

On Courage
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Several years ago, at the congregation where I was ministering at the time, a hospital Chaplain talked about risk-taking and how, when a person's life is coming to an end, they will often regret, more than almost anything else, the risks they didn't take. They didn't take some particular opportunity, or act in a certain way, because there was a risk attached to that action -- the risk of losing something they already had and valued, the risk that it would turn out badly.



Around the time of that talk we were also discussing some possibilities for social action as a congregation, and one of the things expressed in the discussion was the memory of past actions by the congregation which had resulted in the disapproval of neighbours (both individuals and neighbouring churches) and a good deal of hurt for the people who participated in the actions. Since then, there have been many occasions demanding courage of that congregation and others, including such things as the move towards full autonomy for the Canadian Unitarian Council, an autonomy which was achieved five years ago, not without misgivings and anxieties on the part of many thoughtful people. This congregation has had similar occasions, since its founding in 1961, to call on the courage of its members, especially at times like the AGM, when people dare to take on new roles, to speak the truth in love, and to voice their hopes for the future of the Fellowship.

In conversation with the speaker and the congregation after that talk about risk-taking and regrets, I began to ponder the truth that any action we take **beyond the routine** involves a risk of being hurt, but that **failing** to take risky actions can mean regret, later on, for the missed opportunities, the things we could have been and done, together and separately. I found myself wondering what it is that enables people to take risks when they're called for by a particular

injustice or need, what it is that makes for what we call courage, even the courage, perhaps, to risk the label “*heretic*” -- or (more likely these days perhaps) “*weirdo!*”

One of the most helpful things about revisiting this topic in preparing to talk about it again was struggling once more to understand and articulate what I mean by courage. The best I've been able to come up with to date is that it's the willingness to risk one's personal well-being for the sake of a greater good. As you can see, this cuts out some of the things which are often thought of as brave or courageous, such as sky-diving or bungee-jumping or even going to live alone in the wilderness (which I'm always fascinated to read about) because those involve taking risks for the sake of thrills or personal satisfaction rather than for the sake of a greater good. They could be called **adventurous** actions rather than courageous ones.

I admire that kind of physical riskiness in many ways, but it's not the kind of thing I'm considering with you today. Nor is the spontaneous kind of action which gets people well-deserved medals, such as running into a burning building to save a small child or a family pet. I tend to **believe** the recipients of the medals when they say, as they nearly all do, that they didn't stop to think about what they were doing; they just instinctively did it. Wonderful that the right kind of parental training or civic education or genetic predisposition made it happen that way, but this morning I invite you to think about the kind of courage we consider carefully, the kind of courage that demands thoughtful decisions from us, the kind of courage in which we consciously and deliberately put our own well-being at risk for the sake of a greater good. I also want to concentrate on **long-term** courage, not the taking of momentary risks that cost us moments of our lives but the kind that may cost us months or years of struggle -- the kind of courage that for some heroes of faith has led to censure, shunning, heresy trials, imprisonment, even death.

There are people in just about every congregation I've been in who know far more than I do about courage, through their own experience. I know of families who've devoted themselves to the lives of children with handicaps, for instance, in difficult circumstances and for long years, when a different decision would have made their own lives easier. Many individuals have decided to persevere with jobs, or with relationships, or with causes, which provide little in the way of obvious reward, because they believe it's for a greater good. Others have decided to leave jobs or relationships or causes -- even though the leaving will shake their very identities --

and they do it because they believe it's for a greater good. There are courageous people in our congregations, and you're probably among them!

There were courageous people in the little hamlet of Olinda, in S.W. Ontario, in 1880. On November 10, 1880, a group of 23 lay-people met to organize the First Universalist Parish of Olinda. They were there largely because of Big Mike Fox and his wife Margaret, who had begun to study Universalism from mail-order books in the 1860s. Michael and Margaret Fox were ordinary people who became convinced -- through their reading, and through pursuing the thoughts and ideas that their reading stimulated for them -- became convinced of the truth of the Universalist message that God's love encompassed everyone and would save everyone, would not condemn anyone to everlasting punishment. They passed on their convictions to everyone in their community who would listen.

Now, I don't imagine it was any easier to buck the trend in Olinda in 1880 than it is here, today -- the founders of that church were brave people by any definition! You may know the kind of things that were said about them -- that without a doctrine of everlasting punishment in hell, people's natural tendency to evil would take over and immorality would be rampant. Can you put yourself there for a moment and try to feel the struggle between the wish, on the one hand, to enjoy easy, pleasant relationships with the people around you and the need, on the other hand, to speak up for what you believed, even though it would mean that your neighbours would shun you as immoral, evil, or even crazy? The founding of that church, and many other congregations in our movement, including this one, have been courageous acts indeed, and we do well to remember and honour those acts. We do well, also, to recognize similar acts of courage among us today.

