

# Moments of Truth

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## **Meditation Words**      “For Longing” by John O’Donahue

Blessed be the longing that brought you here  
And quickens your soul with wonder.  
May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire  
That disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.  
May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease  
To discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.  
May the forms of your belonging - in love, creativity and friendship  
Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.  
May the one you long for long for you.  
May your dreams gradually reveal the destination of your desire.  
May a secret Providence guide your thought and nurture your feeling  
May your mind inhabit your life with the sureness with which your body inhabits the world.  
May your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures of old damage.  
May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.  
May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

## **Reading**      “The Journey” by Mary Oliver from *Dream Work*

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,

though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.

It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.

But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

### **Sermon: “Moments of Truth”**

We can never know when a moment of truth will arrive—  
a moment that will define our lives by whether we rise to it, or yield,  
whether we let the moment pass,  
or summon the courage to meet it face to face.

Such moments of decision come to define any life—  
and they come to define our lives over time.

By what we’ve done and by what we’ve left undone  
is the record of our days on this planet written.

And the thread that weaves through each of those days  
is the question of courage.

The question of whether we can find within us  
the courage to act when a defining moment is upon us.

There are, of course, many types of courage—  
or at least many ways we measure and describe it.

Courage is sometimes synonymous with nerve and moxie and pluck,  
with valour and grit, with fearlessness and audacity.

Sometimes we speak of someone who is daring or brave  
as being courageous, though I'm not so sure they're really the same thing.

Each of these other words shares shades of meaning with courage,  
but true courage speaks, more than the others, to matters of the heart.

The word itself, of course, comes from the French word *coeur*,  
that precious organ that beats out the pulse of life within each of us.

Courage, then, calls us to *take heart*.  
To take heart in the face of what frightens us.  
To take action knowing that our lives—  
and maybe even our souls—depend on it.

“Courage,” Amelia Earhart said,  
“is the price that life exacts for granting peace.  
The soul that knows it not,  
knows no release from little things:  
Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,  
Nor mountain heights  
where joy can hear the sound of wings.”

The cost of courage can sometimes seem well beyond our budget.  
A price we're unable or simply unwilling to pay.

So often, though, when cowardice overcomes our courage,  
we fail to account for the high cost exacted  
by not taking the more courageous path.

That cost is frequently paid in regret and remorse, in guilt and grief.

That's because when we let a moment of truth pass us by,  
something in the soul of who we are shrinks,  
and our lives become so much smaller than they ever need to be.

Too often we see the moments that call for courage  
as being the stuff of distant and ancient battlefields—  
the moments that have defined the lives  
of heroines and heroes down through time,  
rather than being the stuff of our each and every day.

But, courage is called for in the here and now.  
And, moments of truth  
have a way of arriving when we least expect them.

Though these stories are now the stuff of history,  
there are in the forefront of my mind this morning  
two iconic images of courage  
I want to hold up for you.

One is of a woman on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama;  
the other of the Unknown Rebel of Tiananmen Square.

Both of these images tell the story of people on the front lines  
of a battle that intersected with their workaday lives—  
with a struggle for justice and human dignity.

The Unknown Rebel, the Tank Man, as he is called,  
stood down a line of armoured tanks,  
all the while holding grocery bags in his hands.

He had just been shopping, when he walked into history.

Little is actually known about him.  
His identity is uncertain.  
It's widely thought that he was swiftly arrested and likely executed.

His memory today, while known around the globe,  
is largely lost within his homeland,  
as the famous photo on the cover of your Orders of Service  
has been suppressed in China since the uprising in 1989.

But what endures is the question of what prompted  
someone strolling back from the store  
to confront that array of tanks rolling through the square?

Some suggest it was mental illness.  
That he was out of his right mind, and maybe worse.

It's hard to say. It's likely impossible that we'll ever know.

But, as powerful as the defining image  
we have in our heads from that day is,  
what I find all the more powerful  
is the photo that was released just a few years ago.

It was a photo taken from ground level,  
not from the hotel balcony six floors up and at a safe distance,  
but from the sidewalk 20 to 30 metres away.

What is seen in that image is a man determined and defiant.  
He is standing alone in the middle of the street,  
as people are running for cover, fleeing in every direction.

At the moment the photo was taken,  
the tanks are still probably a hundred metres away.

And there he stands, steady and calm.  
It turns out he didn't dart into the street at the last minute.  
This was not a whim.

He stood there with intention, until the tanks came to him.

When they drew close and saw that he wouldn't budge,  
they tried to go around.

He simply moved into their path again and again until they stopped.  
He then climbed up on top of the first tank  
and engaged the driver in a conversation.

Eventually, he made his way back down,  
and then parked himself in front of the tank again.

The stand-off only ended when two people in blue uniforms  
whisked him away to a fate unknown to this day.

There's some speculation that if he is still alive,  
given the suppression of the photo within China,  
he may not even know of his fame around the world.

And, yet, his moment of truth  
is one that we carry with us as a profile in courage.

