

## Lighting the Way

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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Cold winter morning,  
yet the sky is glorious before the grey clouds set in.  
A sunrise of rose and red  
against indigo and gold  
reflected in fields of white snow.

How will we remember to be grateful  
for small things?

How will we have the courage  
we see in others  
who are not afraid to face  
life as it walks with death?

How will we learn to accept  
that with all things  
there are beginnings, and endings,  
imperfection and imprecision,  
the unanswered questions  
and the complexity?

A voice calls out into the wilderness of winter.  
Come in,  
no matter how great your fear of love.  
Come in, whether your step is tentative or strong.  
Come into this ever-widening circle.  
You are home.

*Meditation by Rev. Diane Rollert, 10 January 2010*

## Lighting The Way

I know what courage looks like.  
 At least according to films and television.  
 It involves jumping onto speeding trains, or trucks, or cars.  
 And then leaping off into certain danger.  
 Tall buildings are often involved. And there are lots of helicopters.

Courage often requires a large gun and a really good hairstyle.  
 Or lots of swords and daggers and not so good hairstyles.

Courage includes cracking jokes just before the showdown.  
 There is often a lot of swearing.  
 Most courageous people are white men who speak English and have good teeth.  
 But in the past twenty years, some are now white women who speak English  
 and have good teeth.

This is progress. Seriously.

I am delighted that the girls of today are growing up with Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Katniss, the girl on fire, from The Hunger Games. It is so important that our cultural myths show women embracing their physical power.

But they are mythic dramas, and they can make our own lives seem a little mundane. Saving the world from the Big Bad by fighting vampires in nightclubs appears far more courageous - and fun - than saving the world from climate change through changing lightbulbs to compact fluorescents.

But “**courage doesn't always roar**. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.” (*Mary Anne Radmacher*).

Courage doesn't always roar, so it is not so obvious in our complicated times, but if we pay attention, we might see courageous acts all around us, performed by our friends, our neighbours, ourselves.

Courage is present:

In the single parent dedicated to creating a home of security for her children, despite living at the poverty line.

In new immigrants, leaving all they know, in the hopes of a better, safer life.

In the boys and girls willing to out themselves in high school, knowing the possible costs.

The word courage comes from the same root as the French word *Coeur*, which means heart. **To have courage is to have heart**, to have the passion to fight for life, for meaning, for what matters most.

Maya Angelou calls courage “the most important of all virtues” because we need it in order to practice other virtues with consistency.

In honour of international women’s day, I want to share the stories of Canadian UU women who are examples of a quieter, but no less important, courage.

**Sometimes courage lies in quiet dedication.**

Like the persistence of Sarah Allen of Halifax.

Visiting in Boston in 1810, Sarah heard the Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou speak. Sarah embraced his vision of God’s love, “drinking in universalism like a man dying of thirst. After returning to her home in Halifax, she told everyone she knew about this new religion, hopeful that it would spread to all. Her embrace of a new vision inspired a neighbour, who in turn, brought other families to a belief in a loving God in a time of hellfire and damnation.

It took 27 years, but in 1837, the Halifax Universalist Society was formed and began to meet.

27 years.

It took 27 years for Sarah’s dream to come to fruition.

Even then, the initial meeting was disrupted by orthodox Christians.

A gathering to develop worship services dedicated to a God that loves everybody was interrupted and shut down by people who believed in a God of judgement.

The Universalists were called “children of the devil”, and were accused of being capable of the direst of deeds because they did not fear God.

This must have been, if not frightening, disconcerting, hurtful.  
But our spiritual ancestors kept meeting and recruited a preacher.

It takes a lot of quiet courage to stand firm with an unpopular belief, a belief that calls for love and acceptance of all people, and to hold onto it in the face of active opposition.  
And to do so for years!

**This is moral courage.** The kind of courage that reflects what theologian Paul Tillich calls “the courage to be”.

Courage is finding the resolve to act in the face of frightening or painful circumstances.

Courage is standing firm when pushed to the limit of our resources.  
Courage happens when we feel the most weak, the most vulnerable, the most terrified, yet we find the strength to move forward anyway.

Courage is less Tom Cruise and more the Cowardly Lion.

In the Wizard of Oz, the cowardly lion is convinced that he is a coward because he is afraid so much of the time.

He believes that because his heart races, and his knees get weak, because he would rather hang out with his friends than face a formidable foe, he is a coward.

