

Reading:

On April 23rd of 1910, the former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt made a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris, France that he called, “Citizenship in a Republic.” Our reading this morning is a well-know passage from that speech. I’ve changed the language slightly to be more inclusive...substituted the word “person” for “man”.

It is not the critic who counts; not the person who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Sermon

It’s Not the Critic Who Counts

Rev. Sara Huisjen

It’s fair to say that I am not by nature a very brave or courageous person. I have always hated black diamond ski trails. I once stayed *on* a chair lift rather than get off and have to ski down.

There’s the time, too, that I cried at the top of a particularly steep and icy slope. That *day*, I took my skis off, held onto *them* and my poles, and I slid down the portion of the mountain I was convinced would otherwise have killed me. When I finally got to the lodge at the mountain’s base, I stayed there in front of the fire until everyone else was ready to go. I don’t think I’ve been downhill skiing since.

Two summers ago, I was the absolute *last* person in my family to jump off the “Chunk of Pork” rock in the middle of Beach Hill Pond where my mother lives. My 4-year-old nephew and 7-year-old niece regularly jump off it. This rock, which gets it’s name from looking like a piece of *salt* pork you’d find in baked beans, juts *up* and out of the water some 10 or 12 feet and has a loosely bolted, wooden ladder on one side that allows people to climb it. The *one* time I did jump off, a painful amount of water shot up my nose. Last summer, I agreed to try it again, only to end up deciding from the *top* of the rock that, *No*, I *wasn’t* going to jump...A little embarrassed, I climbed back *down* the ladder and crawled into my waiting kayak.

Did I mention that I’m not particularly brave? That I’ll never sign up for sky-diving, or bungee jumping, or anything else that requires negotiating serious heights from some kind of ledge?

Perhaps some here can relate to feeling this way, too?

We are not all *dare-devil* types, or naturally inclined to concoct & execute heroic acts. But then again, it *has* occurred to me of late that maybe such acts of bravery or bravado—depending on your take on things—maybe these things don’t actually tell us or reveal *much to us* about what it really *means* to be and *live* with courage?

On this, the *first* Sunday of the new year, a time it's customary for many, *myself* included, to name New Year's Resolutions and the *intentions* we wish most to nurture in our lives, what, I wonder, does *real* courage look like to you?

What risks are you willing or *wanting* to take on behalf of love and justice; your own actions and efforts that *offer* some promise of catapulting you "into the arena," as President Roosevelt refers to it, in his 1910 speech at the Sorbonne?

What is it that holds you back, or gets in your way?
What encourages you most? How do we call each other, *here*, in this *faith* community, to be courageous by daring to be real and honest with ourselves & with others, and by choosing to act in ways guided by the principles we espouse?; ways, we can be sure will mean we'll *fail* at times, and disappoint ourselves and others?

In a sermon she called "Learning Courage: Encouraging Risk," my Unitarian Universalist colleague in ministry, the Rev. Megan Lynes, begins her remarks by expressing *this* sentiment to her gathered people in Massachusetts; it's a sentiment that readily comes to my mind when I think about who *you* are, and how I've witnessed many & varied ways that you're courageous:

*I wish, she said to her people, I wish I could **show** you one another's courage with a sharper tools than words alone.*

I wish I could take the stories you've lived [and shared with me] and break them open before you like a grapefruit, juicy and sweet, acid and sour, each segment perfect in color and scent. So surprising on the tongue.

Given the chance, I wish I could ask you to turn around in your [chairs] and unmask your friends, your new acquaintances, your unknown neighbors [sitting beside you] with quizzical glee.

Tell me what brings you courage, you'd say.

Speak to me of your father, your husband, your students, your son?

Show me what you face each morning when you rise.

Share with me how you learned to trust again.

*Introduce me to the ones who lived because **you** spoke up.*

Tell me your convictions, and why you do not sway.

Show me how to sacrifice, and help me to let go.