I've often wondered what compelled him to take such bold action.  
What in his life had prepared him for such a moment.

A convincing case can be made for temporary insanity,  
but what speaks to us across the years and through those photos  
is his testament of defiance—  
of someone doing something that surely scared him to death—  
and maybe, quite literally, brought about his untimely end.

The other image, the one of Rosa Parks on that Alabama bus is clearer.

The classic story is of a demure black woman,  
on her way home from a hard day's work  
as a seamstress in a downtown department store,  
who was just too tired to give up her seat on a segregated bus  
when it was demanded by a white man.

In the almost sixty years that have passed since that moment of truth,  
Rosa Park's story has become the stuff of legend,  
and the actual facts covered over in the mists of modern mythology.

As she told a reporter several years after the incident,

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true... the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

What history has had a hard time remembering  
is that what happened on December 1, 1955  
was not some singular act of defiance.

In the twelve years prior to that day,  
Parks had been kicked off buses  
several times for her refusal to sacrifice her seat.

She had even faced off with that same bus driver at least once before.

And what is so often forgotten  
is that she had been studying and teaching non-violent resistance  
for years by the time she boarded that bus that December day.

What she had learned is that you can practise courage—  
that you can study it and prepare until a moment that matters arrives.

Yet, the study of courage presents to us a paradox.

To practise courage, it will do you no good  
to hit the gym or study martial arts.

To become courageous, you need not hone  
the powers of the body or the mind.

To live courageously, you must harness the power of the heart,  
for the key to courage is vulnerability.

And, that’s the paradox.

To be courageous requires opening ourselves  
to hurt and harm, to injury and insult.

The courageous have a way of putting their hearts  
and sometimes their lives on the line.

Brene Brown is a researcher who studies human connection, about what binds us together and what gets in the way.

Early in her work, she noticed an odd trend that she couldn't quite explain.

As she puts it in her wonderful TED Talk:

“when you ask people about love,  
they tell you about heartbreak.

When you ask people about belonging,  
they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences of being excluded.

And when you ask people about connection,  
the stories they [tell are] about disconnection.”

She struggled to understand this unnamed thing  
that unraveled connection and caused people to respond  
over and over again in this way.

And what she found was that this unnamed thing is shame—  
that sense that each of us, at least occasionally, has  
that “we are not enough.”

That we are not good enough, not smart enough,  
not beautiful enough, not, not, not... enough.

In her research, though, she discovered that there was a key difference  
between the people “who have a strong sense of love and belonging  
and the people who really struggle for it.”

And that difference boiled down to  
“the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging  
believe they're worthy of love and belonging.  
That's it. They believe they're worthy.”

She plunged into trying to better understand how such a sense  
could come about. And what she came up with  
is that these people are “whole-hearted.”

She found that they shared a deep sense of courage.  
Tracing back to the root meaning of the word,



that these are people who tell  
the story of who they are with their whole heart.

They had a capacity for vulnerability.  
They could put it all out there.  
They could put their imperfection on display  
without worrying whether it might undermine their worth.

They could be compassionate toward themselves and others.  
And, they could be their most authentic selves  
because as she says, “they were willing  
to let go of who they thought they should be  
in order to be who they were.”

Warts and all, they were themselves.  
“What made them vulnerable made them beautiful.”

They didn’t consider being vulnerable excruciating  
because they knew that it was simply necessary  
to living a courageous and connected life.

They displayed a willingness to risk their hearts and their hopes,  
knowing there are no guarantees in this life.

And she found with the other group,  
with the ones not quite living with their whole hearts,  
that they had a way of resisting vulnerability, at all costs,  
often numbing feelings of grief and shame and disappointment.

The kind of things we really don’t want to feel.

And, yet, as her research makes so starkly clear,  
“you [can’t] selectively numb.”

When we numb the emotions that we try to keep at bay,  
we also numb ourselves to happiness, and gratitude, and joy.

The very first principle of our Unitarian faith is that we uphold and promote  
the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

And, yet, I know that a good many of us find this principle easier to apply to other people than to ourselves.

Out of fear that we are somehow lacking,  
we numb ourselves to not only to the hard stuff,  
but to the good stuff, too.

And, so, my prayer this morning  
is that each of you might come to live with your whole hearts,  
with compassion for your own faults and imperfections,  
for your sins and your short-comings.

To know that you are of intrinsic worth,  
to know that you are enough.

To know that you can live with courage  
by living with a heart open wide.

To practice the art of vulnerability,  
knowing that we can live for what we love rather than what we fear.

Our moments of truth may never call us  
to stand down a line of tanks or refuse to budge on a bus.

But our moments of truth come, every day,  
on the streetcar and in our city's squares,  
in our homes and schools and offices,  
calling us to be courageous by being vulnerable.

May we trust deeply enough in our own worth  
that we might risk an authentic life.

May we put ourselves on the line,  
knowing in our heart of hearts  
that "courage [truly] is the price that life exacts for granting peace,"  
and yet be unconcerned about counting the cost.

So may it be, this day and all the days of our lives. Amen.