

COURAGE:

The Classical Virtues Today, III

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
(Unitarian Universalist)

Human Rights Sunday, December 10, 2006
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“Courage is not the abnormal,” says Jack Gilbert, “but the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.” If that’s the case, one of the most courageous people I’ve known was my wife’s grandmother – a tiny woman whom Gwen and her brother called “Lady.” Today she would have been 110 years old. She lived to almost a hundred. I visited her a few months before she died. She said that she had just enjoyed the heck of life. She had remarried after her first husband died. She had gone on after the second one died, too, and flirted in the retirement home some. But now there seemed to be no men her age left. And she’d begun to lose even her sense of taste. “And when you can’t even taste your bourbon,” she added, “what’s the point?” She was ready to go, without fear or regret. “After all,” she said, “if you live to be 100 in this country, that clown on morning television puts your photo on jam jar and tells the whole world just how old you’ve become.”

Her first husband was the telegrapher who sent out word about the earthquake in 1906 in San Francisco. Which is where my older daughter, her great-granddaughter, now lives. And also has a birthday today. (Strange how the Universe works!)

Erica called us Friday. She’d just finished a conference she had organized at which the principal speaker was feminist and political commentator Arianna Huffington, whose latest book is called *On Becoming Fearless: In Love, Work, and Life* (Little, Brown, 2006). She thinks that too many women in our culture are still afraid to be themselves – to inhabit the bodies they have, speak their minds, express their gifts, and claim their autonomy. Erica’s co-workers celebrated her birthday by teasing her about how nervous she had been about the conference. As Huffington says, becoming fearless does not mean always being calm. It means facing your fears, and going ahead anyway.

She tells the story of how, when she was a girl, her own mother told her about something that had happened to her during World War II. She had fled to the mountains with the two Jewish girls, as part of the Red Cross. Her responsibility was to hide the girls and to take care of wounded partisans fighting the Germans. One night German soldiers found their hut and demanded that they surrender the Jews they were hiding. Arianna's mother spoke fluent German, and just told the soldiers not to point their guns at her, and to go. And they did. Arianna says that she has spent all of her life trying to become as fearless as her mother. And she admits that she has found it easier to take provocative public political stands than to face the fears in her personal life. Once she was a conservative, married to a wealthy Republican congressman who ran against Dianne Feinstein for the Senate. Later, after they had divorced, Michael Huffington admitted that he was gay. Arianna now crusades for people to be themselves, and for a society that would really help people to do that. But to get there, she says, we're going to need courageous leaders. So she challenges politicians to join her Partnership for a Poll-Free America, and to quit constantly putting their fingers up in the air to test which way public opinion is blowing. She's open about having felt [quote] "seduced, fooled, blinded, and bamboozled" by the 1994 Republican "Contract with America," and by Newt Gingrich, whom she and her husband had supported.

Today, when she thinks about public figures whom she most deeply admires, she goes back to Franklin Roosevelt. When he said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," she points out, he was talking out of personal experience – his experience with polio – and not just about the Depression. And when he said the war was about four freedoms – freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of belief, and freedom of speech – Roosevelt left his widow, Eleanor, with a legacy on which she worked to persuade the United Nations to adopt, on this day in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as a kind of international bill of rights, at least in principle, built upon the UN Charter.

I suspect that all of us, when it comes right down to it, when it comes to courage need to draw on resources shown to us by those who have gone before us, especially our parents

and mentors. Certainly I know that my own father seems to have left me three treasures – all of them connected to aspects of courage.

First, unlike many men in this culture, he clearly didn't think of courage just in physical terms. When I was a teenager, younger and less athletic than my classmates, he actually *discouraged* me from playing football. "I did that as a freshman," he said, "and at the first practice I ended up so bruised I just asked myself, 'Why am I doing this? To prove what?'" He said it took another kind of courage to just walk away, but that's what he did.

This week I've been thinking of him. Thursday, Dec. 7, was the 65th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – his generation's version of 9/11. When that happened, Dad was an apprentice naval architect, helping to build Liberty ships and naval vessels. Later he served in the Pacific himself, on a repair ship. "Everyone had a part to play," he'd say. "I tried to do what I could do best."

He never got a chance to go to college. Yet he became a fully certified naval architect and marine engineer. When still in his early 30s he was running a whole shipyard, employing thousands of workers. He wasn't the top boss, but the chief operating officer. And when he took me to see the yard, he made it clear that he respected everyone who worked hard, no matter how lowly their position. And that he had no use for bosses or professionals who used their position or credentials to look down on people who did the real work.

Perhaps only when he died did my brothers and I realize that he had given all three of us the courage to take on complex leadership tasks for which we had no real preparation. So when I became President of the UUA, he gave me a name plate for my desk, which says, on one side, "*Never give in, never give in never, never, never. .*" Winston Churchill. But if you flip it to the third side, you read, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. No use being a damn fool about it." W.C. Fields

It takes courage to change course. I could say something political here, but I'll refrain. But far too much courage today is only vicarious. It reminds me of the character in

Joseph Heller's great novel, *Catch-22*, Colonel Cathcart, who "was courageous, and never hesitated to volunteer his men for any target that was available." I think that another reason that it has taken so long, with regard to Iraq, to get any courageous bipartisan opposition mobilized is that we rely chiefly on politicians, as George Bernard Shaw put it, "of great common sense and good taste, meaning thereby without originality or moral courage."