*Make me try on bravery in **your** size shoes.*

Trying on bravery in *your* size shoe...I love that *image*, the intimacy it aims at, what it says or *suggests* about

the *power* of being compassionate and feeling connected with others;
how we, *here*, value caring about and understanding
another persons' experiences, knowing, too, that change
and transformation in *our* own lives, is often inspired in us
by witnessing and holding such revelations;
each one of them calling to us to be a little braver,
a little more "all in" with our lives;
a bit more confident and committed to sharing with others
the most significant truths we carry about who we are
and how we have, and aspire yet to live.

Of course, it's true, too, that seldom ever come right out and *ask* each other to publically answer such
deeply *personal* questions for everyone else to hear. Nevertheless, in the more *intimate* circles of trust we
create over time with each other here—in our small group ministry circles and the classes we lead & take
together—we *do* make space to listen open-heartedly to these *kinds* of truths—to *witness* to and *take* in
the very the *real* ways that our experiences—good and bad, resolved or still unfolding—have *shaped* us
and are shaping us still;

how they've carved currents *into* our beings; currents made up
of the struggles & sorrows we've known that have been fermented
in the gentle embrace of loving witness; *transformed* into tender
sources of strength; into some nurtured capacity often quietly
at work inside us that calls us to the disciplines and faithful work
of being more compassionate and engaged people in our lives and the world.

In her two books, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* and *Daring Greatly, How the Courage to be **Vulnerable** Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Houston-based social work researcher Brene Brown points out that the root of the word *courage* is *cor* – the Latin word for heart. In one of its *earliest* forms, the word *courage* had a very different definition than it does today. Originally, *courage* meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart."

Historically, *courage*, in *this way*, had *everything* to do with daring to speak honestly and openly with others about who we *really* are, and what we're feeling, and what our most formative & shaping experiences, good and bad, are or have been. In her 2010 TED Talk on "The Power of Vulnerability," which over 10 million people have seen on-line, Dr. Brown openly laments the fact that *courage*, today, is *most* often associated with heroics, and not with our capacity and need for *ordinary courage*, a willingness, on our parts, to be vulnerable and real, two of the qualities she identifies as *most needed* for people to be *able* to live what she describes as "whole hearted" lives.

In her extensive research with people, Dr. Brown identifies a group of people living *whole heartedly*. She makes the point that they are the ones consistently *practicing* living their daily lives from a place of worthiness. "Whole hearted" people, she suggests, are the *ones* who have had and *experience* a strong sense of love and belonging; they are the ones who believe they are *worthy* of being loved and belonging.

Courage is the trait "whole-hearted" people most often hold in common; a deep-rooted sense of *courage*, exhibited by their willingness to be and reveal to the world that we're imperfect. Whole hearted people, as she describes them, are the ones who fully embrace their vulnerability, their "breakableness," and consequently, their authenticity leads them to forging stronger connections with others and a willingness

to invest *more* of themselves in relationships and risk-taking, particularly when it comes to *acting* in the world.

Reflecting on what *courage* is, or might be and *look & feel like* in our lives, I'm reminded of a story I recently read on-line. It's a story that was published in mid-December in the Lewiston Sun Journal (12/22/13) and it reports on two Passamaquoddy women from Maine who local activist-artist Robert Shetterly recently honored by painting their portraits to be exhibited as part of his "Americans who Tell the Truth" series. Rob Shetterly spoke at our church just over a month ago, and when he was here, he brought several other of these portraits he has painted of people he feels exhibit great courage in their lives by seeking to face & rectify injustices.

