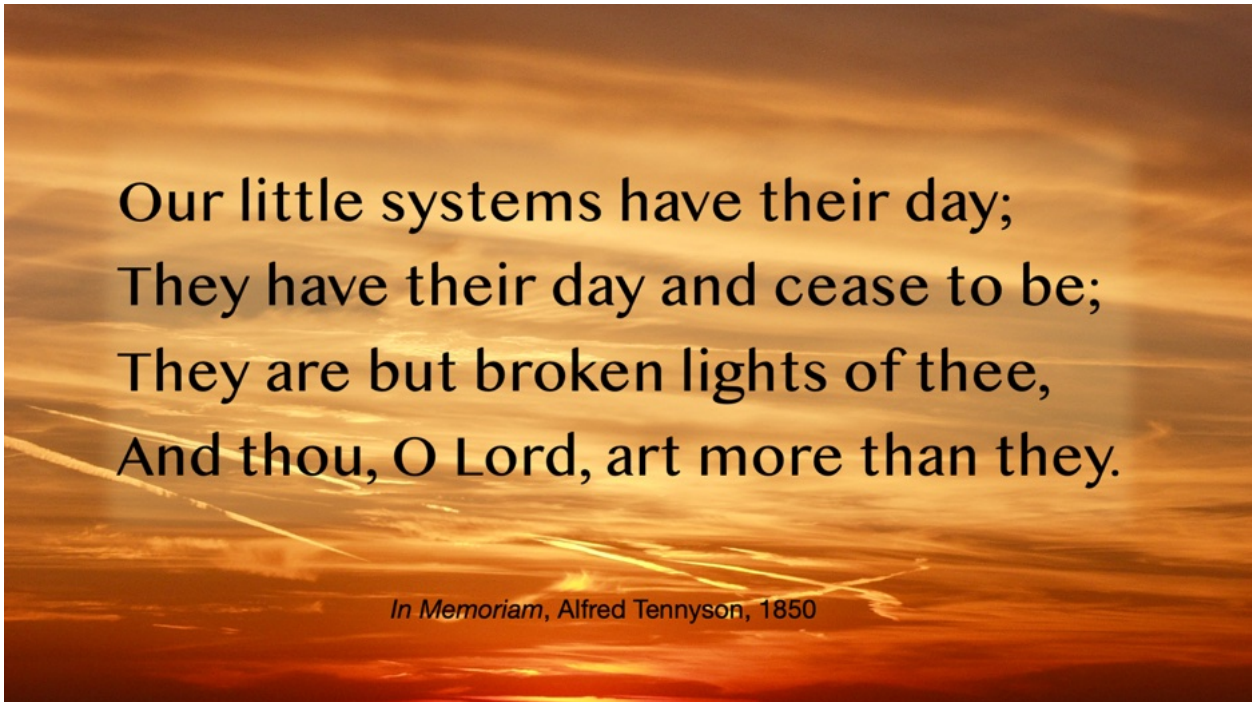
And so, let us come together now in prayer, remembering the words as expressed in the Lord's Prayer, beginning with "Our mother," or "Our father." Let us pray together.

Our Mother/Father, who art in heaven.
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.



Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove.

