

“The Courage to Be”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading

words of Mark Morford

Stop thinking this is all there is. . . . Realize that for every ongoing war and religious outrage and environmental devastation and bogus [war] attack plan, there are a thousand counter-balancing acts of staggering generosity and humanity and art and beauty happening all over the world, right now, on a breathtaking scale, from flower box to cathedral. . . . Resist the temptation to drown in fatalism, to shake your head and sigh and just throw in the karmic towel. . . . Realize that this is the perfect moment to change the energy of the world, to step right up and crank your personal volume; right when it all seems dark and bitter and offensive and acrimonious and conflicted and bilious . . . there's your opening. Remember magic. And, finally, believe you are part of a groundswell, a resistance, a seemingly small but actually very, very large impending karmic overhaul, a great shift, the beginning of something important and potent and unstoppable.

Sermon: “The Courage to Be”

It was a Tuesday morning that began like most any other.

I got up and got ready to head into downtown Boston, where I worked at Arlington Street Church.

When I walked out the door, I was struck by the feeling that the season was at last turning to autumn.

There was, for the first time, that unmistakable crisp feeling in the air that promised fall was on the way.

As I waited for the bus, I could hear the mumble

of the morning news through the open window of a neighbour's house.

I couldn't make out the words, though, and thought little of it.

I went back to reading the book I had just started:
Paul Tillich's classic theological text: *The Courage to Be*.

Later, on the subway, there was an eerie silence,
but I didn't think much of it either, and went back to reading my book.

When I walked up the stairs of the subway exit
and down the sidewalk to the church,
I did notice the streets were all but abandoned,
but, again, didn't think too much of it.

It was only after walking through the door of the church office
and having my coworkers ask if I'd heard the horrible news,
that I finally began to think more about the newscast I couldn't decipher,
the silence on the subway, and the empty streets and sidewalks.

During the time I had been commuting in to the office that morning,
two airplanes—that had originated in Boston—
had flown into the Twin Towers, while at least one other was missing.

News was hard to come by,
as our primitive internet connection was down
and the church didn't have a television.

I stayed at the church all day that day—
through to the evening when we opened our doors to the city for a vigil and
people poured in to sit in silence, to light candles, and to weep.

It was only late that evening when I finally made it home
that I first saw the iconic images that still define that September day.

For some twelve hours,
the visuals were simply the stuff of my imagination—
a mental exercise I had to undertake to conjure the unthinkable,
to imagine what it could possibly be like to see the collapse
of the World Trade Center towers or the Pentagon in flames.

In lieu of images that day, what I had to work with was theology.

Forever weaved with my memories of that strange and sorrowful day are the insights of Tillich's *Courage to Be*, the book I'd been reading that morning and that I would continue to read in the days ahead.

Tillich was one of the true theological giants of the 20th century.

Born in Germany in 1886,
he was the son of a conservative Lutheran pastor.

Shortly after his mother died, he went off to university,
then married, was himself ordained a Lutheran pastor, and later served
as a chaplain in the German Army during the First World War.

Between the wars, he became a prominent and outspoken professor of
theology, eventually coming into open conflict with Nazi ideology.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, it was no surprise
that Tillich promptly lost his job at the University of Frankfurt.

Fortunately, within a matter of a few months,
the faculty at Union Theological Seminary
invited him to come teach in New York—
an offer they each subsidized that first year
by sacrificing 5% of their own salary to support Tillich and his family.

Over the remainder of his career, Tillich would go on to teach
at Columbia, Harvard, and the University of Chicago.

During that time, he put forward a systematic theology for the modern age
that deeply challenged many of the religious conventions of the time.

While many were busy denouncing him,
Unitarians took a shine to much of what he had to say.

Tillich did not believe in God in any conventional sense.

Indeed, Tillich was often condemned for being an atheist,
though he found that idea preposterous.

Instead, Tillich spoke of God as “the ground of being”—not as some debatable being that may or may not exist, but as being-itself.

A god that could be defined by borders, he thought, was no god at all. So he talked of the God beyond God and the God beyond theism and the God who shows up when what we’ve called God disappears.

In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, who edited a collection of Tillich’s seminal works a few years ago: “God is not God’s name. God is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each—the life force, the ground of being, being itself.”¹

In his book *The Courage to Be*, Tillich said: “There are no valid arguments for the ‘existence’ of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being, whether we know it or not.”²

“There are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being.”

That courage, the courage to affirm the power of being—the power of our own being—is central to Tillich’s theology.

And it was something he felt was in short supply.

Tillich was an intensely devoted student of the human condition, which he believed to be beset by deep and universal anxiety.

He named three fundamental forms of anxiety that we humans contend with.