More than twenty years ago, for the first time ever, someone told me I was brave. It was a woman from my home church in Hamilton who said it, and it was one of the things that cemented our relationship and made me count her as one of my very best friends ever. I was utterly astonished that she thought I was brave, especially because it had to do with my family break-up, about which I felt a whole lot of guilt -- which many people were ready to tell me was fully justified guilt, as it probably was. Here, though, was someone telling me that my actions were **courageous** rather than reprehensible -- is it any wonder that I loved her for it and still do?

Over the years I've developed a bit more of a perspective on the situation. As I see it now: yes, there was *some* courage in what I did, because I was aware of how much was at risk in

terms of material security, social approval and so on. But I mostly acted for my personal well-being, not for some greater good. Our own authentic living is certainly worth taking risks for, but the greatest courage is perhaps about doing what has to be done even when it won't, or may not, have any personal benefits beyond self-respect. In my case, I can't honestly claim to have been thinking of others' well-being when I took the risks of ending a marriage.

Becoming a single woman again was probably more selfish and not nearly as courageous as when I walked out of a meeting of a local Cultural Society (and rashly slammed the door behind me!) because the speaker was making a hostile speech about people on welfare, especially immigrants. It would probably have been easier just to sit through to the end of the speech and maybe ask a polite question or two afterwards to show my liberal leanings. Why did I decide to risk my dignity and the comfort of the other people in the room by what was perhaps a rather childish display of anger?

On a much more serious level, why did Martin Luther launch the Reformation of the Christian Church, saying "*Here I stand; I can do no other*"? Why did Michael Servetus accept burning at the stake by order of Calvin rather than give up his concept of the truth about God? Why have countless people given up the security of home and family to do missionary work in China or to practise medicine in Africa or to insist upon equal rights for blacks or gays or women or the poor? What has enabled soldiers in wartime to overcome their fears; what has enabled some others to become conscientious objectors to fighting, in the face of terrible social sanctions and labelling as cowards? My husband John, who happens to have been that hospital Chaplain I mentioned at the beginning, goes every year to do three months of volunteer work in South America, in a poor country with a simply horrendous rate of murder and other violence. There's some courage, I think, in his decision to do that, although it's also true that he just naturally has an adventurous spirit. What helps **you** to be courageous in making changes in your life, or prevents you from doing so, and is there any way you can pass your courage along to others?

I chose to mention Martin Luther, of all people, because I think his words give us a clue. "*Here I stand,*" he said. "*I can do no other.*" What I've seen of courageous people suggests that they're often under some sense of compulsion -- and perhaps in that sense they're not so very different from the heroes who rescue victims from burning buildings. There's a sense in which it **has to be done**, "*I can do no other.*" This tells me that there's an extremely strong conviction underlying the courageous action, a conviction so strong that it compels the action. **Without**

strong convictions, courage may not be possible. We do well to ask ourselves, I think, what are the values so dear to us that we would risk at least our comfort, perhaps even our lives, for them, and we do well to question them and keep re-assessing their validity, and when we've consciously affirmed them we do well to cherish and strengthen and nurture those values. It's having those values and convictions deeply rooted and healthily growing in us which helps to make us courageous, I think.

It was the conviction that free religious ideas deserve to be shared as widely as possible which enabled those 23 women and men to found the Olinda church, and people in **this** area to take the risky first steps in 1960 towards establishing a new Unitarian Fellowship. It was the conviction that their country and its freedom was more important than their safety which has enabled countless numbers of people to sacrifice their lives in wartime, and it's the conviction that we must not let war happen again which **could** enable us to take all the risks of peacemaking. Courage and conviction go together, I believe, and the phrase "*courage of your convictions*" expresses a multi-level truth. As Viktor Frankl said in writing about his concentration camp experiences, "*If you have a "why" for living, you can bear almost any "how"*". Our Unitarian communities can be, and I pray they always will be, among our chief sources of conviction and courage, of knowing our "*why*" for living, as we share our thoughts and experiences with each other and help each other to be braver people.