In Memoriam, Alfred Tennyson, 1850



Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

In Memoriam, Alfred Tennyson, 1850



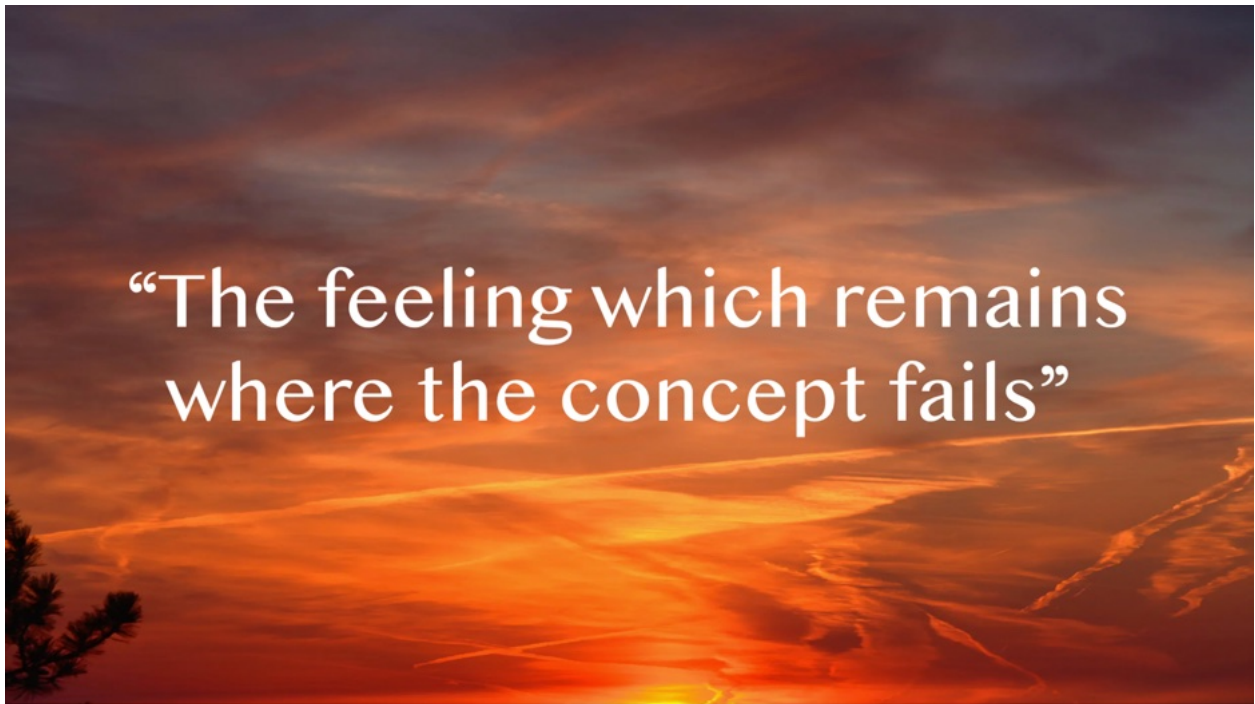
Peter Hart, friend, member of Christ Community Church, secretary of the Center for Religion and Life and editor of the Richard A. Rhem Archive at GVSU and www.richardrhem.org



Dick and I both lived in homes on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. We loved the fabulous sunsets over the lake and often talked about them. I enjoyed sunsets as beautiful natural phenomena that can be completely understood as the physics of light waves interacting with Milwaukee pollution. Ah, but for Dick it was that but so much more. Dick saw God in the sunset and let his heart be lifted.

We maintained a running dialogue about sunsets. As usual, it was an asymmetric dialogue as Dick wouldn't debate so much as let one of his sermons be his response.

Dick's final word on his quest for God in sunsets and life can be found in his last lecture, given April 19, 2015 at the First Presbyterian Church in Grand Haven, and entitled: "The Feeling which remains where the concept fails."



The meaning of the lecture's title for Dick should be understood within the context of his spiritual quest, his obsession with the question of God – *how to image God, how to speak of divine action and most importantly, how to experience God.*



Dick was propelled in his spiritual journey by the tension between heart and mind. He had a sharp, critical mind. His friend and fellow pastor, Bud Ridder, used to call him up with some theological conundrum for Dick to unravel and say: Jong, you're so smart.

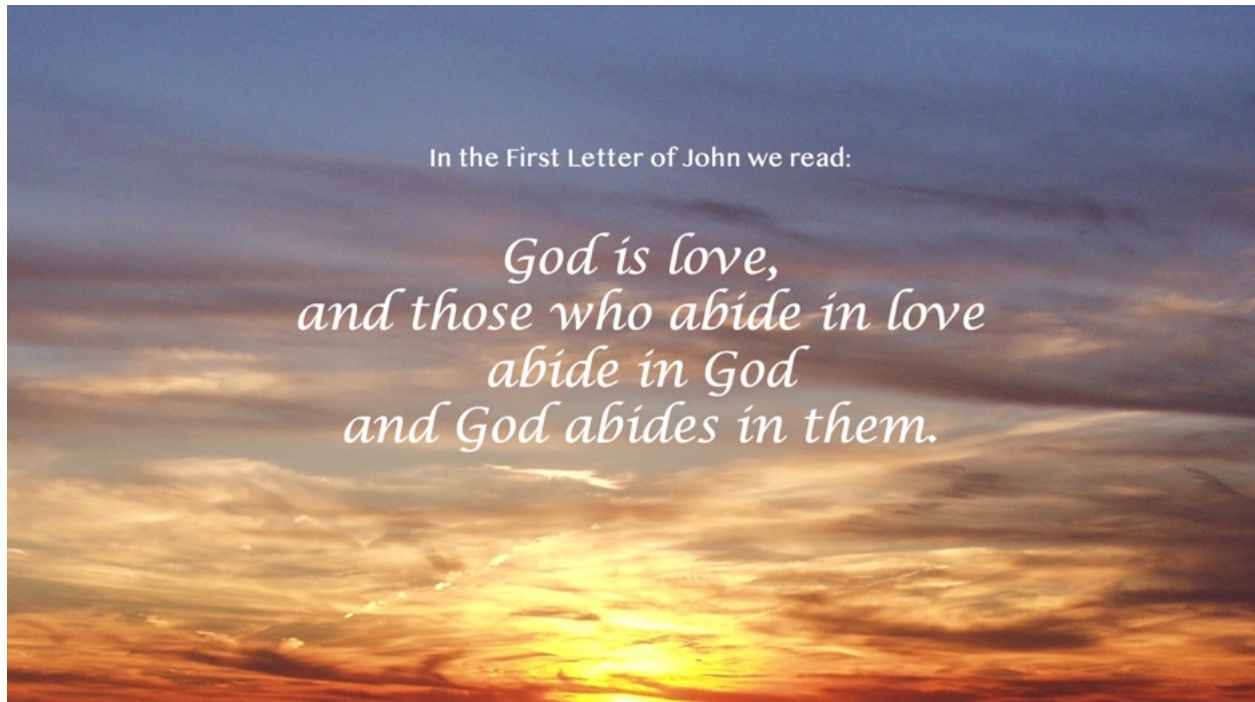
But Dick's critical thinking was tethered to a generous, loving heart nurtured from an early age in sweet Dutch piety.



