

THE COURAGE TO DO

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. Two weeks ago, I spoke about the inner experience of courage, “The Courage to Be.” Today, we turn to the outward expression of courage, “The Courage to Do.”

One of Plato’s many dialogues tells the story of a conversation between Socrates and two eminent Greek generals, Laches and Nicias. The generals have just watched an exhibition by soldiers who are fighting in armor, a new form of combat. In the future, Laches and Nicias wonder, will the best education include learning this new skill? Socrates uses the occasion to explore a much larger question, the meaning of courage.

When asked by Socrates to say what courage is, Laches replies, that’s easy enough. Anyone who stays at his post, faces the enemy, and doesn’t run away, you may be sure is courageous.

Surely courage is more than staying put in battle, Socrates replies. Sometimes great victories are won by falling back and regrouping. Besides, people can be courageous in other areas of life: against the perils of the sea, for example, or against disease or poverty. People can also be courageous in public affairs, or in facing their own desires and pleasures.

This is quite true, Laches agrees.

So, Socrates continues, what is this thing, courage, which is the same in all of these cases?

Perhaps courage is a certain endurance of the soul, Laches ventures.

But what if someone endures in doing something that is foolish, or hurtful, or mischievous, Socrates replies. Is that courage?

Obviously not, Laches admits.

At this point Socrates mercifully turns to Nicias, who tries a different approach. Nicias ventures that courage is somehow related to the goal being sought or the danger being avoided. He eventually concludes that courage requires wisdom—the knowledge of what is good and worthy of being pursued, as well as what is evil and must therefore be avoided. As Socrates puts it, summarizing Nicias’ argument, “Courage is not only knowledge of what is to be dreaded and what is to be dared, but knowledge of all goods and evils at every stage.”

The essence of courage, in other words, is not merely the ability to do something that is physically risky. Courage is the knowledge of what is worthy and therefore must be pursued, no matter if the road is long and the path unclear. Courage is also the

knowledge of what is sinful and must therefore be confronted, no matter if the risk is great and the outcome uncertain.

In other words, you cannot demonstrate courage merely by plunging down a black diamond ski trail at breakneck speed, although courage sometimes requires facing significant risks. Nor can you demonstrate courage merely by leaping out of a plane with a parachute, although courage always requires grappling with fear. Rather, courage is the ability to do two things. It is the ability see good afar off and take a step toward it—despite obvious risks. It is also the ability to see evil close at hand and take steps to confront it—despite present danger. To know courage is to know a calling that is greater than fear.

The English word courage derives from a French word that means heart. This is a useful etymology. The work of the heart is not to pump a vast amount of blood in an instant, and then rest for a season. Rather, the heart works best when its rhythm is steady and its beat is unrelenting.

Courage is like that too. There is a cadence to courage: a steady march toward achieving what is good and confronting what is not. Courage does not eliminate fear; it sees a path through the fear to the calling that lies beyond. The key to courage is not the fear but the calling.

Theodore Olson responded to a calling greater than fear when he wrote an article for the current issue of *Newsweek* magazine titled “The Conservative Case for Gay Marriage.” Best known as the Republican lawyer who won the case of *Bush v. Gore* in 2000, Olson is trying to help overthrow Proposition 8 in California, which in effect bans same-sex marriage. In the article, he argues that the constitution requires extending the benefits of marriage to same-sex partners and that conservatives and liberals alike should actively support same-sex marriage.

Olson’s decision to champion same-sex marriage illustrates his ability to see good afar off and take a step toward it—despite obvious risks to his standing as a conservative. Since he took up this cause, Olson says he has been subjected to anger, resentment, and hostility, as well as to words like “betrayal.” But he has also been overwhelmed by expressions of gratitude and good will. He says, “I have been particularly moved by...how lonely and personally destructive it is to be treated as an outcast and how meaningful it will be to be respected by our laws and civil institutions as an American, entitled to equality and dignity.” He adds, “I have no doubt that we are on the right side of this battle, the right side of the law, and the right side of history.” To know courage is to know a calling that is greater than fear.

Earlier this week, I received an email from a longtime member of All Souls, and I tell part of her story with her permission. She had worked successfully in the media world for a couple of decades, but had also begun teaching yoga classes on the side. Over time, she developed a desire to teach yoga and meditation full-time—and thought she had a plan for making the move. Then the economic crisis struck.

