

## THE COURAGE TO BE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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A couple of months ago, I began a series of sermons on virtue, which Aristotle rightly insists is the key to happiness. Virtue is a state of character in which we fulfill our potential by living as human beings ought to live. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in salvation not by grace or by faith, but in salvation by character. We believe in virtue: the spiritual discipline of becoming the kind of individuals we ought to become, in order to live as human beings ought to live.

In my own catalog, there are seven necessary virtues: wisdom, courage, compassion, justice, temperance, transcendence, and hope. Today, we turn to the second of our seven virtues, which is courage. I wish to speak about the inner experience of courage, which I have titled “The Courage to Be.” The next time we return to this series I will speak about the outward expression of courage, “The Courage to Do.”

In the famous speech given by Hamlet, Shakespeare describes what is at stake in the realm where courage either lives or does not.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them.

Shakespeare suggests that the difference between passively taking in whatever the world has to offer us—“the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” in his words—and actively staking a claim in the world by “taking arms against a sea of troubles” is the difference between being and not being. What does it take to be a person in this sense? It takes courage, which comes from the Latin word for heart.

Paul Tillich, perhaps the leading Protestant theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, highlighted this inner experience of courage in his best-selling book titled *The Courage to Be*. Writing in the early 1950s, Tillich described that era in America and Europe as an “age of anxiety.” Western civilization, he said, had experienced the breakdown of religious and political absolutism and the development of liberalism and democracy, along with the rise of a technical civilization that had triumphed over its enemies. Along the way, however, the modern world had lost a spiritual center that could provide answers to the questions of the meaning of life. Humanity was now free to live without reference to God. But freedom brought with it overwhelming responsibility and the eternal threat of what Tillich termed non-being, which was his way of referring to the loss not only of meaning, but of existence itself.

Freedom had produced anxiety in all directions. For many people, Tillich said, the crisis of meaning had “the character of both a trap without exit and of an empty, dark, and unknown void.” Humanity’s astounding technological achievements now included the ability to annihilate itself. It was an age of anxiety.

In response, Tillich called for courage—the courage to be. He described courage as the strength to continue living in a meaningful way in spite of the fact that our existence sometimes appears to have no purpose. He counseled us not wallow in doubt, self-derision or despair. We have come into being in this time, in this place, in spite of the ever-present threat of non-being.

What’s the alternative? Without the courage to be, being fades into non-being. This is the stuff of which tragedy is made. Ask Hamlet if you doubt, or King Lear, or Jude, the young man whose travails fill the pages of Thomas Hardy’s 1895 novel, *Jude the Obscure*.

In Hardy’s book, Jude lives in the small English village of Marygreen. According to Hardy’s tale, Marygreen stands a short journey outside the cathedral and university city of Christminster, a city not unlike Oxford or Cambridge. Times were changing at Marygreen, for Jude and for everyone else. The institutions on which life had always rested were collapsing. The schoolmaster was leaving the village for a better post in Christminster, and his students didn’t know where to turn. The rector of the village church was away too. In fact, the original church had been torn down and its materials used for pigsty walls and garden seats. The design of the new church was modern and unfamiliar. In the face of these changes, Hardy says, “everybody seemed sorry.”

On the one hand, these changes symbolize a new era of opportunity for Jude and Sue, the young woman who eventually becomes his wife. Sue is told at one point, “You are free, absolutely; and your course is your own.” The slate of old ways and old patterns has been wiped clean. But as the old order breaks into fragments, Jude finds himself caught between two worlds, between an old world in which everyone is given a place by society, and a new world where individuals define themselves in their own eyes. It is a challenge that Jude and Sue try desperately to meet.

Early on, Jude flings himself both at Christminster and at Sue, hoping to find some way of resolving his crisis of meaning. Hardy tells us: “It had been the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to....” But Jude would never find what he sought: he would never find something to anchor on. The chaos of change frightened him, and his lack of courage kept him from discovering where he fit in new world that was emerging. Near the end of the novel, surrounded by the fearful wreckage of their lives—divorces, dead children, failed vocations—Jude and Sue hold each other close with a sadness that offers neither the redemption of tragedy nor the relief of resignation. They have tried to build a new world for themselves, but too late they discover that they do not know how, nor can they reconstruct the old. In the end, Jude is dead. Without the courage to be, being fades into non-being.