We can best understand these two seminal concepts together.

Dick wants to understand the ultimate meaning of life. He called it a mystery. His reasoning mind will only go so far. Reason alone falls short. The concepts are good but fail to penetrate the mystery. There is more at the end of reason’s road.

So what, after decades of searching and preaching, is Dick’s understanding of that more, of the ultimate, the Omega Point?



Dick finds the ultimate reality, the grain of the universe, the core of his being in the prologue of the gospel of John and in the first letter of John.



God's love is not an abstract concept. John spells out just what this means in our lives.



In Dick's favorite musical, Victor Hugo gives expression to what it means to love God.

In the *Finale* of *Les Misérables*, *Jean Valjean*, *Colette*, *Marius Pontmercy*, *Fantine*, & *the Bishop* are present as Valjean dies. As he approaches his eternal home, he's greeted with open arms by the Bishop as all sing:

**"And remember
The truth that once was spoken:
To love another person is to see the face of God"**



“To love another person
is to see the face of God”

In his presentation on July 17, 2011 at the Lakeshore Interfaith Center, in Ganges, Michigan, entitled:

Love at the Core: The Grain of the Universe

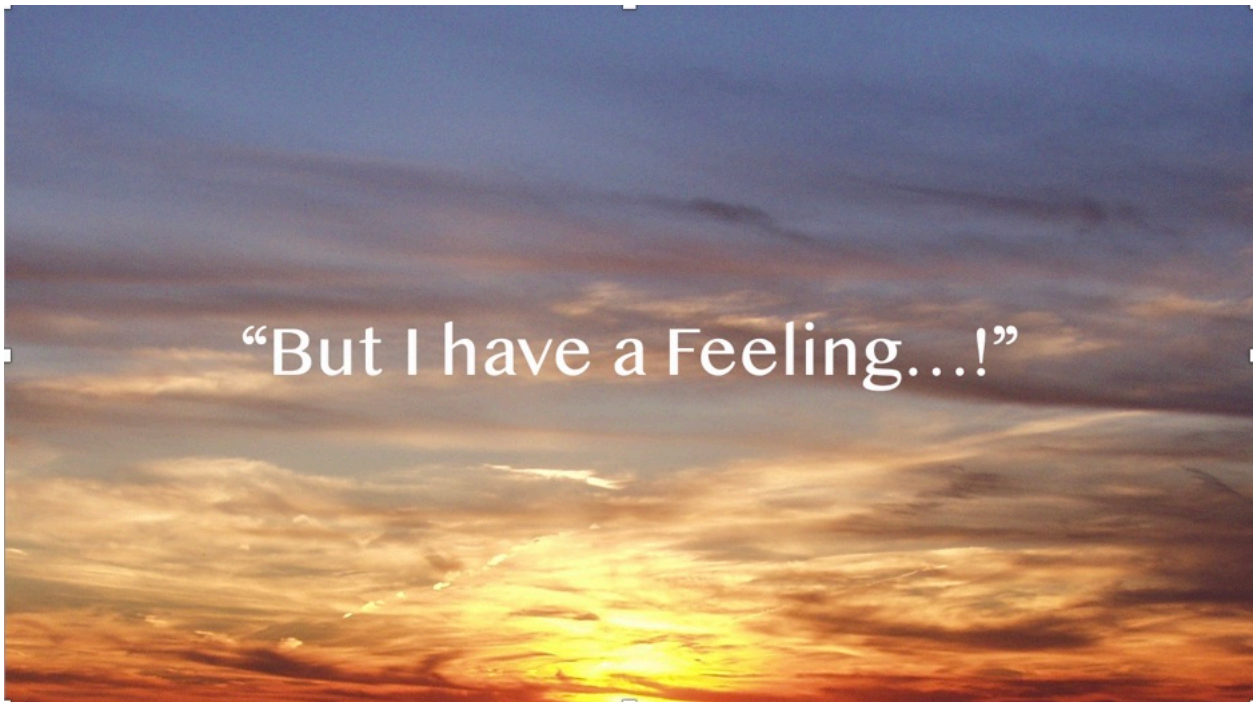
Dick said in conclusion:

“Love is at the core of reality, the creative center of the cosmos. The grain of the universe is Love. It is to love we are called every day in every way to one and all. It is the Way of Jesus for me, a very concrete way to which I am called, ...

