

Tim Keller Taught Me About Joy

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Opinion Columnist

Tim Keller was a recliner. Whenever a particular group of my friends would get together, discussing some personal, social or philosophical issue over Zoom during the past few years, you could see Tim just chilling and enjoying it, lounging back in his chair. The conversation would flow, and finally somebody would ask: “Tim, what do you think?”

He’d start slow, with that wry, friendly smile. He’d mention a relevant John Bunyan poem, then an observation Kierkegaard had made or a pattern the historian David Bebbington had noticed. Then Tim would synthesize it all into the four crucial points that pierced the clouds of confusion and brought you to a new layer of understanding.

I used to think of it as the Keller Clarity Beam. He didn’t make these points in a didactic or professorial way. It was more like: Hey, you’re thirsty. I happen to have this glass of water. Want a sip?

It was this skill that made Tim Keller, [who died on Friday at 72](#), one of the most important theologians and greatest preachers of our time.

American evangelicalism suffers from an intellectual inferiority complex that sometimes turns into straight anti-intellectualism. But Tim could draw on a vast array of intellectual sources to argue for the existence of God, to draw piercing psychological insights from the troubling parts of Scripture or to help people through moments of suffering. His voice was warm, his observations crystal clear. We all tried to act cool around Tim, but we knew we had a giant in our midst.

Erudition was not the core of who he was. Early in his career he pastored a church in the small town of Hopewell, Va., where only 5 percent of the high school graduates went on to college. References to Hannah Arendt were not the right way to connect. But Tim had this uplifting sense that the hard part about faith is persuading yourself to believe in something so wonderful.

On the cross, Tim wrote, Jesus was “putting himself into our lives — our misery, our mortality, so we could be brought into his life, his joy and immortality.” He enjoyed repeating the saying “Cheer up! You’re a worse sinner than you ever dared imagine and you’re more loved than you ever dared hope.”

Tim spent most of his career at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, ministering to young, highly educated people in finance, medicine, publishing and the arts — often fallen-away Christians, seekers and atheists. Tim found himself surrounded

by people with the unquenched thirsts of modern life, the deep longings that work, autonomy and moral relativism had failed to satisfy.

He didn't fight a culture war against that Manhattan world. His focus was not on politics but on "our own disordered hearts, wracked by inordinate desires for things that control us, that lead us to feel superior and exclude those without them, that fail to satisfy us even when we get them."

He offered a radically different way. He pointed people to Jesus, and through Jesus' example to a life of self-sacrificial service. That may seem unrealistic; doesn't the world run on self-interest? But Tim and his wife, Kathy, wrote a wonderful book, "The Meaning of Marriage," which in effect argued that self-sacrificial love is actually the only practical way to get what you really hunger for.

After some time in marriage, they counseled, you're going to realize that the wonderful person you married is actually kind of selfish. And as you realize this about him, he is realizing this about you.

The only way forward is to recognize that your own selfishness is the only selfishness you can control; your self-centeredness is the problem here. Love is an action, not just an emotion, and the marriage will only thrive if both people in it make daily sacrificial commitments to each other, learning to serve and, harder still, be served. "Whether we are husband or wife," the Kellers wrote, "we are not to live for ourselves but for the other. And that is the hardest yet single most important function of being a husband or a wife in marriage."

Tim's happy and generous manner was based on the conviction that we are born wired to seek delight, and we can find it. "Anybody who has tasted the reality of God knows anything is worth losing for this," Tim preached, "and nothing is worth keeping if I'm going to lose this."

Tim kept contact with his friends as he was dying of pancreatic cancer — one time even calling into our group Zoom from a hospital emergency room. He told us that he and Kathy cried a lot during these last few years, but their faith became more real. In [an essay for The Atlantic](#), he wrote that he never experienced more grief than when dying, but he had never experienced more happiness either.

Tim was confident, cheerful and at peace as he spiraled down toward death and up toward his maker. His passing has made us all very sad, but if you go back and listen to his sermons, which you should, you come back to gratitude for his life and to the old questions: Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?