

“Leading a Life of Spiritual Generosity”
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This past week we lost a national treasure in Rosalynn Carter. Mrs. Carter was much more than the wife of a political leader. She was a partner to her husband in every sense of the word. She was his sounding board, she was his rock, she was a trusted advisor. And she held a deep moral compass, a profound understanding of how life should be lived.

When her husband was elected governor in Georgia in the 1970s one of the first things that she did her official act as first lady of Georgia was to visit a women's penitentiary there. She was appalled at the conditions she found there and she set about doing what she could improve them.

Her public life was a model of generosity and compassion for those whom the world treated unfairly.

Born in 1927 in Georgia, she was the eldest of four children. Her mother was a teacher and a dressmaker and worked at the post office. Her father was a mechanic, bus driver, and farmer. Like so many families during that time, they lived in poverty. But growing up during the Depression meant that nobody had money, and so they didn't know that they were poor. They were just like everybody else.

She was a very smart child by all accounts, succeeding in school – graduating at the head of her class from high school and then graduating from Georgia Southwest College in 1946. She married Jimmy Carter in 1946 just after she graduated from college and in doing so she set aside plans to attend Georgia State Women's College to pursue a career in design.

They had four children: three boys in relatively quick succession and then Amy seven years later in 1967.

Women of her age and social status were expected to comply with a certain model of behavior: as a married woman she was expected to raise her children and keep her home and if her husband were successful

enough that they could afford it, she should devote her passions, not to a career, but to charitable works.

Rosalynn Carter's professional/public life was a model of generosity, humility, and fierce advocacy for those living with and deeply challenged by mental illness. In Georgia, while her husband served in first the state legislature and then the governor's mansion, Mrs. Carter focused her attention on the care and treatment or rather mistreatment of those living with mental illness specifically in Georgia. She was a strong supporter of the Special Olympics and worked tirelessly to normalize mental health treatment and remove the stigma associated with seeking mental health care especially for children and for the elderly.

During the time when her husband was governor of Georgia, there was a prison work program that permitted incarcerated people to work outside of the prison, essentially as slave labor. One of the jobs that a prisoner could get was to work in the governor's mansion either as a cook or a housekeeper or a groundskeeper, or in one case, as a nanny for the governor's children.

Mary Prince is a Black woman who had been wrongfully convicted of murder, and one of the people who worked in the governor's mansion, serving as little Amy's caregiver. Amy was a toddler and pre-schooler while her father was Governor of Georgia.

Rosalynn learned about the unfair treatment of criminal defendants by the court system in Georgia from the people who were working at the governor's mansion. When Jimmy Carter was elected to the US presidency in 1976, the Carters worked to secure Mary Prince's parole into their care with the president serving as her parole officer. They brought her with them to the White House to care for Amy and they worked for years to clear Mary's name and get her wrongful conviction dismissed. Mary Prince remained with the Carters for decades, working as an integral part of the family structure. The former president dedicated his 2004 book "Sharing Good Times" to Mary Prince, "whom we love and cherish."

We see in Rosalynn Carter a lifetime of work for charitable causes. That was the expected role of a married woman in the middle of the 20th century in the United States.

Her role as spouse of a political leader elevated her efforts to the public, bringing attention: some good, some bad, to the work she supported.

Mrs. Carter could have devoted herself to non-controversial efforts, like Lady Bird Johnson's work to beautify America's highway median strips, but instead she chose to support those who were most harshly treated by the systems and government that purported to protect and serve them: those with mental illness and disabilities, and those who were cheated and abused by criminal defense lawyers while they were incarcerated.

Mrs. Carter was a model of what it takes to engage in a lifetime of spiritual generosity. She opened up her heart and her family to absorb the stories of real people who were suffering, and sought to ease that suffering in whatever way she could. She leveraged her public position as the wife of a state politician, then governor, then First Lady, to achieve things that she might not have been able to manage were it not for the pressure her position could bring to bear. Corrupt officials have no trouble tossing reporters, protestors, and complainants out of their offices, but when the First Lady comes calling, well, that was a different sort of thing. I cannot imagine they liked it one little bit, but Mrs. Carter was undaunted by any negative comments aimed in her direction, and exposed the injustices in the system. A system, it should be acknowledged, that her husband was elected to lead.

We have all heard these stories in the past week, as America mourns a national treasure.