Denise Alvater and Ester Attean are the two women Shetterly most recently honored, both of whom are known personally to Anne, and perhaps others of you here among us. Denise & Ester are co-founders of Maine's Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC for short. This TRC they helped create is the first of it's kind in our nation, and it was imagined and created as an effort to bring to light the ways in which many of Maine's Wabinaki peoples' have been traumatized over the years by child welfare programs and practices that forcibly removed Indian children from their homes and placed them in non-Indian families. The express goals of the TRC are two-fold: to create and hold a series of "listening sessions" that might provide an avenue for healing, (we will make this sanctuary space available for such a session for the 2nd time at the end of the month) and in the end, to provide the state with suggestions on how *better* to work with Maine's indigenous communities today.

On December 4th, in the Hall of Flags at the State Capital in Augusta, Rob Shetterly unveiled these two most recent paintings he made of Denise and Ester. Speeches were given by him, by these two women being honored, and by the Secretary of State, Matthew Dunlap. After the speeches were done, a former DHS worker who had taken native children out of native homes and placed them in white homes, stood up and asked for forgiveness.

A day or two later, Rob Shetterly shared with others what he saw happen *after* this woman publically asked for forgiveness. I want to share his words now as they were reported in the article I read:

"We were all aware of the woman who rose in the audience at the end of the Q & A...and asked to be forgiven. Her request was met with silence.

You (Ester & Denise) did not say anything to her at that moment—and how could you? Could you have absolved her as though you were priests? Of course not.

When the event was over, I went over to her and thanked her for her courage to speak up, to expose her own guilt and remorse. She had just told me her name when Denise appeared and clasped her in a tight embrace.

Then Denise drew back and kissed the woman's right cheek, then her forehead, then simply rested her forehead against hers and held that position of bodies embracing, foreheads touching—a complete connection of body and mind—for a long time. When Denise finally took a half step back and continued to hold the woman's hands, just looking into her eyes, both women were in tears. Nothing was said...to my surprise, I learned they'd never met before."

Later on in that same talk he gave, Shetterly says he tried to understand what had happened there in Augusta. "[He] could recognize the woman's courage and her pain, but [he] knew [he] had no legitimacy to offer more." What Denise had done, he understood to be deeply consoling. "Denise had given this

woman something that words could not and that could only come from her, a woman, now in her early fifties, who had been forcibly removed from her home at the age of seven along with five other sisters..."

Shetterly goes on to say, "I have to assume that the woman felt forgiven...that Denise, who is still struggling with her trauma, still fragile herself, found the strength and courage to comfort an agent of the state whose agency victimized her, left me in awe... It was an act that made healing possible and left people feeling ennobled and encouraged by the integrity of what they gave to each other..."

And so I ask you again, as I am asking myself:

What does *real* courage look like to you, in your life?

What risks are you willing or *wanting* to take in this new year, in this very moment there is, on behalf of love and justice?

We will not do it the same way.

None of us is expected or required to be or become a hero, though today we remember we are each capable of great and still ordinary things.

Courage, you have told me, looks like doing what you think you should, even when you're scared to do it.

Eleanor Roosevelt was the one who said this way: to have courage is "look fear in the face and do the thing you think you cannot do."

Today, we have dedicated ourselves, our care and affection to two of the youngest people among us – in the ways we will see them, and talk and teach them as they grow up, we will, I trust, affirm and nurture a sense of belonging and worthiness that we can hope will help them be caring and brave...blessed with a spirit both passionate and kind.

In closing, I offer you these words of blessing by the Irish poet John O'Donohue intended to be spoken at times of new beginnings. They're words I included in the few Christmas cards I did finally manage to write and send out on one of our Sunday snow days. They are words that express a hope and prayer, and quiet, but sure confidence that we might each aspire to carry with us into our efforts today, and tomorrow, and every day, to live our lives with courage.

In out-of-the-way places of the heart
Where your thoughts never think to wander
This beginning has been quietly forming
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire
Feeling the emptiness grow inside you
Noticing how you willed yourself on
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety
And the grey promises that sameness whispered
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,
And out you stepped onto new ground,
Your eyes young again with energy and dream
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not clear
You can trust the promise of this opening;
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
That is one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

May this be so, in your life and in mine.