

September Theme

Courage: The Practice of Commitment

Having a soft heart in a cruel world is courage not weakness.

~ Katherine Henson

Introduction

Courage is defined as the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. Courage comes from Old French ‘corage’ referring to ‘heart, innermost feelings;’ and from Latin ‘cor’ or ‘heart.’ Words for heart are commonly metaphors for inner strength. Courage is foundational to our faith and encourages us to live with heart in a world which can be cruel, and in desperate need of strong heart-centered action. The practice of commitment, therefore, may help us to develop our courage, and to embody the great miracle that is the courageous human spirit in the face of adversity.

Courage is certainly something to hope and pray for, and to cultivate for a meaningful life. Courage is less about fear and is more a deeper yearning within our spirit or soul to live and embody what we love, and what we are passionate about; and this may involve fighting against injustices that evoke fear in ourselves. Mark Twain wrote, “Courage is not the lack of fear. It is acting in spite of it.” Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “We must constantly build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.” Courage requires we take a stand against something despite our fears. Courage is a spiritual value, and could use exploration by all of us to combat the many injustices in our world today. And to take that action, to become courageous, we may need to make commitments to ourselves and others, which is what our faith is about- covenantal promises.

The lives of many remarkable Unitarian Universalists throughout history illustrate the nature of courage and integrity. Universalist Clara Barton demonstrated tremendous moral courage. She was known as the *Angel of the Battlefield* during the civil war, and later as the founder of the American Red Cross. In her later years she wrote, “To compliment me, writers dwell on my courage. In the earlier years of my life I remember nothing but fear.” Clara Barton was plagued throughout her life by sadness, melancholy and a lack of confidence. Perhaps her courage was not in her acts of bravery during the war or her fortitude in guiding the Red Cross; rather her courage was evident in the fact that she persisted in life each day.

Unitarian Universalist values of acceptance of diversity and independence of spirit are the basis for growing moral and spiritual courage. To develop moral courage, we need to be independent, make decisions on our own, and have a willingness to do the right thing even if it means breaking the rules. Within our faith community we may develop moral courage by committing ourselves to a cause, and joining with others. This is where the practice of commitment comes in, to help us take action in order to be courageous. Commitment is from the Latin *committere* ‘to unite, connect, and bring together’. When we join with others and commit to causes, both in our faith and more broadly, we may remember we are not alone, and perhaps this can help us to discover seeds of courage within ourselves.

Our faith reminds us of the great mystery, which some refer to as the spirit of life, as being with us on our journeys together as we commit to just and merciful causes. As UU minister Douglas Taylor said, “It takes courage to persevere with a dream of the Beloved Community.” Let us remain hopeful that the strength of our faith will sustain us on our journey towards courage. As we enter into a new church year, may all of us have the courage to face the challenges of our troubled world, so that we may act with commitment, hope, trust and love in the face of fear and hatred. Let us commit to growing courage in ourselves, and in each other, so that our world may become more just, kind and loving.

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

1. What helps you to feel more courageous?
2. In what places do you feel courageous? In what places do you not feel courageous?
3. How can you live and lead authentically in ways that help you to foster a deeper commitment to leadership and service to others?
4. What does it take for you to feel able to show moral courage when necessary?
5. Do you feel that seeds of courage are growing in you? Why or why not?
6. How can we commit ourselves, as a faith community, to growing seeds of courage in ourselves and in our community? What about in our children?
7. Is there a cause you would like to commit to that will take tremendous acts of courage? If so, what is it? And, what can help you to muster up the courage to commit?

Quotes and Short Readings

Swimming against the tide takes courage, but the joy gained from the disruption, especially from disrupting obsolete or unhealthy social structures, is worth the effort. It's always worth the initial fear involved, and you'll find that the more you practice going against the tide, the more you'll be capable of transforming fear into courage.

~ *Forrest Church, Freedom From Fear: Finding The Courage To Act, Love, And Be*

Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.

~*Mary Ann Radmacher*

Never doubt that a small group of committed, thoughtful people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

~*Margaret Mead*

Had you but the courage to acknowledge the haunted inner room, turn the key and enter, you would encounter nothing strange or sinister there. You would meet some vital self of yours that you had banished during a time of pain or difficulty. Sometimes, when life squeezes you into lonely crevices, you may have to decide between survival and breaking apart. The banished self from an earlier time of life remains within you waiting to be released and integrated. The soul has its own logic of loyalty and concealment. Ironically, it is usually in the most awkward rooms that the special blessings and healing are locked away.

~*John O'Donohue, Turn the Key and Enter, Excerpt from ETERNAL ECHOES*

It will not be enough to offer people the opportunity to 'build your own theology.' They must be offered the freedom to build their own theology in the context of a community which is asking serious and probing religious questions, and has the courage to make deep and profound affirmation — questions and affirmations rooted in a sense of who we are and what we care profoundly about.