She writes, “As were so many other members of the media world, I was very hard hit this past year-and-a-half by the economic downturn. The stock option shares I was so prudently managing—and that were intended to fund the next three years of transitioning into the much lower pay scale of a yoga and meditation teacher—disappeared one particularly tumultuous afternoon. After a short period, spent mostly sitting in my living room in a complete panic, I decided to do what in retrospect was

quite uncharacteristic for me: I took the less safe route. I decided to go with my gut and follow the path I'd started down, knowing that it would mean continued economic challenge.”

She reports that so far things are going well. She's finding deep satisfaction in her work. She teaches yoga to HIV/AIDS patients in the South Bronx and to people who suffer from arthritis. She has embarked on a two-year Yoga Therapist training program. Reflecting on the financial crisis that impelled her decision, she says that while “the exercise in massive non-attachment was not particularly welcome, it helped me to walk my talk and realize that the most important thing is truly the most important thing.” To know courage is to know a calling that is greater than fear.

Courage is the ability see good afar off and take a step toward it—despite obvious risks. It is also the ability to see evil close at hand and take steps to confront it—despite present danger. Some of you know the story of Muktaran Mai of Pakistan. I have mentioned her compelling story before, but it merits a fuller retelling because of the varieties of courage it vividly illustrates.

Muktaran was a teenage peasant girl in a small village when her 12-year-old brother was falsely accused of raping the daughter of one of the landowners in the village. In retribution, the chief of the landowner clan ordered four of his henchman to gang rape Muktaran. So they did, taking turns for more than an hour on the floor of a stable, while other men with shotguns forced her father and brother to wait outside. Muktaran recounts, “When they are finished with me, I am thrown outside. My clothes are torn and I am nearly naked. I lie on the ground, along with my shame.... In that one hour on the stable floor, my life has been destroyed.”

For several days afterward, no one spoke to Muktaran about what happened, and she spoke to no one. In Pakistan, Muktaran explained, women do not talk about such degrading things with others. Some women stay home and never mention it again. Others kill themselves. “Is that what I should do?” Muktaran wondered. “In Pakistan, staying alive is seen as more cowardly and shameful than the rape itself.... But if I don't commit suicide, what will I do with my life?”

Muktaran soon learned that her rape was not just a plot of the landowners; it had been ordered by the town council as a so-called “honor revenge.” This is not unusual. “Honor” rapes and killings are relatively common in Pakistan. Thousands of Pakistani women die each year from “honor” killings, almost all at the hands of family members.

The inspiring part of Muktaran's story is that two people unexpectedly met Muktaran's courage with their own and came to her aid: the local Imam and the local judge. In one of his Friday sermons, the Imam told his congregation, “The village council has sinned greatly in ordering this violation of Islamic law. The criminals responsible for the rape must be brought to justice. Muktaran Mai and her family should go to the police and file charges immediately.”

Muktaran had never heard of the Constitution. She didn't realize that women had legal rights. Even so, her father and brothers went with her to file charges, and she ended up before a judge. He asked her to describe every detail of what happened in the stable. So she did, as the judge bore witness to the travesty of her suffering, and gave voice to her cry for help. Before she left the courtroom, the judge told Muktaran to hold fast to her courage. He knew how explosive her testimony would be.

Almost overnight, a commonplace rape involving a voiceless peasant girl in a nameless village became a national scandal in Pakistan and an international outrage around the world. Today, Muktaran uses money she received from the judgment against her rapists to fund the operation of a school and a clinic in her village.

In Muktaran's case, it took the courage of three people to change the world: a rape victim who decided not to give up, an Imam who decided to speak out, and a judge who decided to listen. Though their actions were indeed courageous, they weren't trying to be dramatic or heroic. They were simply doing what was right. Muktaran stood up, the Imam spoke out, and the judge listened.

Courage is the ability to see evil close at hand and take steps to confront it—despite present danger. Courage is also the ability see good afar off and take a step toward it—despite the obvious risks. To know courage is to know a calling that is greater than fear.

The key is to focus not on the fear but on the calling. I don't know what good you feel called to pursue today—for yourself or your family, in your workplace or in our world. I don't know what evil you feel called to confront today—whether it's personal or political, whether it's physical or spiritual. But I do know that whatever calling you feel will be accompanied by fear.

Despite your fear, have the courage to say yes to the calling. The voice that you hear saying yes, the poet Mary Oliver wisely observes, is a voice you will slowly recognize as your own. It will keep you company as you stride deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you can do—determined to save the only life you can save. Have courage: say yes to your calling.