

Courage ©

***A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
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at The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist***

“Sometimes standing against evil is more important than defeating it.” – N.D. Wilson

***“Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgement
that something else is more important than fear.” – Ambrose Redmoon***

Just this past week, I learned that I attended a protest against the Vietnam War. I was in a stroller at the time, so I do not remember the occasion and my mom had never mentioned it before.

But I guess I was there, likely protesting in my own way in my stroller, and meanwhile my uncle was over in Vietnam, flying bombing runs off a Navy ship. How old you were, and who you were, made all the difference in that time of war.

I know some of you have been watching and re-living the Vietnam era these past two weeks, thanks to the 18 hour documentary that was airing on television. For some, the footage is intensely personal; for some, too hard to watch; for some, not accurate enough. For some, it no doubt provoked old memories and poked at old wounds, and for others, revealed more of the Presidential mistakes, the political maneuvering, the governmental secrets and lies that cost two nations so very many lives.

It was a hard time, an anxious time,
a time of ongoing war in a country thousands of miles away.
It was a time of intense national polarization;
a time of stark divisions based on politics, race and class;
a time when protestors were pitted against military veterans.
It was a time when the President was lying to the people, many were buying those lies,
and our nation faced a “most serious Constitutional Crisis”.

It was an anxious and fearful time.

And yet it was also a time of courage.

It was a time of battlefield courage. It was a time of protest courage.

It was also a time of intense grieving in our nation, and that takes courage, too.

In hindsight, we can see this.

As the beatnik writer Amrose Redmoon once wrote:

“Courage is not the absence of fear,
but rather the judgment that *something else is more important* than fear.”

Vietnam was a time that required courage,
as mothers and fathers said final goodbyes to their sons;
as soldiers slogged for months through the heat, under fire,
and risked their own lives to save their friends;
as protestors faced arrest and rejection by family
to protest unnecessary death and hold their elected officials accountable
to our national ideals and to truth itself.

Funny, how these people, intensely patriotic and courageous in their own ways
were often pitted so fiercely against one another, turning each other into their enemies.
Meanwhile those at the highest levels of power were basing
their military and foreign policy strategy on what would get them re-elected.

It was a bit over a year ago, on September 18th-
before the most recent Presidential election-
that I suggested in a sermon that we are, once again, living in anxious and fearful times.
Calling on the wisdom of my favorite systems thinker, the Rabbi Ed Friedman,
I noted that: *“In anxious societies, there tends to be a lot of reactivity,
blaming of others, as well as a strong desire
for some sort of quick fix that will make everything better.*

*People in chronically anxious societies are given to group-think
and herding together in tribal groups.*

*They are given to polarization, either/or, all-or-nothing thinking.
They tend to be oriented towards pathology instead of strength,
crisis instead of opportunity. They tend to lack curiosity.*

*They tend to adapt to most their immature members
and choose the least mature to be leaders.
And since anxiety is an emotional phenomenon,
it is not particularly impacted by information or facts.”*

If this is so, then perhaps it would be wise these days
to keep an eye on our own reactivity,
to notice when we blame others or find ourselves in polarizing conversations.
We might want to remember to think for ourselves, focus on our strengths,
look for opportunities and be curious.
We might want to notice the seductive patterns of anxiety and fear
and then try to step right past them.

*Courage is not the absence of fear.
Courage is making the judgment that something else is more important than fear.
In truth, we make that very judgment time and time and time again.*

Think of the times in your life when *you* have had to be courageous!
Perhaps you are in one of those times, right now.
Maybe you need to be courageous yourself...
or for a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend, a neighbor.

Maybe it feels like society or our country or humankind could use your courage.
Some might say that given our circumstances,
our earth and Life itself needs us to be courageous- to speak up and act up on its behalf.
One could say that God or Love- or that Greater Reality which sustains our being-
needs us, invites us, *encourages us* to be courageous, each in our own, beautiful way.

The poet “alta” writes:

the man standing next to molten steel.
boy, i wouldn't do that.
the woman raising seven children.
there are many kinds of courage & i don't have them all.
we're all in this together.

there's an earwig under the spoon.
not only am I going to let it live,
i'm not even going to put it "outside".
"let it live". i actually sad that.
shake hands with god.