~*Rev. David Baumbaugh*

For more on this month's theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

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Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

~Winston Churchill

You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

~Eleanor Roosevelt

You have to have courage to love somebody. Because you risk everything. Everything.

~Maya Angelou

Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others.

~Brené Brown

It takes courage to love, but pain through love is the purifying fire which those who love generously know.

~Eleanor Roosevelt

Dear child, I only did to you what the sparrow did to you; I am old when it is fashionable to be young; I cry when it is fashionable to laugh. I hated you when it would have taken less courage to love.

~Charles Bukowski

If we had the courage to love we would not so value these acts of war.

~Jeanette Winterson

Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality.

~Jonas Salk

Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.

~Maya Angelou

You've got to follow your passion. You've got to figure out what it is you love--who you really are. And have the courage to do that. I believe that the only courage anybody ever needs is the courage to follow your own dreams.

~Oprah Winfrey

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next. Amen.

~Reinhold Niebuhr

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Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.

~*Maya Angelou*

It's easy to stand with the crowd. It takes courage to stand alone.

~*Gandhi*

You can have courage or you can have comfort but you can't have both.

~*Brené Brown*

The saddest thing in life is that the best thing in it should be courage.

~*Robert Frost*

When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge to test our courage and willingness to change; at such a moment, there is no point in pretending that nothing has happened or in saying that we are not yet ready. The challenge will not wait. Life does not look back. A week is more than enough time for us to decide whether or not to accept our destiny.

~*Paulo Coelho*

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.

~*Lao Tzu*

It takes courage to persevere with a dream of the Beloved Community. Courage is not always measured in success. The most courageous people aren't always those who succeed, but those who refuse to give up when they fail.

~ *Sermon by Rev. Douglas Taylor, February 20, 2005*

O God, we seek your forgiveness for the numerous injustices around us,
for our inability to create a world of equality.
We pray for a deepening of our commitment to justice,
for the ability to reflect on the many ways to which we offend people of other creeds, of the opposite sex, of other nations.

Above all we ask for the courage to stand up as witness-bearers for justice,
though this may be against ourselves.

~ *Unitarian Universalist Prayer in Prayers for Hope and Comfort by Maggie Oman Shannon*

We are a community of seekers covenanted to walk together in the ways of integrity and service. Here, we open time and make room to reflect on the questions. Here, we help each other find the courage and commitment to live fully toward what answers we might find and within the mysteries that abide. Here, the whole community may see itself gathered to celebrate its common

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life. Here, we promise to keep our minds and hearts open to each other and to what lies beyond our certainties to what is yet to unfold.

~Rev. Barbara Pescan

Some people think only intellect counts: knowing how to solve problems, knowing how to get by, knowing how to identify an advantage and seize it. But the functions of intellect are insufficient without courage, love, friendship, compassion, and empathy.

~Dean Koontz

Nature loves courage. You make the commitment and nature will respond to that commitment by removing impossible obstacles. Dream the impossible dream and the world will not grind you under, it will lift you up. This is the trick. This is what all these teachers and philosophers who really counted, who really touched the alchemical gold, this is what they understood. This is the shamanic dance in the waterfall. This is how magic is done. By hurling yourself into the abyss and discovering it is a feather bed.

~Terence McKenna

A church united by covenant is made up of people who have made commitments to one another.

~Conrad Wright

Mistakes are always forgivable, if one has the courage to admit them.

~Bruce Lee

Wisdom, compassion, and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men.

~Confucius

The greatest test of courage on earth is to bear defeat without losing heart.

~Robert Green Ingersoll

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.

~C. S. Lewis

Remarkable contributions are typically spawned by a passionate commitment to transcendent values such as beauty, truth, wisdom, justice, charity, fidelity, joy, courage and honor.

~Gary Hamel

The priest is interested in the answers; the shaman is more interested in provoking you to ask the questions that will lead you into paradox and duality. The task of the shaman is not to pursue meaning but to create it, to bring the sacred to an otherwise profane and mundane reality. That takes a daily act of courage and a willingness to make mistakes.

~Alberto Villoldo

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

~Nelson Mandela

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The healer you have been looking for is your own courage to know and love yourself completely.

~Yung Pueblo

Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make. The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture's values. Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.

~ Rev. Paul Rasor

Laughing, really living, and loving all require more courage than dying does. Dying comes naturally, yet we have to work at laughing, really living, and loving. To love is especially difficult, because we may lose what we love. But love is super important, important enough to use along with "death" in a book title. Why? Because love survives us when we die. Love is the one thing death cannot take away. Our love goes on and on and on after we die. That much we do know about what happens at death.

~Reflections by Forrest Church

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/riddle/session6/157217.shtml>

Acknowledgements:

The introduction of this month's theme was inspired by two sermons on courage, which can be found by following the links below:

<http://www.pbuuc.org/sermons/archive/sermons0102/courage.html>

<http://uubinghamton.org/2005/02/profiles-in-courage/>

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