Love is the answer to the world’s violence, to humanity’s disease and finally, Love will prevail because there can be no doubt, Love wins.

This I believe. “

And that feeling stems from an awareness of something ultimate, of the Love that is at the core of Being.



Dick concludes his Last Lecture in 2015:

“Indeed, to love is to experience beyond reason’s deepest probe, a feeling beyond reason’s search or word to convey.

Of course, there is no proof for that because reasoned proof has no place in the quest for the Ultimate Reality, call it God or call it Love.

But I have a Feeling...! “

Dick has penetrated the mystery. At the end of his journey, ultimate reality, the core of being, is a mystery only to reason. He has found his ultimate truth. Indeed, he knew it his entire life. He has a feeling, an awareness, a consciousness, a fundamental trust that embraces him and transcends his personal existence. We celebrate Dick with profound gratitude for his journey of faith, for sharing it with us, for sunsets that will never look the same, for changing many of our lives, for opening our hearts to the divine gift of love.

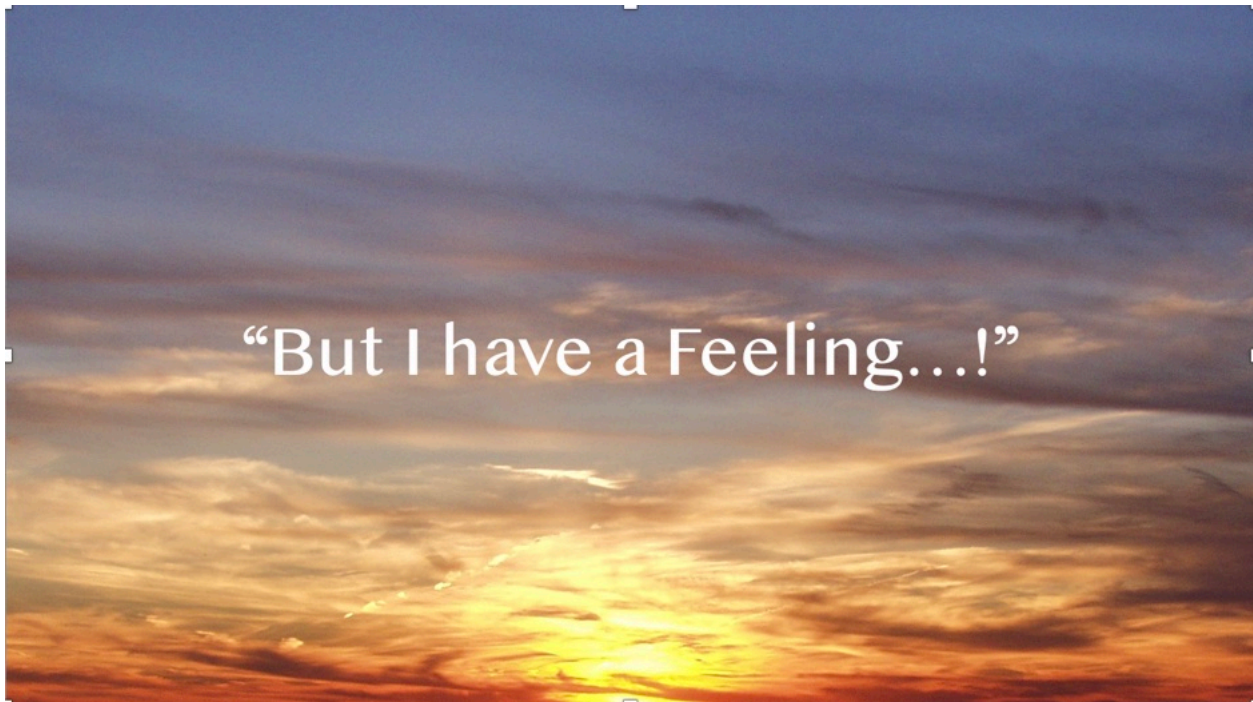


After his 2015 “Last Lecture”, Dick gradually lost his interest in reading books. He happily began the weekly task of selecting a sermon from his online archive for Sunday distribution. Almost all his selections were sermons he preached during the last half of the nineties.

Dick was reliving those years as pastor of Christ Community Church, exploring “a new freedom he didn’t know he didn’t have”.