There are many kinds of courage, and as the poet suggests,
even a *small* courageous step can help us move in the right direction.

Let me suggest a few such steps, and if you think they take courage,
I invite you to just say the word "courage" after I share them:

A young child learning to go to sleep by him or herself at night. *Courage.*
Going to the first day of school. *Courage.*
Visiting a new church to check it out. *Courage.*
Going back on the job market. *Courage.*
Managing a family when money is tight. *Courage.*
How about heading into surgery? *Courage.*
Growing older. *Courage!*
Traveling to a new country. *Courage.*
Signing up for military service. *Courage.*
Going to college, having a child, adopting a child. *Courage, right?*
Courage, courage, courage.
How about facing your own demons? *Courage.*
Living with an addiction? *Courage.*

Telling a family secret. *Courage.*

Changing your religion. *Courage.*

Grappling with one's own prejudices. *Courage.*

Admitting you were wrong, making amends, asking for forgiveness. *Courage.*

Preparing for a death, saying goodbye. *Courage.*

How about standing up to a bully? *Courage.*

Resisting pressure to be unethical at work. *Courage*

Risking disapproval by standing up for something you believe in. *Courage.*

Reading a book on climate change. *Courage.*

Driving down certain streets unless your skin is a certain color. *Courage.*

Spending time in jail. *Courage.*

The list could go on and on.

Of course, for some folks, it takes courage just to leave the house.

If you suffer from severe anxiety or depression, or have PTSD, or are undocumented, just leaving the house takes courage.

If one of your parents is undocumented, going to *elementary* school takes courage, because it's not completely unreasonable to worry if you'll see your parent again.

Sometimes more courage and grief is required of us at a young age than we should ever have to carry.

And this, perhaps, is where others of us come in.

In the face of fear or injustice or kids who are suffering, courage is required of us- not only on a personal level- but a collective one.

That certainly goes for people like us- people "of faith"- who see ourselves as participants in an unfolding creative reality. It goes along with being part of a religious community, gathering in a Meeting House that aims to be a visible reminder of what we imperfect humans- who do all sorts of awful things to each other- can do when we choose to help each other.

Honestly, we are *expected* to be a moral and loving and generous voice in the wider community. When we're not, people wonder what's going on.

A congregation's silence and a congregation's courage can send powerful signals to the wider community. Here's just one example:

The Boston Globe reported that last Sunday, the Rev. Ray Hammond of Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain made an announcement from his pulpit. He announced that an undocumented immigrant had taken sanctuary within the church walls that week, on September 18th.

According to Michael Levenson, the writer who reported the story, when Rev. Hammond said this, the parishioners sitting in the pews burst into applause.

Now, the applause is impressive because welcoming someone into sanctuary is not an *easy* thing to do. Bethel AME is only the second church in Boston to do so, thus far. The other one, University Lutheran, has built up a list of 350 volunteers to rotate through the job of accompanying their person in Sanctuary, a 26 year old mother of two who has been living in their building since May. Bethel AME only has two other Christian and three Jewish congregations to work with.

The other thing about welcoming someone into sanctuary is that churches cannot legally *protect* immigrants from deportation. There is no guarantee that immigration agents won't enter the building.

In the past, it's true that immigration agents have not entered into houses of worship, schools or hospitals. But earlier this year, hospitals have been crossed off that list of safe spaces, as a 26 year old mother of two with a brain tumor was roused from her hospital bed in Texas and taken to a detention center for deportation. She had come here with her children fleeing her abuser. Brain tumor or not, hospital or not, abuser or not, she was seized. So there is no guarantee.

Should agents decide to pursue the case, they know exactly where to go.

Part of taking or offering sanctuary is not *hiding* but being *public* about it, hoping the press will tell the story and try to shape public opinion.

The church leaders also sent immigration officers a letter last week telling the agency up front that they are providing refuge to the man but hope he won't be taken into custody.

By being open about it all, church leaders believe they are not violating the law.

The hope or goal is to keep him there, safely, to allow him and his lawyers time to figure out a way for him to remain in the country legally.

Meanwhile, two volunteers will stay with him around the clock and others will bring food, clothing and necessities.

