

Trying Again Tomorrow: A Sermon About Courage

©Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

Courage. Our ministry theme for the month. Catherine and Scott and I really enjoyed putting together the all-ages service last week. Stories, music, readings, lots of participation from our children and youth allowed us to reflect on what it means to be a people of courage from a number of different angles. And then I found myself thinking, “What else is there to say?” Luckily, we have Soul Matters; a consortium of several hundred Unitarian Universalist congregations that collaborate on the creation of worship resources, Religious Education resources, and small group ministry programs each month on the shared ministry theme we have chosen. So off I went to dive into those materials seeking inspiration. I found it in an unexpected place; a section I usually skip. Calendar Connections. “Please, I know what holidays there are in October!”

Did you know that October 31 is Reformation Day? Reformation Day commemorates the bold action of a German monk named Martin Luther, who on that day in 1517 challenged the power of the Catholic Church by nailing his Ninety-Five Thesis to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg. Some scholars think he deliberately chose All Saints Eve because it was more likely to get the attention of the common people. Pretty brave.

And did you know that October is Bullying Prevention Month? The story Catherine told last week beautifully illustrated how every one of us can contribute to ending bullying. You don’t have to be a famous baseball player, you just have to be a little bit brave.

And October 11th is National Coming Out Day. Robert Eichberg, one of the co-founders of National Coming Out Day in 1988, was a believer that the personal

was political, and that if enough GLBTQ people told their personal stories publicly, the culture would change. "Most people think they don't know anyone gay or lesbian, and in fact everybody does," he said back then. "It is imperative that we come out and let people know who we are and disabuse them of their fears and stereotypes." Being all of who you are in a very public way is very brave.

But, there's more in this month of October. October 2nd was the birthday of Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi's genius was to use nonviolent civil disobedience in the Indian independence movement. Imagine being brave enough to challenge the British Empire (the one on which the sun never set) with nothing but moral courage and a fierce commitment to freedom! And also in October we note another anniversary of an act of liberation, one that did not practice non-violence. On October 16, 1859 John Brown and a small band of fierce abolitionists carried out their quixotic raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry. The action was unsuccessful, the violence was condemned, and Brown and his co-conspirators were executed.

Before I finish this little tour of the October calendar, I want to remind you that October 31 is not just Reformation Day and Halloween, it is also, in the Wiccan liturgical year, Samhain. Samhain, an ancient Celtic seasonal festival, marks the halfway point between the Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice. For contemporary wiccans, Samhain is a time to honor the ancestors and remember loved ones (including pets) who have died. A good reminder that for millennia pagans around the world have bravely kept their rituals and traditions alive in the face of fierce repression.

Well, last week that was as far as I had gotten in my sermon planning. A bunch of historical stories of brave individuals. I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do with all that calendar inspiration. And then came Sunday night, and the terrible news of the unbelievably violent act of terror in Las Vegas. "There are not

enough candles in the world,” laments Sean Neil Barron. There are not enough candles to memorialize all the victims of gun violence, of police misconduct, of civil wars that end in genocide, of natural disasters made worse by climate change. There are not enough candles in the world. And if there were, all any of us would do was light candles day and night and weep. And scream and yell at the people who have blood on their hands: the NRA and Congress being, to my mind, the primary perpetrators of this most recent act of terror. I want to do something and I feel so helpless and tired and discouraged. A line from *To Kill a Mockingbird* seems relevant here. “Courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.” So, let’s all do what we can about gun violence. Individually, yes. If there is interest in doing some work together as a congregation, we could explore that option as well.

A few days ago, particularly enraged by the hypocritical ‘thoughts and prayers’ offered by members of the Senate and House, I crafted this brief message and both posted it on Facebook and tweeted it. “Dear Congress, I am a minister. I’ll take care of the thoughts and prayers. You take care of getting automatic weapons out of our homes and off our streets. Sincerely, Rev. Roberta Finkelstein.” And you know what happened? Something that has never happened to me before. It went kind of viral! It has been reposted and retweeted so many times now I’ve lost count. Many of the original reposters and retweeters gave me credit, but now it has been reposted from their posts and my name is no longer attached to it. In fact, it popped into my inbox one morning this past week signed by somebody I don’t even know, with no indication of where it came from. And when I read my own words posted back to me, I realized that it is, in fact, my job to take care of the thoughts and prayers, and sermons and such, and went back to writing this sermon.

Hopelessness is a luxury we cannot afford right now. Wallowing in outrage is a luxury we cannot afford right now. Fear is a luxury we cannot afford right now. So, let's take a lesson from all those people made it onto the October calendar for their acts of bravery. And the lesson is this: courage is contagious. As Scott Tayler wrote in this month's Soul Matters packet, ". . . maybe we should say there are dozens of ordinary acts of bravery we help each other rise up to every day. Courage is not only noble; it's contagious. The bravery that makes it into the history books may save the world, but our ordinary courage keeps each other going."

It is also important to remember that the bravery that makes it into the history books may, in the present moment, be indistinguishable from the bravery that doesn't on most days. None of the amazing movements that resulted from the acts of bravery we celebrate in October happened over night. They happened over days and weeks and months of patient organizing. I suspect that contagious courage is really about endurance.

Martin Luther could not have known that when he committed his small act of defiance, he was going to start a religious revolution known as the Reformation. His single act of courage was contagious; others who had been disturbed by the corruption of an all-powerful theocracy were inspired to join their voices with his. Robert Eichberg and all of those who followed his lead and told their love stories to a hostile world could not have imagined that just a few decades later marriage equality would be the law of the land. Story by story, people were empowered to come out, the courage of the early few was contagious and continues to be so. Gandhi's carefully built non-violent revolt against a brutal military oppressor was also contagious; it spread to the American civil rights movement and to movements for human liberation across the globe. John Brown died a martyr to the

cause of abolition. Though "Harper's Ferry was insane," wrote the religious weekly the *Independent*, "the controlling motive of his demonstration was sublime." And his sublime commitment to ending the enslavement of human beings in our nation was contagious. Those wiccans and pagans across the centuries who quietly and courageously kept their earth-based practices alive, well their courage was also contagious. And as their dedication to their beliefs was passed from generation to generation in defiance of all odds, they gifted us with a new form of earth based faith just when we began to recognize that by our actions we were killing the very earth that they venerated. Our Seventh Principle – we covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part – that Principle is the result of a thousand years of contagious courage on the part of marginalized and persecuted heretics.

So, it is incumbent on each of us to be as courageous as we can be, on a daily basis, in as connected a way as possible. Because we just never know what small act of courage is going to matter the most. As our beloved Transcendentalist ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A hero is no braver than an ordinary person, but they are braver five minutes longer." Five minutes longer. We can do that, can't we?

There may be days when even that five minutes seems too long. And that's OK too, because there is always another chance to be courageous tomorrow. "Ah," you say, "she is finally getting around to explaining the title of the sermon. Trying Again Tomorrow." Yes, I am. Because when I chose the title, at least a month ago, Las Vegas hadn't happened and Hurricane Maria hadn't happened and – well I could go on. But what had happened was that I read this quote from Mary Ann Radmacher. "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at

the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'" And I said to myself, "There's my sermon."