He remembered those years and experiences with great fondness. Remembering nurtured him.

It’s my sense he was readying himself for his eternal home.



When Dick and I started working together on programs for the Center for Religion & Life, we did all our planning over lunch. I always brought a yellow sticky note with the items that needed our attention. I continued doing that after Dick's retirement.

He would call me during the week and ask me to make a note about something he wanted to discuss at our next lunch. If something was important and not to be forgotten, it needed to be on the sticky note. He never brought his own sticky note.

That is, until this past Monday, when he turned the tables on me.

At a meeting with the family, Susan fetched Dick's well-worn Bible, and opened the leather cover to a yellow sticky note from Dick.

Did he place it there for us to find?

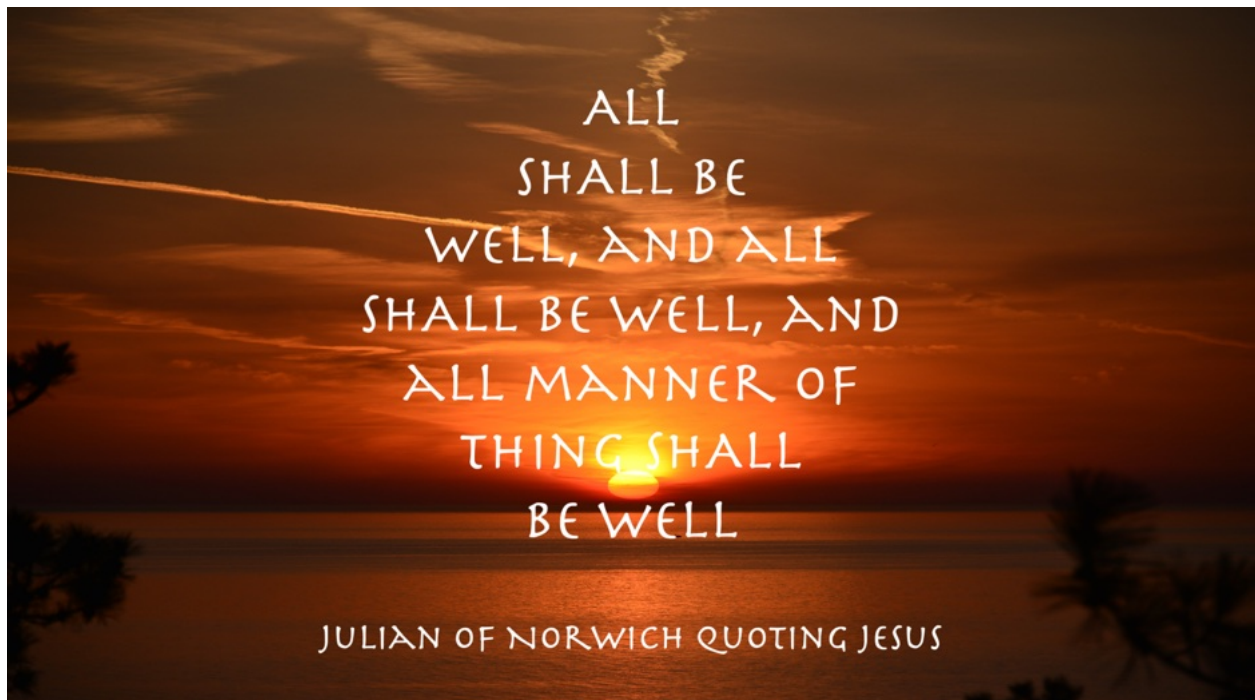
We will never know for sure...but I have a feeling...!

Deaths

When surrounded by the blackness of the darkest night, O how lonely death can be. But at the end of this long tunnel is a shining light where death is swallowed up in victory.

Just think of stepping on shore and finding it heaven, of touching a hand and finding it God's.

of breathing new air and finding it's celestial, of waking up in glory and finding it home.



And all God's people said "Amen"

ADDENDUM

Memorial Prayer for the Life of Richard A. Rhem, in his own words,
as selected and assembled by Helen Hart from seven of his funeral prayers.

Remembering Dick Rhem by Doug Kindschi, Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

Obituary for Richard A. Rhem, 1035 ~ 2020

**Memorial Prayer for the Life of Richard A. Rhem,
In his Own Words,**

*as selected and assembled by Helen Hart
from seven of his funeral prayers.*

Oh God,
we would be still and know that you are God,
Source of all being, mysterious mover of the ongoing cosmic drama,
creatively breathing fresh surprises into the tapestry of our history,
graciously present to us in those moments of awareness
when we come to ourselves,
when, for at least a brief time, light dawns upon us
and we are saturated with wonder – at the sight of setting sun or starry sky.