It is the minister in me that causes me to view the life of this remarkable woman as that of a deeply committed person of faith. A lifelong Baptist, she was an elected Deacon in the family church in Plains, before the family parted ways publicly over the Southern Baptist Convention's refusal to ordain women and treat them as equal to men. Rosalyn and Jimmy were known to read bible passages to each other (in Spanish!) before bedtime in the evenings, late into their years.

This is a woman who believed in Jesus and his instructions to serve others, humbly, without drawing fanfare and attention to herself. Together, she and her husband approached life as an opportunity to serve others.

That takes a deep personal commitment to generosity.

Growing up in rural Georgia in the 1930s, Rosalyn's family was poor. But *everyone* in rural Georgia in the 1930s was poor, and lacking any reference, she and so many others thought they were doing just fine. When neighbors were in need, you helped them out. When you were short on flour to make bread, neighbors would share their own. That's just how neighborly relationships worked. You share.

You share what you have, even when what you have does not feel like it is quite enough. The Gospel story of the multiplying loaves and fishes was not a lofty or magical myth to these folks – they saw it played out every day, all around them. Everybody's living lean, but when your neighbor's hungry, you share what you've got, and everybody gets to eat.

For Rosalynn, and her husband Jimmy, sharing and giving were simply practices of their faith, as much a part of their identity and personhood as their belief in Jesus and his call to kindness.

Answering the call to kindness is not always easy, of course. Sometimes people will say cruel things about you. Sometimes they will criticize your choices, question your motives. The Carters got a full serving of that kind of negativity over their lifetimes.

And it never stopped them from doing what was right.

It never caused them to say "but don't you know who we are?"

It never once deterred them from what they saw as their faith-based obligation to help others less fortunate than themselves.

Now we come to the challenge part of the week's service.

What is it that you believe in so strongly that you are willing to endure the slings and arrows of small people to continue to do?

What is it that you are morally bound to do, not because you get accolades, but because you feel like you've failed if you don't give it your honest effort?

What is it that is so connected to your soul that it is a spiritual practice?

Generosity does not always mean giving money, although that is one way to be generous.

Generosity as a spiritual practice is but one facet of the legacy that the Carters leave this world. Devotion to their god, commitment to family, humility in all they do, and generosity that begins deep in their hearts, not merely in their bank accounts.

For truly, the Carters could have stopped picking up hammers at Habitat for Humanity building projects decades ago and no one would have faulted them. But they understood that they are not so grand and glorious that they can sit on boards and tell others what to do. They knew that it mattered when they showed up and did the humble work of nailing together two-by-fours to make a home for a family that needed one.

They understood that it mattered when they showed up in rural places on the African Continent to fight parasitic infections that ravaged remote communities. They didn't just send a check – although their foundation does plenty of check-sending – they sent themselves, as human emissaries of good will, of Christian service, of spiritual caring and generosity.

We don't all need to be generous at the same level as the Carters. Not everyone has the resources and situations available to them to do what the Carters have done. They are very clear that Jimmy's political career was the springboard from which they were able to launch a world-wide effort to help people.

But we can work at the places where we are.

We can volunteer at the Takery. We can volunteer at the Arts Festival. We can show up at the church booth at a Pride celebration. We can volunteer to help make coffee, or to clean up after a potluck, or to perform in the annual holiday service.

The Carters did what they did out of a deep abiding faith in the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our tradition has its roots in that same theology, and it plays out every day – we believe that everyone has worth and dignity. That is solid Jesus of Nazareth stuff.

We believe that we are obligated to support others, to be good stewards of the planet, to care for each other.

If anyone tells you we don't have a set of beliefs, I would argue that they are wrong. We believe things. We just happen to believe them because we have spent a great deal of time thinking and reasoning and reaching into our hearts to see what is right and just and compassionate, not only because an ancient text tells us it is so.

Rosalynn Carter died this week after a lifetime of exemplary service to humanity.

Her model is an inspiration to everyone.

And. And. And we are human. We need not achieve the things that Rosalynn Carter achieved through her generosity. We can work here, in our communities, to do what needs doing. When we make generosity a regular practice, it becomes a deeply spiritual thing.

I offer you this morning an invitation to engage in spiritual generosity in your daily lives. Consider what you might be able to offer, and do that. Don't worry about what you might be able to achieve, or complete – consider what you can give, how you can offer support.

And then do that thing.

May our lives and our actions and our practices as spiritual beings be as enriching to the world as they are to our hearts.

Amen.