

Thou Art a Wonder Gome

*Celebration of the Reverend Peter Gomes'
Twenty-five Years in the Ministry of Memorial Church
Adolphus Busch Hall, October 14, 1995*

SOME TIME AGO, in 1982, Peter Gomes was delivering one of his Commencement-morning utterances to the graduating senior class. He said that he realized the seniors were probably quite surprised to find themselves in Memorial Church at such a time.

Indeed, they might well feel they were well past the point where prayer could be of any assistance to them. Nonetheless, said Peter, they should try to do their best. Besides, chapel (like the glass flowers) should be visited at least once.

People generally do visit Memorial Church, not only once but rather more. And often, they do so because of Peter. He is our own perpetual multiplier effect: our pastoral exponent, as well as our elegantly worldly host, our Crimson cicerone, our Master of Loaves, Fishes, and Chandon Brut champagne.

I know that Peter's surname Gomes probably relates to Gomez, via his Portuguese ancestry. But I prefer to think of it as the plural of "gome," because I assume that (in his ubiquity) there must cer-

The Worlds of Harvard

tainly be more than one Peter. Everywhere I stray, in different parts of the campus, I see gomes galore in different roles fulfilling different functions.

It occurred to me that I ought to know more precisely what a gome actually is. As I'm sure you know, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (there is, alas, no *Emmanuel College Cambridge Dictionary*) tells us that "gome" derives from the Anglo-Saxon *guma*, found as early as *Beowulf*. *Guma* meant literally *man*, and is connected to our own *human*. In *Beowulf*, of course, a gome tended to be a warrior type, a heroic battler: the sort of person who went galloping after Grendels.

Later, in the medieval period, a gome became rather more refined, Arthurian, and chivalric. There's a charming fourteenth-century poem, in which, at one point, the narrator salutes a stranger riding toward him in shining armor. The image seems to me the very picture of our young Peter:

*"Christian knight," quoth Ferumbras,
"thou art a wonder gome."*¹

Finally, from ancient to recent times, in different languages, "gome" has referred to several important qualities associated with people who carry responsibilities and who are likely to be spiritual as well as secular leaders. It means heed, or attention, or care; and it also has meant good sense, wit, tact. Whether we think of Peter as a singular gome, or as many plural gomes, he is our *guma*, our man; our heedful hero; our Christian knight whose real armor is in fact his care for others, his good sense, his wit, and his tact.

+ + +

The special capacity for human and spiritual interlocution is what I most associate with Peter: his ability to transform the modest everyday experiences and events of life into so much more than they might otherwise become.

Thou Art a Wonder Gome

In the 1982 Commencement sermon that I mentioned earlier, Peter told the seniors that they should expect virtue and other important moral or spiritual qualities to be

demonstrated in the ... unexciting ... side of life. Tempting as it may be to perform virtue at a cosmic moment in world affairs, ... more often than not the test of your character will come ... in the ordinary circumstances of living, being, and doing.

So, he said, try to make as much as possible of your daily, mundane existence, by turning it into something “civil, gracious, and humane.”

There are many occasions, of course, when Peter lifts us, with the gift of his eloquence, far above the mundane. But I like to think that his other gift is equally great: the gift of somehow blessing and giving significance to all the incidentals of our experience. He reminds us that in the many mansions of our Father’s house, there are rooms where Gilbert and Sullivan as well as Mozart, Josquin des Prés – and even Elgar – are played; rooms where butternut squash, baby carrots, and even cranberries, as well as *crème anglaise* and Chardonnay, are served; where Emmanuel College, Tuskegee Institute, Bates College, and Harvard University all convivially coexist; and where all of these are as holy as they are worldly.

Peter has been Minister of the Memorial Church a full twenty-five years; and he has not long ago passed his fiftieth birthday. I would like to conclude these remarks with a brief lyric by William Butler Yeats. It is a poem that is set in England – a place Peter loves. The poet is about fifty, and that seems appropriate. The subject has to do with moments of grace and how they can come unexpectedly, illuminating and transfiguring the most ordinary particulars of our life. This is not so much a poem about a person, as it is about the ways in which mundane life can, at moments, be experienced intensely, when we have a gome to remind us of what is possible:

The Worlds of Harvard

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.*

*While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessèd and could bless.²*

Thank you, Peter, for what you have done at Harvard, these twenty-five years, to bless the life that surrounds us.

¹ "Sir Ferumbras," in *Ashmole MS. 33* circa 1380, ed. Sidney J. Herrtage (London: Early English Text Society, 1879), 14. (Modernized spelling added.)

² W. B. Yeats, "Vacillation" IV, in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, rev. 2nd ed., ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 255.