Then in silence and solitude we know what is beyond knowing.
Then a serenity sweeps over our souls
and we know all is gift.
Then we know we are part of something so much larger
than the narrow parameters of our daily experience and limited understanding.

Then, we are grateful, O great Mystery of life,
that we have been graced with a fundamental trust
that this cosmic dance into which our lives are woven
is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing,
but a universe whose grain is Love
whose end is life and light.

Before the wonder of it all, we sense we are embraced,
caught up in something the dimensions of which we cannot begin to take in –
that Mystery that has addressed us,
eliciting from us the only response we can utter: “Oh God!”

When we have done our best to grasp you, image you,
only one thing matters –
Eternal Love that came to expression in the face of Jesus.
God is love.

All of our theology and philosophy, our reasoning and our wondering,
comes down to that: God is Love.

Then, knowing beyond knowing, we know we have been found by our Source
and in turn have found our resting place:
Source and resting place, present to us in mysterious and gracious Presence.
Only gratitude then fills our being and thus we pray,
“Thanks be to You, O God.”

We turn to you, O God, giver of life and ground of all being.
We rest in You; we trust where we do not know.
In You we hope and to You we commend this one we
have loved and lost awhile.

We celebrate the life of Dick Rhem, whose presence was larger than life,
one who, it seemed, would always be there.
We are still reeling from the shock, the abrupt wrenching away
of one so deeply loved – husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, friend,
inspiring leader of the broader community.

We know that death awaits us all,
that, from the moment we emit our borning cry,
there is for all of us a final farewell.
Yet, especially when the leave-taking is sudden,
it seems too soon, even after 85 years.

Though spared the agonizing pain and suffering of a slow, deteriorating death,
there has been no time for proper goodbyes,
no time to say things so often felt but left unsaid,
no time for mutual blessing and holding and hoping.
And thus, the grieving comes so sharply, cuts so deeply,
because there has been no time for easing into the inevitable,
to adjust to the loss.
Loss is proportionate to love.
Pain is measured by what the one removed meant to us –
and this one meant so much.

There is no denying the loss.

Yet, O God, there is no denying the wonder as well –
wonder at the beauty of love, at the amazing grace
with which this one, now absent from us, lived before us, with us.

We remember the graciousness, the sensitivity, the laughter,
how he sought to put us at ease, often with humor and effortless puns,

We remember the way he was in the fulness of human being;
the brilliance of that mind that never rested, yet was ever at rest;
a brilliance used never to intimidate or humiliate, but to lay bare the truth that sets
us free,

to free us from superstition that holds the soul bound,
from a lack of nerve, a failure of courage to follow where justice and fairness lead,
furthering the possibilities for a humane world,
for civility and dignity, for compassion and peace.

In the silence we remember the way he was,
the way he changed our lives.

We remember and we are grateful,
grateful that the luminosity of his being irradiated our own,
grateful for this gift we have shared,
this human encounter which has been divine.

This one whose life we celebrate was an instrument of your Love,
a channel of your Grace.

What a gift we have shared!

We remember and we give you thanks, O good and gracious God,
Now, while our hearts are open, our spirits tender,
mantle us with your gentle Grace and assuage our grief.

O God, grant the comfort of your Spirit,
Renew our hope and lead us on in the confidence that
nothing can ever separate us from your Love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Interfaith Inform: March 3, 2020

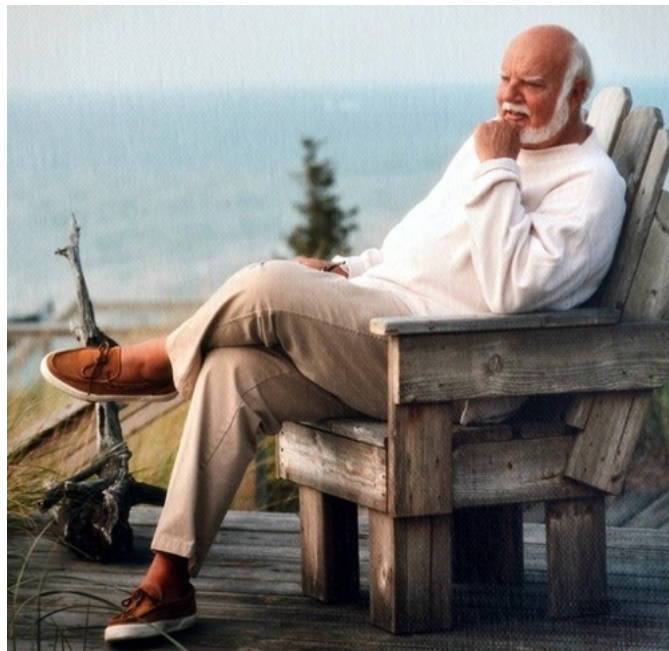
www.interfaithunderstanding.org

Interfaith Insight

Doug Kindschi
Director, Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

Remembering Dick Rhem, at his journey's end

Early last week,
Richard A. Rhem
“passed into Life
Eternal at his home



Richard A. Rhem

on the shore of Lake Michigan,” as was stated in his obituary. As he was known and remembered throughout his successful life and ministry, Dick Rhem was also an early West Michigan champion for interfaith understanding and acceptance.

