

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

### **11.3.13 Sermon: “Taking a Stand”**

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

We all know courage when we see it don't we?

Philomena and I saw the movie about Captain Phillips last Friday. It's the story of a cargo ship boarded by Somali pirates with the purpose of ransoming it for millions of dollars. Captain Phillips cleverly and courageously managed to get the pirates off the ship and into a life boat with him as the only hostage. The whole movie has you on the edge of your seat as the captain takes risk after risk. We also saw the movie Gravity that showed a lot of courage, but in this case, the kind of courage it takes just to survive in space. I think I'm going to avoid boating off the Somali Coast or space travel from now on.

In the 1960's, there were many examples of courage during the struggle for civil rights. Those courageous souls who faced police dogs and fire hoses. The Freedom Riders who were attacked and assaulted. All these people put their lives on the line for freedom and justice.

I'm grateful for the inspirational record of courageous action in our Unitarian and Universalist histories. The Boston abolitionists who upset the manufacturers and merchants who were profiting from slavery. Unitarian ministers like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Theodore Parker. Higginson actually served as colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized African-American regiment, from 1862–1864. Julia Ward Howe and Susan B. Anthony were courageous in their fight for women's rights.

I'd like to call out another group who have been and continue to be examples of courage. Those who challenged the dominance of Christianity and questioned its doctrines and beliefs. The one who comes to mind for me from the latter half of the nineteenth century is Robert Ingersoll. Within Unitarianism, John Dietrich and Curtis Reese were early humanist ministers. On the Universalist side, Ken Patton distinguished himself. They challenged theism to make room for a non-theistic approach to religion that is common in our congregations today.

This only begins to identify the many courageous people who have been leaders within our religious tradition. Institutionally, we have a lot of pride about the ways we, as a movement, have both participated in and led social change that has brought more freedom and fairness to the world. And there is plenty more to do.

I was just at the October Unitarian Universalist Association Board meeting doing a presentation on good governance procedures for our Association. I chair a UUA committee that monitors our Association's openness and transparency. At the meeting, I learned more about the high level of commitment by the leadership of our Association to be an anti-racist, anti-oppressive force in society as well as encourage that commitment in our congregations.

Closer to home, our Green Sanctuary Committee reminds us of the urgent need for the whole world to temper our insatiable appetite for consumption and transition to living sustainably on

our planet. They have proposed a statement against fracking that our congregation will debate and hopefully pass so our congregation can take a stand on the issue.

These are a few examples of opportunities to take stands as individuals and as a congregation that may take courage to accept ... or resist. And here is the rub. Will we have the courage to take a stand for or against... or will we let the opportunity pass by?

If we believe that you have to be a heroic figure like those Unitarian and Universalist luminaries I've mentioned to do this work, you might be a little discouraged. What is an ordinary person to do just trying to keep food on the table and take care of their families? I can't put aside my responsibilities or risk my security or my relationships tilting at windmills.

Yet, maybe I could be MORE courageous than I am. So what holds me back?

The philosophers separate courage into two types. The first, physical courage, is the capacity to face fear, pain, danger, intimidation, uncertainty and death. These are potential physical assaults on the body. The second is moral courage, the ability to do the right thing when the right thing isn't popular. Maya Angelou says of courage:

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

And there is also a quiet dimension to courage, we might miss. This is the courage of questioning one's own beliefs and opinions in the search for the truth. I like how Winston Churchill put it: "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

Bryan Stevenson is a wonderful example of quiet wholehearted courage. The origin of the word courage is: to have heart. Stevenson is:

a public-interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated and the condemned. He's the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, an Alabama-based group that has won major legal challenges eliminating excessive and unfair sentencing, exonerating innocent prisoners on death row, confronting abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill, and aiding children prosecuted as adults.

The message he brought to the TED audience was an agitation to care about injustices in our criminal justice system. He pointed out that if plane flights crashed every one out of ten time no one would buy a ticket. Today we tolerate one innocent person out of ten being executed. Many are silent in response to this error ratio.

Speaking in Germany, he talked about this error rate and the very high proportion of people of African descent who are incarcerated and put on death row. One of the Germans responded that they don't have the death penalty there and could never have it because of their oppressive history. Stevenson reflected on what this might mean if they did have the death penalty and most

of the people being executed were Jews. That would be unconscionable. Yet, here where we have a history of oppression of people of African descent, in the old south, a defendant is 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim was white than if the victim was black. The defendant is 22 times more likely to get a death sentence if they are black.