The company and support of people who value us: that may be the next most important factor in the development of courage. To know that you're not alone in your convictions, or that even if you're alone in what you believe you're supported in your stand for your belief -- this is immensely encouraging. I wonder if any of you are like me in fantasizing sometimes about how you might react in circumstances of oppression. While I know my fantasies may not say much about reality, it seems to me that I **might be** strong enough to face prison, say, for my beliefs, if I had to, knowing that I have friends within the Unitarian movement and elsewhere who would work for my release (successfully or not) and who, above all, would not forget me or give up on me. I think this is one of the most vital things about an organization like Amnesty International: it promises victims of human rights abuses all over the world that they will not be forgotten, that they have the support of people who believe passionately in the freedom to speak your truth. Such support is the greatest encouragement possible; feeling alone and discounted and unsupported in our views is the worst discouragement. The more we can support each other in

our congregations, the more courage each one of us will find in the decisions and actions that we have to take.

And related to the support of those around us is the sense of being part of a line of courageous people. It will help us to face the possibility of being laughed at for our beliefs if we remember that the early Unitarians and Universalists were ridiculed for their strange notions and unconventional ways, if we remember that our friends the Quakers, with whom we have so much in common, were given their name in derision because they trembled with the weight of their convictions, if we remember that those who conscientiously objected to fighting were handed white feathers and called lily-livered and worse. We may not necessarily admire or accept the particular beliefs of these courageous people, but we can be **encouraged** by them and draw strength by knowing about them. We stand in a long line of non-conformists and dissenters who weren't afraid to speak out – or who were afraid, and did it anyway!

On a more intimate level, it will help us to be courageous if we know that we come from a brave family, or belong to an organization which is known for taking brave stands on controversial issues, or are members of a congregation which stands for religious freedom in an area of religious conformity. Knowing our forebears and their courage can strengthen our own. Knowing about our religious movement and what it has stood for can make us braver people. I hope that you can know enough about the history of the Unitarian Fellowship of Fredericton to give you a sense of being part of a courageous line of Canadian Unitarians.

At a book discussion group I used to belong to, we were talking one day about courage - and several people suggested that one of the biggest contributors to bravery is **practice**. Someone said that usually a person doesn't perform a heroic act right out of the blue; they start with little baby steps, making a small stand for a conviction -- being conspicuous for refusing to laugh at a racist joke, for example -- and graduate to slightly bigger ones. Most of us will probably never be called on to put our physical lives on the line, but the habit of having the courage of our convictions can grow in us through the little things. Some of us never get much past the baby steps -- I was really proud of myself one day because I told the dental hygienist, as she was draping me with the protective apron, that I would really prefer not to have another X-ray less than 6 months after my last one. I'm very easily intimidated by health professionals, and for me that was brave. Your steps are probably different, but they, too, take practice.

These four things, then: conviction, support, connectedness and practice -- are starting points for the development of courage. But I recall that someone has suggested, "*Perhaps if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly*", and I wonder if the **willingness to risk failure**, to make ourselves vulnerable, may be the biggest factor of all in being brave. If so, it surely comes from the knowledge that if I fail in this particular action I'm still a worthwhile person -- and from a fundamentally trusting attitude towards the world. If I fail in this act, if I lose my security, my comforts, my health, even my life, do I still believe that goodness will ultimately prevail and that if I act courageously I cannot really lose?

I wanted to end with a story illustrating the kind of courage which inspires me, and I was searching the newspapers for something current when I remembered one from my own experience. Around 25 years ago in the Unitarian Church of Hamilton, Ontario, there was a man (very active in the congregation and in the C.U.C.) who had a bee in his bonnet about something he considered a great social evil, but which was generally seen as a matter of personal lifestyle choice. Brian was his name, and he made himself quite obnoxious by getting on his hobby horse in public and private situations, tackling individuals and groups about their need to outlaw this unhealthy habit. People would move away as they saw him coming, muttering, "Brian's going to bug us about you-know-what"

Not everyone who's passionate about a cause, and certainly not everyone who's obnoxious, is courageous. But Brian was at the forefront of the anti-smoking movement, and our smoke-free public areas and controls on tobacco sales and other measures owe a lot to people like him who didn't **want** to be unpopular but **did** want to work for better health in the community and thought it was worth braving all kinds of opposition to achieve it, and who trusted that the future would show him in a different light.

That's the kind of courage I aspire to -- the faith that enables us to trust the future rather than being afraid of it. In my own life-transitions over the past few years, I've been gradually finding that trust. It's not that I think everything's going to be easy, but that I believe with the help available I'm up to whatever life throws at me. I think to the extent we can learn to believe **that**, we will be brave. I hope our life in our Unitarian fellowships will strengthen our faith in those things -- that each of us is worthwhile and that the world is trustable at its heart. Let us learn courage together, **the courage to be**.