

## Take Courage My Soul

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel  
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
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*"Let us renew our resolution- sincerely- to be real brothers and sisters regardless of any kind of bar which estranges us from each other."*

*"Great you are beyond conception, God of gods and God of stars.  
My soul soars with your perception, I escape from prison bars.  
You, the One within all forming in my heart and mind and breath,  
you my guide through hate's fierce storming, courage in both life and death." (Hymn #28)  
-The Rev. Norbert F. Capek, Unitarian (June 3, 1870 – Oct. 1942)*

76 years ago, an arrest was made that led to the martyrdom of a wildly successful and well-known Unitarian minister. His name was Norbert Capek, and we know him as the founder of our annual flower communion—a ritual that celebrates the beauty and diversity of life and human beings.

He was also a leading orator in Czechoslovakia, the composer of 90 hymns and author of public school curricula, an effective organizer of religious schools and counseling programs, and along with his wife Maya, a founder and minister of the Prague Unitarian church, which over 20 years grew from nothing to 3,200 members.

He was also a spiritual pilgrim. He grew up Roman Catholic and served as an altar boy, converted to the Baptist faith at age 18, became an evangelist and a founder of a dozen Baptist churches. His family fled World War I in 1914 and he came to the U.S. as a Baptist minister. But five years later, he left the church and the ministry... that is, until his daughters led him to the Unitarian church in Orange, New Jersey, in 1921.

When they returned to Czechoslovakia,  
Norbert and Maya founded the Prague Unitarian church.  
After some years of wild success but also the encroachment of World War II,  
they were invited back to the states.  
Capek chose to remain in Europe.

Arrested with his daughter in 1941,  
held in prison and then taken to Dachau in 1942,  
he was killed by the Nazis for resisting the regime,  
resisting the dehumanization of his fellow human beings.

As with Jesus, it can be tempting to focus on how he died,  
but it is *just* as important to focus on how he lived.  
Capek was a man full of a driving positive spirit and joy.  
Some who knew him at Dachau and survived the war said that *even in the camp*,  
Capek encouraged the other prisoners, often by singing hymns.  
It seems he had a ministry at Dachau. *A ministry at Dachau*. Imagine!

Even under the threat of constant starvation and death,  
in a context where many were forced to think only of themselves in order to survive,  
he was singing.  
In the face of the worst that humanity can produce,  
he offered the best that humanity can offer.

There's no telling what a difference that made.  
Sometimes a word of encouragement can *change* a person's life—  
or even *save* a person's life,  
helping them find the mental and physical resilience to carry on.  
This is true for us as well.

Most of us face times of disillusionment, suffering, even despair—  
—as individuals, as communities, as a nation, as people of faith.  
And in our interconnected world, there are many, many times  
when we hear of atrocities that are reason enough

to lose all faith in humanity, to simply cease loving people.

Last week I talked about that Universalist ideal of boundless, universal love for *all* beings. Sometimes it's hard to love even just a *few*.

The question for us, as individuals, as a congregation, as people of faith, is what do we do when things get hard?

Do we give up on humanity and people?

Do we retreat from society?

Do we focus only on ourselves and our immediate family?

Do we narrow our vision?

Or do we continue to connect, to engage, to encourage one another?

Do we continue to seek and offer our *best selves*?

Do we keep on loving people,

despite knowing how downright awful people can sometimes be?

You know, the very earliest writing in the Christian scriptures, or New Testament, was written down at a time when human viciousness was quite evident—about 20 years after Jesus' death.

It is a letter written by the evangelist Paul, a letter to the Thessalonians.

Now, just to remind you— this author, Paul, was not a disciple.

Paul never met Jesus.

He never ate with Jesus, walked with Jesus, hung out with Jesus.

He never listened to Jesus talk, was instructed or confused by Jesus.

His encounter with Jesus was not during Jesus' life, but after his death.

Paul, who had persecuted Christians, had a conversion experience- a vision- that convinced him that Jesus was in fact the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God.

This led him to convert others and to instruct communities of Christians about theology, behavior, and surviving persecution.

He did this in person and by letter.

I don't agree with much of Paul's theology,

but there are times when he offers

somewhat sensible and even poetic words of advice to congregations.

In this earliest letter that we have,  
he says this to the Jesus followers in Thessalonica:  
*"...encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.  
...See that none of you repays evil for evil,  
but always seek to do good to one another and to all.  
Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances....  
Do not quench the Spirit.  
Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything;  
hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil."* (1 Thessalonians 5:11.)

Encourage one another. Seek to do good.  
Do not quench the Spirit. Hold fast to what is good.  
Good advice for congregations, right?

Just before he was put to death in Dachau, Dr. Capek wrote this prayer.  
*"It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals.  
Oh blow ye evil winds into my body's fire; my soul you'll never unravel.  
Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight  
and everything would worthless seem, I have lived amidst eternity.  
Be grateful, my soul, my life was worth living.  
He who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit  
is welcomed into the choir of heroes.  
He who overcame the fetters giving wing to the mind  
is entering into the golden age of the victorious."*

Capek is not the only one who died,  
not the only one who was disappointed a thousand times, who was fallen in the fight.  
But he was *also* not the only one *who remained victorious in spirit...*  
whose soul *did not unravel* even in the face of evil,  
who, until his last breath, encouraged others.  
If only we might do the same!