Following his graduation from Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, Rhem served the First Reformed Church in Spring Lake. Later after further study and receiving the Doctorandus degree (DRS.) in systematic theology from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, he returned to the church in Spring Lake where he would serve for 37 years before his retirement in 2004. The church renamed itself Christ Community and grew rapidly as Rhem became widely known for his inspiring sermons and progressive ministry.

He was an early supporter of the interfaith movement in West Michigan, actively participating in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the early 1980s. Rhem served with Sylvia Kaufman for years on the West Shore Jewish/Christian Dialogue Committee, and was honored in 2014 by receiving the first Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award from the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. At that event, the citation included the words:

“Your commitment to inclusion and to an understanding of the expansive grace of God led you into controversy but did not thwart your journey of where God was leading you and the congregation. You spoke of a God of love, without presuming to know of limits of that love.

You were called to serve, but not to judge.

You were on a quest, without assuming certainty or superiority over those whose journey had a different language and practice.”

At that event, Rhem’s response included the affirmation that “good religion does not divide, but unites; that good religion does not denigrate, but affirms; that good religion enables us to transform all that would divide us.”

Sylvia Kaufman, on hearing of Rhem's death, wrote, "I will always remember Dick for the courage of his convictions and his compassion. He had the courage to stand up for religious inclusion and acceptance of all without having to be a Christian. He was inspired to do this after a Jewish/ Christian dialogue event in Muskegon where he heard Rabbi David Hartman." Sylvia continued, "When I was preparing for serious heart surgery, Dick is the one I turned to for comfort and support. He recommended a verse in Deuteronomy which I repeated as I was taken into the operating room. I will always remember Dick as a wonderful friend and mentor. I will miss him immensely."

President Emeritus of Grand Valley State University, Don Lubbers, was a friend and fellow Hope College graduate. He reflected, "Dick Rhem's life was a spiritual and personal journey that was helpful to all around him. He led a complete life motivated by love and service."

When I think of Rhem, I also felt his warmth and keen insight. He was on a journey that he pursued with integrity and courage. He would not let himself be divided between what his heart knew and what his mind concluded. In a recent lecture he summarized his view: "For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false. If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible."

Last October, in one of my Interfaith Insights, I recalled one of Rhem's sermons where he was reflecting on his visit to Chartres Cathedral a few miles outside of Paris. He noted that these great cathedrals, built centuries before the printing press, told stories of faith through their stained-glass windows. As one enters the nave and looks to the west, you see the Creation story and then the stories of the patriarchs, the exodus, and the prophets. Going further one observes the birth of Jesus and the stories of his life and teaching.

Rhem imagines what it would be like if one group of people only looked at the windows in the west wall of the nave and another huddled in the transept or in the choir. What if they didn't move out of that location and only knew the light coming from that particular story? "The only part of the story they knew was Creation or Christmas or Easter, or whatever it may be," Rhem said. "Would they not think, 'That's it! That's the story.' But it wouldn't be the story at all. It was a chapter of the story. It was a facet of the story."

Rhem then imagines various windows from the different faith traditions. "What if all of these respective groups were gathered before their windows where the story was told, their story? And what would be the common thing that would bind them together? Being unconscious of one another and without knowledge of anyone else's story, what would be the common thing? Well, it would be the light that streams through all the windows, that illuminates all the stories."

I continued my earlier Insight by asking, could we mistake our various "windows" as reality itself and not be aware of the light that makes that view possible? Is the whole truth of God's revelation contained in what my finite mind and understanding can perceive? And yet, Rhem reflected further by affirming that he does have a place to stand as he seeks the reality which can only be seen through our limited human understanding. He affirms his Christian stance, as do I when I recall the final verses of the famous love chapter, "For now we see through a glass dimly, but then I will see face to face." (I Corinthians 13)

Let us learn from the life and ministry of Dick Rhem to not mistake our particular limited window as the full reality of what God is doing in our world. Let us be open to how God might be working far beyond what we see through our tiny windows, while we look to the day when we enter that Life Eternal and see the light directly "face to face."

