

March Theme

Courage: The Practice of Bearing Witness

“Showing up is 80 percent of life.” --- Woody Allen

What, you may well ask, does that quote have to do with our monthly worship theme?

The root of the word courage is from the Latin *cor*, meaning heart, and the old French *corage* meaning innermost feelings. In modern language it is used to describe inner strength. Witness means to bear in mind, acknowledge. In early Christian and Islamic writings the word witness as a noun was nearly identical to the word for martyr, that is, someone who gives testimony about something they believe to be true. Bearing witness has traditionally meant testifying to something you know or believe to be true. More recently it is a phrase used in psychology to describe acknowledging a trauma and in doing so validating the person's experience of it.

Religious texts are full of the idea of having the courage to bear witness. In Buddhism, this manifests itself as the beginner's mind....being present, listening, allowing yourself to wrestle with your own uncomfortable feelings in the face of an unknowable or painful situation. Beginner's mind allows us to “show up” with no idea of what will happen, what we should do, or how to change anything. The significance of bearing witness is that in doing so the truth of a situation can be revealed. Bearing witness requires the courage to be vulnerable, uncertain and more comfortable with questions, rather than answers. Fostering a non-anxious, non-judgmental presence in the face of life experiences that may go beyond food, shelter, wealth, and progeny takes the courage to acknowledge our own frailties and prejudices. In being open, like an empty vessel, to the reality of a strange and/or painful situation we bear witness to someone else's pain or struggle and can take away an account that can be shared with others. This informs the call to service that is a part of our Unitarian Universalist covenant. We take away what we have learned and share the story, hopefully to then generate some sort of action to address injustices. On a more personal level bearing witness can be listening with loving attention to the difficult/painful story of another person or sitting silently with someone who is dying. We acknowledge the sorrow in the world rather than turning away from it and in doing so confirm our collective relationship to struggle and differences.

We have to have the courage to bear witness to our own feelings and prejudices before we can truly do the same with people and situations that we may not be comfortable with. Bearing witness can reveal inner, as well as outer, truth...the truth of our own prejudices and fears. Having the courage to “show up”, rather than turn away from, pain, suffering and life experiences different from our own is the first step in bearing witness to our own fears and prejudices, and begins the path to affirmation of our connection with the truth of lives different from our own. How often do we hear from our ministers that life begins outside our comfort zones? Bearing witness requires not only the courage to show up and listen but the courage to feel.

This month's theme was composed by Peggy Homer and the Worship Associates.

Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:

1. What prevents you from being courageous?
2. What is the responsibility of being a witness? What is the burden?
3. Are there things you have to do everyday that require courage?
4. In what way does bearing witness inform activism?
5. When does it take courage to bear witness?
6. What is the most courageous thing you've ever done?

Quotes and Short Readings

"By creatively encountering people in their struggle with life as they are living it we are participating in the universal human challenge of self affirmation in spite of hardship, pain, suffering, fear, and anxiety." --- *Unknown*

"A fulfilling life requires embracing or bearing witness to, difficulty, rather than running away from it." ----*Frederich Nietzsche.*

"I've always preferred being a foul weather friend." ---- *Jean Homer*

"Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point. What good is it being chaste, merciful, or honest only when it is easy? It's when you are afraid that it takes the most courage to choose the harder right over the easier wrong. Pontius Pilate was merciful until it became risky." ----- *C.S. Lewis*

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak.

"Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." ----- *Winston Churchill*

Whether a newborn, a toddler or teenager, a middle-aged or thoroughly wrinkled soul, when they are too sick to get out of bed and their breath is ragged and their hands are starting to curl into their palms, they are the sacred vulnerable and it is up to the ones standing to take good care. If you have a habit of being surprised by life's mysteries, if you're drawn to the myriad layers of human experience, if you feel compelled, called, and really, really want to be there as someone is dying, go all in. Because you will carry with you the imprint of those final weeks or days or moments, someone else's breaths, and you'll remember the gifts, eventually.

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"For the dead and the living, we must bear witness."

— Elie Wiesel

"As Emmanuel, Cardinal Suhard says, "To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."

The Worship Associates are: Tom Bolton, Alexandra Businger, Alan Cantor, Masha Hoffey, Margaret Homer, Maria Kempner, Julien Lafleur, Marty Nickerson, Jennifer Ollington, and Penn Young.

— Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*

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