

The glory of the mundane: Remembering John Updike

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

John Updike, who died January 27 at age 76, was one of the literary giants of our time. As I mentioned in my column in the February 10 issue (written before Updike's death), I have read as much as I could of his work—ever since I saw him interviewed on television and heard him respond to a question about why religion and clergy appear so frequently in his writing. He said that he was a believer, that he sat in a church pew on Sunday mornings, and that he admired and was interested in the clergy because week after week they try to help people deal with ultimate questions. And indeed, Updike served on the building committee for a Congregational church in Beverly Farms, Massachusetts.

There was little that Updike was not interested in, but religion and theology were among his major concerns. The theologian Karl Barth in particular interested him. One of Updike's poems includes these lines: "Did you know / that four-fifths of the body's intake goes merely to maintain our temperatures of 98.6°? / Or that Karl Barth, addressing prisoners, said the prayer for stronger faith is the one / prayer that has never been denied?"

My admiration for Updike has not been without complications. When I quoted him in a sermon once, a church member rushed out and bought a copy of his novel *Couples*, the title of which aptly reflects the book's sexual content. She started eyeing me suspiciously.

Updike applied his writing and observational skills to the most mundane of subjects. On the ubiquity of blue jeans: "It came to me that the curious global triumph of denim and Levis is, for the young people from China to Chile who have taken them up, a declaration of freedom, a liberation from caste." On the architecture of high schools in the early 20th century: "The municipal high school was a species of cathedral, looming ornately above its neighborhood—not merely constructed, but constructed with a flourish that showed where the society placed its pride." On the joys of walking in the late autumn sun: "Why do we love them, these last days of

something like summer, of freedom to move in few clothes, though frost has flattened the morning grass? They tell us we shall live forever. Stretched like a rainbow across day's end, my shadow makes a path for my feet; I am my path."