Yet it would be easy to rail about the misunderstandings and absence of real courage in the public realm. Where it really matters, as Huffington has the courage to admit, is in the personal, private, and spiritual realm. Physical courage, when it is needed, is secondary. Spiritual courage, within, is primary. Just ask the late Christopher Reeve. Playing Superman or riding horses was nothing compared to the courage Reeve needed after he was paralyzed. That's when he and his wife Dana decided that even though they weren't conventionally 'religious,' they still needed to tend to the spirit, before anything else, and joined a Unitarian congregation. Today, both he and his wife Dana having died, she of cancer, I think of their son, Will, now 14, and pray that he will find in his parents' steadfast and courageous concern for others some inspiration for his own living.

This fall my brother's wife, Ann Bookman, gave me a book that helped me understand where she gets some of her courage. It's called *Conduct Under Fire: Four American Doctors and Their Fight for Life as Prisoners of the Japanese, 1941-45*, by John Glusman [Penguin pb, 2006], and one of the doctors it concerns was Ann's own father. He was a young Navy doc in the Philippines when, two days after Pearl Harbor, Japan also destroyed the American fleet based in Manila – a fact that was hushed up by FDR, lest the public get too discouraged right when a response was needed. He ended up among those who, along with survivors of the Bataan death march and Corregidor, became POWs for four long years. Often conditions were horrific. Many POWs were killed by American bombers or subs as they were evacuated to Japan. John Bookman knew that he had been helped to survive just because he was a doctor. "Heaven arms with courageous compassion those whom it would have endure," says the Tao Te Ching, 67.

When I knew him, in the 1980s, in New York, he never said a word about being a POW. He was simply an exemplary physician, the essence of kindness, widowed, re-married, who invited us over for dinner one December evening. Gwen and I and our daughters were then living in a tiny church-owned apartment over the neighborhood center she ran, and thinking about investing our savings in a country house somewhere. John loved his country house, but as we talked about buying one ourselves, he said, “Excuse me for asking, but you’re both ministers, and work on weekends, and you have children in school. When would you go?” And I went home feeling that I had just had my favorite escape fantasy bubble punctured by a man used to being simultaneously kind, courageous, and candid in speech.

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other,” said Reinhold Niebuhr, in a prayer uttered in the midst of that same war, and then adopted latter, in a simplified form, by Alcoholics Anonymous.

My friend Forrest Church, whose father was the courageous senator from Idaho, Frank Church, who died of cancer, is now struggling with that disease himself. He’s in my daily prayers, because he has the same form of cancer that ended my father’s life. Forrest has said that in his view, there are three forms of courage. First is the courage to be – to be who you really are, deep down. Second is the courage to love, to love what you have, including your own life and the precious people who have loved and cared for you in it. As the Christmas card that Gwen and I are sending out this year says, “May your longest list this Christmas be the one that counts your blessings.” And finally, the courage to act, to do what you can, knowing that it is not everything that needs to be done, but to act in concert with others.

Today we need profiles in courage not just in the Senate, and in the House – leaders who are willing to go against public opinion and to help do what really most needs to be done. We also need examples of courage in our homes and places of work. Spouses courageous enough to have difficult, honest conversations with one another, even if it takes a

counselor to help. Parents courageous enough to have such conversations with teenagers. And with the parents of their teens' friends. Teenagers courageous enough to challenge how 'cool' it is to drink and drive or to be otherwise self-destructive.

The courage we need today, still, is first, spiritual and personal, and only then political. And the only things we really have to fear is fear itself, within, and then those who would use fear for their own shameful purposes – to keep us from being ourselves, from loving as we might, and from acting for justice.

We may not have all the answers. We are pilgrims on life's way. But let our pilgrimage be one that we take with courage. Step by step. Day by day. Until the day breaks and the shadow of fear is at last behind us, and we are where all our journeys both begin and end, safe at home at last. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn

Who Would True Valor See

John Bunyan

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return to no person evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted.

Support the weak.

Help the suffering.

Honor all beings.

AMEN

All people of Heaven below, the sacred body, call the Tao great
 because it does not resemble anything they know.
 The virtuous masters are great because they do not resemble any others.
 The Tao is barely visible. Yet it endures in beauty.

The virtuous one says, "I have three treasure that I hold and protect."
 The first is called compassion. The second is called moderation.
 The third is not trying to be first in power.

Compassion gives you the power to be courageous.
 Moderation gives you the power to be generous.
 Not trying to be first gives one's powers time to mature.

Nowadays too many people forsake compassion in order to be daring.
 They forsake moderation and are self-indulgent.
 They strive to be first and are self-destructive.

Through compassion the virtuous one prevails.
 Through moderation, one endures.
 Heaven arms with courageous compassion those it would have endure.

The Poles rode out from Warsaw against the German
 Tanks on horses. Rode knowing, in sunlight, with sabers,
 A magnitude of beauty that allows me no peace.
 And yet this poem would lessen that day. Question
 The bravery. Say it's not courage. Call it a passion.
 Would say courage isn't that. Not at its best.
 It was impossible, and with form. They rode in sunlight,
 Were mangled. But I say courage is not the abnormal.
 Not the marvelous act. Not Macbeth with fine speeches.
 The worthless can manage in public, or for the moment.
 It is too near the whore's heart: the bounty of impulse,
 And the failure to sustain even small kindness.
 Not the marvelous act, but the evident conclusion of being.
 Not strangeness, but a leap forward of the same quality.
 Accomplishment. The even loyalty. But fresh.
 Not the Prodigal Son, nor Faustus. But Penelope.
 The thing steady and clear. Then the crescendo.
 The real form. The culmination. And the exceeding.
 Not the surprise. The amazed understanding. The marriage,
 Not the month's rapture. Not the exception. The beauty
 That is of many days. Steady and clear.
 It is the normal excellence, of long accomplishment.