The Wizard tries to tell him this is not so.

“You have plenty of courage... all you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty.”

It is okay to be scared, nervous, petrified.

Without fear, we would not need courage.

Or encouragement.

While we are so often presented with the image of the lone solitary hero, being courageous often means asking others for help, working together.

There really is strength in numbers.

When we choose to move forward,

**the vitality of courage can empower us, make us bold.**

In the 1800s, Unitarianism was unpopular in Montreal.

Unitarianism was preached there as early as the 1820s, but it was considered heresy, no Christian church would rent space to hold Unitarian services.

A minister from England preached in 1832, but was dead in a month of cholera. The rebellion of 1837 divided the small Unitarian community.

It must have seemed like Unitarianism in Montreal was not meant to succeed.

Then two Elizabeths, Elizabeth Cushing and Elizabeth Hedge, women who had come from Boston in the late 1830s, and had been brought up in Unitarian households, chose to be bold.

By the summer of 1841, they found that their position under Trinitarian preaching was “irksome and difficult to be borne.”

So they did act.

They organized for a minister to come to preach for three Sundays. Renewed by his vision, the men, including Benjamin, the brother of our Joseph Workman, finally formed the very first Unitarian congregation in Canada.

It takes courage to be bold enough to persist, to go against the norm.

It is always easier to go with the flow, stay with what is known.

**It takes courage to create something new.**

Our Unitarian ancestors had courage.

It can be easy to underestimate the difficulty they must have had.

How dangerous it was to speak against authority.

How much dedication it required to establish our congregations.

We forget how hard it would have been for women to act in societies where men ruled the public domain.

Their stories remind us that courage counts.

That we are part of a religion that chooses to change the world, that shapes people who stand up for truth, for reason, for love, that creates communities which sees new possibilities hiding in the restraints of the present.

Their stories light our way to the future.

Today we honour international women’s day, a day to remind us that the journey of seeking justice, equity and compassion is not yet over.

The tragic murders of the Shafia women, for wanting the freedoms of western women, tells us there is much work still to do in Canada.

And for that we need courage.

Mary Daly writes that “You become courageous by doing courageous acts... courage is a habit.” **Let us make courage a habit.**

As Unitarians we hold a vision of human society which honours the diversity of culture while upholding the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is a vision worth sharing, worth finding a way to bring it into being.

How do we create a society in which cultural differences are embraced, so that we don't lose the wisdom of the many ways of being in the world; but also adamantly upholds equality and freedom for everyone?

How do we elevate the best of humanity, while quelling our worse instincts for segregation, for violence, for oppression?

I wish I knew. I wish I had some answers. I wish I could call you to a grand vision, satisfaction guaranteed.

I do know that a better future for all will take wisdom, love and courage. And it won't look like an action movie, with car chases and zippy music. And I believe that we, as people of the chalice, have a role to play in shaping that future.

We have a way of being in the world that honours diversity, values people, chooses connections over divisions.

It will take many of us working together. And it will take time.

We will need sources of inspiration, of encouragement.

**We will need to have heart.**

And that is why we need to know the history of our tradition.

We need our own stories, we need to know who shaped our history, created our communities.

From their stories, we can find hope for the future.

We can take heart from their examples.

The loving conviction of Sarah Allen reminds us to be patiently persistent.

The bold actions of Elizabeth Cushing and Elizabeth Hedge reminds us to seize the moment.

And to know which is the best path for any given moment?

We will have to develop our own wisdom.

While for Sarah and the Elizabeths it was about beliefs, beliefs so strongly held, they felt they had to express them in order to live truthfully, today it is principles that we hold most dear.

We live as Unitarians in the choices we make everyday, when we choose to treat others with respect, even when we ourselves are disrespected.

When we choose to speak out against a wrong, even when we are vulnerable.

When we choose to light a chalice to illuminate the dark.

What is your style of courage?

What have been your most courageous acts?

Have you found your voice, so that you speak from a place of love and compassion?

It takes a surprising amount of courage to simply be ourselves, to learn who we are and what we stand for.

And when we know who we are, when we accept who we are, when we love who we are, just as we are, this moment, then we are capable of greatness. Then we can change the world.

Courage lives in quiet persistence, in holding on to hope.

It lives in bold choices and taking ownership of our lives.

**Courage doesn't always roar.**

May we be inspired by our spiritual ancestors,

May we work for justice, equity and compassion,

May we find courage.