The man, who came here from El Salvador 12 years ago, is a factory worker who has regularly checked in with immigration. At his last visit, they told him he would be deported at his next check-in. He has five children. One is a US citizen, one is a legal permanent resident, and three are recipients of DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. He has said, *"I don't want them to separate me from my family. That is the hardest thing to do, to separate someone from their family."*

Courage is the judgment that some things are more important than fear. For some, that is providing for one's children, or keeping a family together, or not wanting your kids to grow up without you or your tangible, present love.

The congregations and clergy involved in this effort stepped forward for their own reasons.

The Rev. Ray Hammond had heard rhetoric implying that most immigrants are criminals and take jobs away from minority workers. He said this:

"As African-Americans, we know this pattern, we know how this gets played out. So our response is, 'We're not playing it and, if you're a victim of it, we are here to support you.'"

Rev. Maria White Hammond, his daughter and the church's minister for social justice, said, *"It is important for us, as a historically black church,*

*to send a very clear message that, as black people,
we will not participate in this anti-immigrant sentiment.”*

She noted that, as a descendent of slaves, she feels called to help undocumented immigrants *“the same way people stood with my ancestors when they had to run away or steal away into the woods.”*

Rabbi Victor Reinstein, of Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain, said, *“It’s so resonant with our story, and it’s hard not to cry talking about it.*

This is our story: being made “other”, the persecution that has come with that, and the closing of hearts and doors when the need was greatest.”

Courage is not the absence of fear.

It is the judgment that something else is more important than fear.

For some, that “something else” might be standing in solidarity, or paying it forward. It might be a sense of God’s call in this moment, or what is required by one’s ancestors, one’s identity, one’s faith. It might be a belief that families are the basic building blocks of our society and that it does no good to separate parents and children. It might be the desire to resist fear, to save *ourselves* by keeping our hearts open.

In our reading this morning, the Rev. Marni Harmony wrote:

*“If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe shall be unknown to us
and our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.”*

I might edit this to say, “If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out, then the Fullness of *humanity* shall not be known to us— parts of the human experience will remain part of life we do not know, and our locked hearts shall not feel that rush of love.”

What is it that is more important than fear?

There's love. Love when the need is the greatest.

Last spring, the Board of Trustees voted to be a Sanctuary Ally congregation, which means we intend to commit funds and volunteer hours to help support local Sanctuary congregations.

The closest one, so far, is in Lowell and no one has taken sanctuary there yet, but the space is being prepared.

Will someone have the courage to go into sanctuary there this year? It's hard to know, but the congregation wants to be ready- ready with the space, ready with a list of volunteers willing to take a shift to accompany someone, ready with trainings for those volunteers.

They are a small church; they will need our help.

If you are interested, I invite you to keep your ears peeled in the weeks to come. If you are *really* interested, there are trainings tomorrow night and on October 24th at University Lutheran Church in Harvard Square; tell me or Lynn Wentzel if you want to go.

As always, it's hard to know what will unfold among us and in our valley over the next year- where we will be called as a congregation, where our energy will most clearly be needed. But it is certain that we will be invited to venture out of our comfort zones, to open our hearts to the fullness of life and love and humanity. What a gift!

Let us hope and pray that one day all locked hearts will feel the fullness of love. Amen.

Reading: “If We Do Not Venture Out” by the Rev. Marni Harmony, Unitarian Universalist, (last paragraph added/adapted)

If, on a starlit night, with the moon brightly shimmering,
we stay inside and do not venture out,
the evening universe remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a cloudy day, with grayness infusing all
and rain dancing rivers in the grass,
we stay inside and do not venture out,
the stormy, threatening energy of the universe
remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a frosty morning, dreading the chilling air before the sunrise,
we stay inside and do not venture out,
the awesome cold, quiet, and stillness of the dawn universe
remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, throughout these grace-given days of ours,
surrounded as we are by green life and brown death, hot pink joy
and cold gray pain, and miracles—always miracles—
if we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe shall be unknown to us
and our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.

And so, in the silence we will now share, may we listen deeply
for that still and small, but brave and bold voice within
that calls us to risk and reach, to open and emerge,
to venture out into the newness waiting to be known.