

2025 Dinner and Awards for Ethical Leadership Remarks

Rev. Dr. Michael Woolf (Clergy 2013)

Distinguished Fellow Award

Thank you so much for that introduction. I'm not used to being greeted so warmly when I show up with a clerical collar on. Usually people are a little less pleased to see me.

When I went to seminary I was looking for ethical formation. While I found plenty of religious formation, I didn't receive much in the way of preparing myself to make complex moral decisions as a religious leader. I got that ethical formation from FASPE.

We only have one lifetime here on this earth. One brief span to hallow and use how our conscience moves us. What we do with it is of vital importance. Will we live lives of courage and resilience or will we allow dehumanization and authoritarianism to flourish without comment?

Each person is different. We must all make our decisions, but it is my contention that the making of those decisions is of vital importance. What we do matters. This is a fundamental spiritual claim. It can be easy to believe that we couldn't change anything if we acted, and if we did act it wouldn't be worth the cost.

We have to be courageous. Each of us has influence and power. Power is not a dirty word - it is a necessary one. The theory of power in this country is that it comes from the bottom up, not the top down. We are witnessing an inversion of that vision today.

Speaking up is risky. But being silent is riskier. We cannot know what will happen when we risk living into our conscience, but we know what will happen if we don't. We will become husks of ourselves, always weighing costs, never living boldly.

I have faith that a new day is coming but it will only come through people who follow their conscience wherever it may lead. My path is likely not your path, and that is OK, but the important thing is to look within ourselves and be willing to take risks for what we believe to be right.

In the end, none of us can guarantee the results of our choices. But we *can* decide the kind of people we want to be as we make them. That is the sacred work before us—not perfection, not certainty, but faithfulness.

If we commit to that, then whatever comes, we will have lived with integrity, and perhaps even helped bend the arc a little further toward the world we long for.

So my prayer, my hope, and my challenge to each of us tonight is this:

May we refuse to shrink ourselves to fit a moment of fear.

May we listen for the quiet tug of conscience and honor it with our lives.

And may we trust that when ordinary people choose courage over comfort, the world tilts—however slightly—toward justice, toward dignity, toward hope.

Thank you, and may we walk forward together with open eyes and brave hearts.