I was moved by Stevenson, as I hope you will be too if you watch the talk. He modeled taking a stand in a non-alienating way that moved the heart – something many effective activists strives to do. And he moved us, because he was willing to be vulnerable on stage.

The key to moral courage is being willing to be vulnerable. When one is courageous, one is open to attack and capable of being wounded. Vulnerability is where courage and fear meet. The researcher and writer, also made famous by a TED talk in 2010, who researches vulnerability is Dr. Brené Brown. She points out that being courageous requires vulnerability. Without a sense of risk and exposure, no courage is needed.

So here we have the center of the problem. We admire and respect people who are courageous, am I right? And how many of us like being vulnerable? Notice that gap? If we want to be more courageous, we need to tolerate being vulnerable.

Brown's research helps us understand what makes being vulnerable difficult. What often underlies an unwillingness to be vulnerable is shame.

At its core, shame is a self-inflicted wound to prevent a loss of connection. Brown asserts that shame is unavoidable if we want to be a person who loves and cares about others and wants love and care and a sense of belonging in return. Shame is based in the fear of disconnection. We all have it. Shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience. I suspect shame evolved as a powerful way to keep groups together by stimulating internalized submission to dominance.

So if we want to be more courageous, and tolerate vulnerability better, we need to become shame resilient. Brown suggests we can't become resistant because of our social needs. "As long as we care about connection, the fear of disconnection will always be a powerful force in our lives, and the pain caused by shame will always be real."

Here is how Brown describes shame resilience as:

the ability to practice authenticity when we experience shame, to move through the experience without sacrificing our values, and to come out on the other side of the shame experience with more courage, compassion, and connection than we had going into it. Shame resilience is about moving from shame to empathy—the real antidote to shame.

Shame is different from guilt. If I do something harmful to someone, there are two predominant ways to respond. The guilty response would be to regret the behavior and resolve to not repeat it. The shame based response would be to think I'm a bad person for doing such a bad thing.

Shame has within it a belief in one's self as depraved and unworthy. Recognize any Calvinism

here? Thinking of oneself as depraved and unworthy undermines one's sense of self-worth and creates internalized oppression. The king, the dominator, the master crawls inside our head and enslaves our minds with self-judgment and self-doubt.

This is where Unitarian Universalism comes to the rescue. We completely reject this view of the depravity of humanity. Yes, we do bad things. Yes, we do really wretched things. But we have inherent worth and dignity too. We have goodness in us that cannot be removed. In our faith, we have tools to support and build shame resilience.

What shame thrives on is silence. Brown learned a powerful technique to break the mesmerizing grip of shame. She suggests we just speak out loud, "pain, pain, pain, pain, pain" until it's grip begins to loosen. She observes that when shame descends, it hijacks the limbic system, the prefrontal cortex shuts down and the primitive fight-or-flight reflex is activated. Reactivating critical thinking skills through verbal activity helps us regain rational perspective.

But probably the most effective way to counter the experience of shame is to reach out. Again, this is another source of support we have here: community. But we are special kind of non-judgmental community that will allow us to try on new ideas and ways of being. In Brown's words:

We need a hand to pull us up off the ground when we get kicked down in the arena (and if we live a courageous life, that will happen). Across the course of my research, participants were very clear about their need for support, encouragement, and sometimes professional help as they reengaged with vulnerability and their emotional lives. Most of us are good at giving help, but when it comes to vulnerability, we need to ask for help too.

Without supportive friends and community, I know who will be there to knock you down again. It will be the critic, the authority, the judge, the master, the naysayer, the one who doesn't see you as a human being. It will be the one who sees you an object to control and extract work.

It takes courage to face the dehumanizing forces in the world. It takes courage to face the forces that treat our planet as an object to control and from which to extract useful resources. If we want to make a difference in this world and counter these forces, we must be courageous. We must learn how to stand together against some pretty strong headwinds. If we can build our shame resilience together, we'll have the strength to be vulnerable. If we can be vulnerable, we can be courageous. And if we can be courageous, we can become real.

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse of the *Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

Copyright (c) 2013 by Samuel A. Trumbore. All rights reserved.