The first is existential anxiety, the fundamental anxiety over the question of our very being—the inescapable anxiety we must bear about the almost incomprehensible fact that we will someday die.

Tillich argued that at the heart of being human sits the paralyzing awareness of our eventual demise.

¹ Forrester Church, *Lifecraft*, p. 12.

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 181.

A concern that defines and drives so much of the religious quest.

Again, summed up so well by Forrest Church: religion, he says, is “our human response to the dual realities of being alive and having to die.”

The second type of anxiety is a spiritual form we experience whenever we grapple with the unnerving prospect of life’s meaninglessness.

It’s the anxiety we encounter
in those times when we are overwhelmed with isolation and despair.

It’s an anxiety that often causes people to all too easily turn
to fanatical and fantastical belief systems that deny the hard truths of reality
rather than stand in the sobering pain
of life’s sometimes devastating emptiness.

Escapist religions more focused on the next life than this one
tend to fit the bill.

The third and final form of anxiety Tillich identified is moral.
It is the anxiety that emanates from that gap
between our actions and our highest aspirations.

It is the anxiety we know so well as guilt,
the anxiety we feel in falling short of our values and our potential,
an anxiety that leaves us swimming in the ambiguity between good and evil, an
anxiety that reminds us we are implicated in webs of injustice and suffering in
this world by what we have done and what we have left undone.

In the face of all of this overwhelming anxiety—
anxiety that is existential, spiritual, and moral—
Tillich said that what we so desperately need
is courage, the courage to be.

Courage that affirms that it is in facing our death
that we find the strength to live.

That through life-giving acts of creativity,
we confront the threat of meaninglessness.

That through accepting our human failings, we strengthen our resolve

to serve the focus of our faith, what Tillich called our “ultimate concern.”

Friends, the choice we face every day is to live with such courage, even though anxiety and ambiguity swirl around us and within us.

“Courage,” Tillich said, “is the power of life to affirm itself in spite of this ambiguity, while the negation of life because of its negativity is an expression of cowardice.”³

Essential to choosing the “courage to be” over cowardice is coming to know ourselves as an essential part of being itself, in knowing ourselves as full participants in the ground of being (what Tillich called God), in seeing in our own finitude the stuff of infinity, and in knowing deep down in the corners of our soul, that we are accepted, even with our short-comings and our failures.

In Tillich’s most famous sermon, called “Shaking the Foundations,” he spoke to so much of this by pointing to the grace that cradles the world:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.
It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley
of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual,
because we have violated another life,
a life which we loved, or from which we are estranged.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being,
our indifference, our weakness, our hostility,
and our lack of direction and composure
have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when, year after year,
the longed for perfection of life does not appear,
when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades,
when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness,

³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 27.

and it is as though a voice were saying:

“You are accepted.

You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you,
and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything;

do not perform anything;

do not intend anything

simply accept the fact that you are accepted.”

Have you felt that sort of grace in your life,
whether you have a name for it or not?

I hope so. I hope that your own exercise of the courage to be
has rewarded you with an appreciation of the fact
that you belong to and are held by a great web of being.

I hope you've come to an abiding awareness
of the infinite to which we all belong, even if the part we are given to play
is but for the briefest moment out of the vastness of time.

Seeing ourselves as more than ourselves is not especially easy to do.

To see the mere drop that our life is in the great ocean of being
can be unsettling, yet it can also be transformative—
when we find the courage to be, for the little time that we have.

I think that is what happened for so many people on 9-11.

I think it is what often happens for people,
when they are staring down a terrible diagnosis.

When time is short—and we know it,
we open our hearts to our true place in the universe.

When we are facing threats to our collective well-being,
more often than not, we open our hearts to one another
and summon our better angels to look after those around us.

It's why people risk their lives to save strangers,
when there's been an earthquake or an avalanche.

It's why people give of what they have and who they are
to help others who are in need.

Such moments speak to the best of who we are,
the best of what we can be.

This ability in dire circumstances to see ourselves as we truly are—
as part of a larger whole—as tiny, fragile threads in the great fabric of life, need
not, though, always depend on catastrophe.

This point is brought home to me in the movie, *Love Actually*.

For me, the most moving scene of the film is the first.
Over a series of images of people enthusiastically greeting one another
at the airport with kisses and hugs are these words:

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world,
I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport.

General opinion's starting to make out
that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that.

It seems to me that love is everywhere.

Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy,
but it's always there—fathers and sons, mothers and daughters,
husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends.

When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know,
none of the phone calls from the people on board
were messages of hate or revenge—they were all messages of love.

In spite of the vagaries and vicissitudes of this life,
may we summon, with each day we are given, the courage to be.

And may we take our place in the great web of being itself,
knowing that we are truly capable of the courage life demands. Amen.