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RICHARD A. RHEM OBITUARY 2/25/19

Richard A. Rhem, age 85, passed into Life Eternal at his home on the shore of Lake Michigan on February 23, 2020. Richard was born on February 11, 1935 in Kalamazoo, MI earmarked for ministry from the womb through his father's prayer for a son. Richard excelled in education at all levels, being honored as Valedictorian at Parchment Junior High; graduating with high honors at Kalamazoo Central High School in 1954; a Summa Cum Laude graduate of Hope College in 1957; and Bachelor of Divinity graduate from Western Theological Seminary (WTS) in 1960, receiving The Systematic Theology and the Sermon Delivery Prizes for the Senior Class. Richard also received a Master of Theology from WTS in 1966.

Richard received his first call into the ministry for the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake, MI on January 26, 1960, the same day his son David was born. Richard served First Reformed from 1960 to 1964, followed by three years at Midland Park Reformed Church in New Jersey. In 1967, Richard moved his family to the Netherlands and began studying under theologian Hendrikus Berkhof at the University of Leiden, earning a Doctorandus (DRS.) degree in Systematic Theology in 1969.

In 1971, Richard returned home to the United States with his life in turmoil. Facing heartbreaking family issues, he received a call to return to the First Reformed Church in Spring Lake. This was a watershed moment in Richard's faith journey as the grace of God shown to him by the congregation in his brokenness served as a catalyst for the rest of his ministry and his deepening theological probing of God's grace. The church soon after re-named itself Christ Community Church, and never looked back. The congregation grew by leaps and bounds and became the third largest Reformed church in the RCA. CCC was "the place to be" on Sunday mornings! Richard served Christ Community until his retirement in 2004, a 37-year ministry.

Richard was an early supporter of the interfaith movement in West Michigan, actively participating in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the early 1980's. Richard led his congregation, exploring the extent of God's grace that he believed to be inclusive of the whole human family. In 2014, Richard received the first annual Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award from the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). GVSU also houses digital sound recordings of Richard's sermons and prayers, all of which can be accessed on-line at www.RichardRhem.org. Hard copies of the same and also articles are also available for reading at GVSU's Special Collections and University Archives.

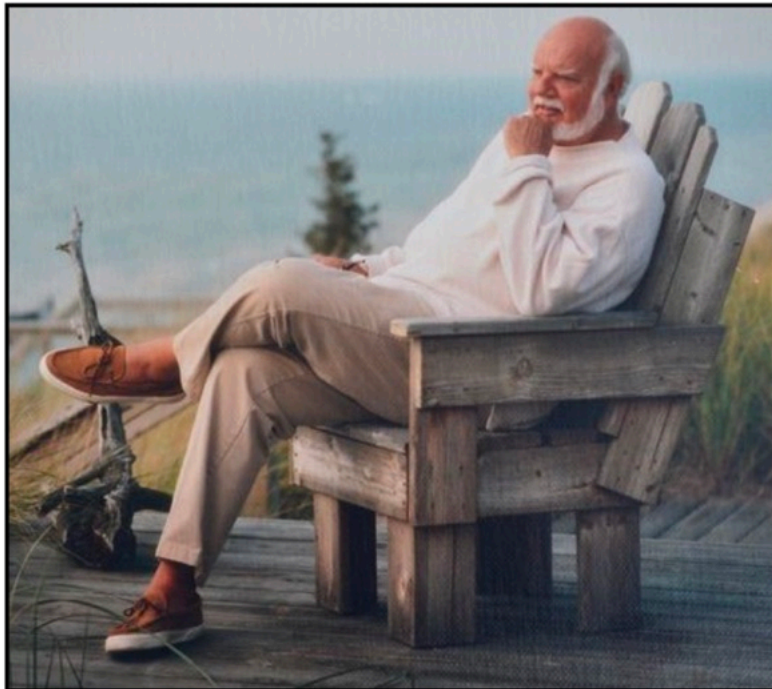
After returning home to Spring Lake, Richard married his beloved, Nancy Dornbos, on Christmas Day, 1972. They celebrated 47 years of marriage together. Together they joined their families of Rick, Lynn (Keith), David (Lori), Jonathon, Susan (Dan), and Joseph (Lana). The family has since grown to include eleven grandchildren—Derek, Catherine, Stephanie, Sarah, Mark, Sam, Sarah, Danielle, Richard, Joey, and Mia; and four great grandchildren—Luella, Porter, Nora, and Isabelle.

Richard, or "Bumpa" as the grandkids called him, was deeply loved and will be missed beyond measure. Special family gatherings continued Richard's ministry as he married his grandkids and baptized his great grandkids, celebrated their birthdays, and read the Christmas story to them every Christmas Day. His special family services and prayers consistently triggered misty eyes as he shared his love for the way of Jesus in the family circle.

Richard A. Rhem lived and died with a deep sense of gratitude to the eternal God, revealed in the face of Jesus.

IN LOVING MEMORY OF A
Reverend Richard A. Rhem

February 11, 1935 - February 22, 2020



Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

~Alfred Lord Tennyson