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl described the emptiness that remains after the loss of meaning as an existential vacuum. Frankl’s book titled *Man’s Search for Meaning* was another best-selling chronicle of the age of anxiety. Writing in the 1950s, Frankl observed that “ever more people are haunted by a feeling of meaninglessness, which is often accompanied by a feeling of emptiness... an existential vacuum. It mainly manifests itself in boredom and apathy. While boredom is indicative of a loss of interest in the world, apathy betrays a lack of initiative to do something in the world, to change something in the world.”

Fifty years later, Frankl’s analysis remains astute but inadequate for our time. Our existential situation has changed. The existential vacuum of the 1950s has been replaced by the existential overload of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Today, the world is too much

with us. More than anything, we feel overwhelmed, and we've become jaded in response. Skepticism has replaced boredom, and cynicism has replaced apathy, as the dominant spiritual traits of our time.

But the crisis of meaning remains. We want our lives to have meaning, but sometimes we wonder if they do. It's easy to wallow in doubt, self-derision, or despair. At such times, we need courage—the courage to be in spite of the threat of non-being. We need strength to continue living each day with meaning and purpose.

From where does this courage come? It's tempting to think that courage is something we need to generate and sustain on our own. But it's not. Jude learned this lesson the hard way. To be free, absolutely, is to be separated from everyone and everything. To be free in this sense is to be dead, as Hardy rightly illustrated.

As human beings, we are constituted by our connections to the people and the world around us. If we have no connections, then we have no constitution: we don't exist. In fact, the essence of life is not freedom, but its opposite: dependence. We depend upon the world around us for oxygen to breathe, for water to drink, for food to eat. We depend on parents to conceive us, teachers to teach us, friends to befriend us, lovers to love us, physicians to heal us, and so on. For everything whatsoever, from molecules to galaxies, the first principle of existence is not independence rather utter dependence.

Why should courage be any different? Our image of the solitary hero is wrong. The goal is not for each of us to become The Lone Ranger or Superwoman. The courage to push back our doubts and find meaning, the courage to push back our despair and find purpose: the courage to be in this sense requires a heart that draws strength from other hearts. When anxiety appears and non-being threatens, it's no time to go it alone.

To be sure, any one of us can subsist for a few days without water and a few weeks without food, just as a woman can tolerate a domineering relationship for a time and a gay man can endure an onslaught of intolerance for a season. Eventually, however, courage within requires support from without. Courage arises from a heart made strong by people who believe in us and a world that sustains us.

I don't know which part of your life is most in need of the courage to be. I don't know where you struggle to push back self-doubt and declare your resolute purpose. I don't know when despair threatens to overshadow your sense of ultimate meaning. My hope, however, is that you will find courage here, in this place, among these people. The only way to fulfill your potential as a person is to become deeply connected to the people and world around you.

The alternative is to remain isolated and alone, never finding out what might have happened if you had tried to fulfill your potential, always knowing the reason you didn't try was that you lacked the courage. As I have listened to you describe the ups and downs of your lives over my years as your minister, I have often heard wistfulness, even regret, about what might have happened if you had found courage to risk a new path, pursue a new relationship, explore a new vocation. Sometime things don't work out, of course. But I don't often hear regrets about risks you took that didn't work out. The presence of courage in our lives, it seems, is reward enough—no matter how things eventually turn out.

The courage to respond to our deepest needs and longings is more than a quest for self-actualization in the psychological sense; it's also an exercise of faith in the theological sense. In his book *The Eternal Now*, Tillich observes that all of us have the experience of being divided within ourselves, disrupted by the demands of the world

without, and isolated from the needs of our spirits within. The courage to overcome this split—to reunite the fullness of our spirit with the breadth of the world we inhabit—Tillich describes as “the innermost center of faith.” By exercising this courage, our greatest strength emerges. “Be courageous!” Tillich enjoins. “Say Yes to yourselves in spite of the anxiety of the No.”

Say Yes to yourself. The courage to be is the best possible antidote to anxiety. It’s an expression of faith in an era of darkness, a beacon of hope in a time of despair. It’s a heart of strength beating to the rhythm of life.