Today we might think about those who have encouraged us.  
I think of the story by Catie Edmondson that was in *The Boston Globe* last Friday about a man named Steve Ross.

Mr. Ross grew up in Poland, part of a large Jewish family.  
He was just a boy when the Nazis invaded  
and his family entrusted him to be raised by a Christian family.  
But that Christian family sent him to live in the woods,  
where he was captured at the age 9 and sent to a concentration camp.

He spent his teen years being shuttled  
between 10 different concentration camps.  
His parents and six of his siblings were killed; one brother survived.  
He survived near-starvation, terrible beatings, being forced to drink chemicals,  
and several close calls with death- hiding from death squads in latrines  
or by clinging to the underside of a moving train.

On the day of the liberation of Dachau,  
he was an emaciated but living 14 year old.  
As a tank went by, a US Army lieutenant named Steve Sattler saw the boy.  
He jumped down from his tank and hugged him- that emaciated boy-  
gave him some of his food and a handkerchief decorated as an American flag.  
That moment was etched forever into the boy's heart.

The boy- Steve Ross- survived the war.  
He moved to the U.S., settled in Dorchester,  
married, had a son, became a social worker.  
For 40 years he mentored troubled teens from housing projects.  
One of those youth, now an attorney, said recently,  
*"I was just amazed that he would spend his life on kids like us.  
A lot of people thought we had very little value as people,  
and they told us that. Steve never let us think that."*

Steve knew what it was like to be seen as a kid with no value.  
And from that moment with the American soldier,

he knew the impact of even one interaction with an adult who saw him and treated him as a worthwhile human being.

For 67 years, he tried to find that soldier again. He said, "If I could find that soldier, I would say to him that what he has done for me, I emulated, and that *I love people because of him.*"

The soldier, Steve Sattler, died before Steve Ross found him. But it is clear the moment outside of Dachau was etched on his heart, too. A few months before he died, he told the story to his daughter. He said, with emotion, "I hope it helped."

Such a brief encounter- that gesture of encouragement. But remarkably, it restored one boy's ability to love human beings again. *Encourage one another. Seek to do good. Do not quench the spirit. Hold fast to what is good.*

I would share with you one more story of encouragement today, because these days we can take all the encouragement we can get, yes? In the May 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Boston Globe, Thomas Farragher shared a story about Andrew Burian, a Czechoslovakian like Norbert Capek. Mr. Burian grew had an idyllic childhood, a childhood surrounded by extended family at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. But then Hitler came to power and things changed, very, very quickly.

Their home was confiscated, curfews were enforced, Jews were forced to wear yellow stars, his family was deported to a ghetto in Hungary. Next came the cattle cars and Auschwitz-Birkenau. His mother, grandfather and great-uncle were murdered upon arrival. He was separated from his father and brother.

But before they were separated, his father said something Andrew would always remember:

*“My child, I have three things to say to you:  
Keep yourself clean so you don’t get sick;  
Be a mensch and don’t let them make an animal out of you;  
And remember, whoever lives through this inferno goes home and waits for the others.  
God willing, we will all meet at home.”*

At the time, Andrew Burian was 13 years old.

Alone and in despair, Andrew was part of a group forced on a freezing death march in the winter of 1945 to Mauthausen. He was on the brink of exhaustion and collapse.

As Farragher writes,  
“Always on the horizon, there seemed to be a church steeple in the near distance. Another prisoner tried to console and encourage the younger boy. ‘We’re just going to make it to that next steeple,’ the prisoner told him. And the next. And the next after that.”  
That fellow prisoner, with his words of encouragement, helped Andrew find the inner resilience to survive.

The story is known by his grandchildren as “the story of the steeples”. How ironic that the steeples of churches- churches that were often silent, unwilling or too weak to stand up to the atrocities in their back yards- still somehow served as a beacon to one exhausted boy. He made it through that march, steeple by steeple.

Andrew Burian was reunited with his father and brother after the camp’s liberation. In 1948 he arrived at Ellis Island, with \$10 in his pocket. He was 17. He found work, married, raised a family, has even met a great grandchild. As Ron Liebowitz, president of Brandeis University has said, the lesson of his life is *“his ability to somehow see the good in humanity when he saw the very worst of humanity.* *It’s remarkable that he can still have love.”*

It is remarkable that he can still have love.

My good people,  
we have a role to play in each other's lives, and in the lives of strangers.  
We have a role to play in history.  
So encourage one another-- and those in despair,  
those on the brink of exhaustion and collapse,  
those who have every right to lose faith in humankind.  
Do not quench the Spirit. Hold fast to what is good.

My prayer is that steeple by steeple,  
congregation by congregation, we shall lift up voices of resistance.  
And those voices will be singing.  
Amen.

*"Take courage my soul, and let us journey on.  
Though the night is dark, and we're still far from home.  
Praise be to Life, the morning light appears...  
The storm is passing over..  
the storm is passing over... the storm is passing over, Hallelu!"*