

# “The Courage of Our Convictions”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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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.

It was a bitterly cold January day in 1942.

Steam bloomed from the man’s mouth  
as he alighted from the streetcar at Broadway and 73<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The passengers all around him were discussing war,  
but he is thinking only of a piano, and his hands tinkering over the keys.

“The thought makes his mouth dry.”<sup>1</sup>

“Gripping the handle of his music satchel,  
he hesitates on the street corner for a moment.”

He stops “to check the advertisement torn from the newspaper  
and now folded—a little furtively—in his coat pocket:  
Number One Hundred and Sixty.”

He sees the address on the right, “passes beneath the portico  
and steps across the polished hallway into a wood-paneled elevator.  
With a clunk, he is lifted skyward, and when the elevator boy  
yanks open the metal grille again, the man finds himself  
at the inaugural meeting of the Society of Timid Souls.”

Little is actually known about what exactly happened that afternoon.

We do “know that just four unsteady piano players responded to the first [ad]  
placed by Bernard Gabriel, a . . . concert pianist,

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<sup>1</sup> This telling is adapted from the version in Polly Morland’s *The Society of Timid Souls or How to Be Brave*, pp. 1-4.

publicizing a series of meetings to be held at his Manhattan apartment on the first and third Sunday afternoon of every month.”

For seventy-five cents, to cover the cost of the refreshments, musicians who were racked with fear were invited “to play, to criticize, and be criticized, in order to conquer the old bogey of stage fright.”

The sound-proofed room itself was empty, but for two great, grand pianos.

“Maestro Gabriel,” the young host of this odd little club, didn’t have much in the way of credentials, aside from being an accomplished pianist.

But the “strange and devious methods” he used to help the timid members of this small society caught on.

By summer, more than twenty timid souls came together on Sundays.

In time, *The New Yorker* magazine sent a reporter, who was himself a pianist, to check it all out.

In this strange salon, he found a range of people, with differing levels of skill, who seemed to only hold in common a horrible fear of performing in front of others.

One of the most challenging cases he witnessed in this motley crew was that of Miss Flora Cantwell.

Her fear was such that Gabriel announced to the group, “This afternoon, I’m [either] going to kill or cure her.”

As the reporter watched the scene unfold, the mysteries of the maestro’s unorthodox methods were quickly revealed.

“As Flora Cantwell sat down at one of the two pianos and began to play” . . . , Mr. Gabriel “moved among the Society members handing out props, a whistle here, a rattle there, occasionally pausing to whisper something into another Timid Soul’s ear.”

As Flora finished playing her etude, Gabriel cried out, “Again!”  
And at the moment she started over, complete pandemonium broke out.

Someone spun the rattle, another blew Bronx cheers.  
One person “repeatedly slammed the door.”  
One woman warbled the song “Daydreams Come True at Night”  
While someone else hurled the New York telephone directory at the floor,  
over and over again.

It was complete chaos. And amid all of this,  
“Flora...tucked her head down and [just] kept playing.”

Gabriel then “crashed his hands upon the keyboard of the other Steinway,  
shouting, “You’re playing abominably, but don’t stop!”

So she “did as he said and rising from the piano at the end,  
Miss Cantwell reported, ‘I could play [this piece] in a boiler factory now.’”

Bernard Gabriel’s comical, if questionable, methods  
“proved to be remarkably effective.”

Many of his students claimed to have been cured  
by the madness of his method, and “a year later,  
Society membership had doubled to include timid actors,  
timid singers, timid public speakers, and timid parlour entertainers,  
each of them desperate to learn—or to remember—how to be brave.”

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As zany as it may sound, that’s exactly what I believe this place—  
this congregation—to be about.

Now, hopefully our methods don’t involve  
the discombobulating pedagogy and pranks of Bernard Gabriel,  
but this is a place where Timid Souls do, indeed, gather  
to learn and remember how to be brave.

I see it all the time.

In small groups and large services, through music and meditation,  
in being with people who rub us the wrong way,

and in listening to others' struggles and hearing how they came through,  
through all of it, we encounter here the stuff that can make us stronger,  
that can summon our courage and make us braver,  
if we are willing to open our hearts to it and each other.

The third principle of Unitarian Universalism states as our aim  
“acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.”

I can confidently say  
that it doesn't take very long at all, in human community,  
to uncover endless opportunities for spiritual growth.

All it usually requires, frankly, is other people—  
people who remind us that there are other ways of seeing the world,  
and that life lived intentionally with others  
involves predictable, if unexpected, journeys  
into humility and grace, heartache and forgiveness, upset and inspiration.

And all of it, all of that, all of those moments and emotions,  
I think, can be the stuff of encouragement and spiritual growth,  
when we're willing to see and understand it as such.

Now, in the thick of it, such moments may feel just  
like all those obnoxious, noisy distractions  
made back in that piano studio so long ago,  
as things meant to throw us off our course.

But they can also be opportunities to learn—  
about our capacity for resilience, about our ability to be real,  
about our desire to keep the song of our life going until we get it right.

When we help one another in this work, by accident or by example,  
it's rightly called encouragement.

I love that word, for it means to impart or to instill courage in another.

It's something I see people doing around here day in and day out,  
in moments when people listen deeply to the concerns on another's heart,  
and reflect back to them a strength that only someone else can see.

I witness it in acts of kindness and compassion,

and in moments of loving honesty.

I've watched it flow forth from both a waterfall of tears  
and erupt in a cavalcade of laughter.

I've seen it come alive in moments when people act for justice,  
putting their faith in action.

I've witnessed it when people have dared to be their truest selves.

Over and over, I've seen people around here impart courage—  
helping others find strength they didn't know they had.

What I've discovered in watching,  
is that the courage we see in others can be highly contagious.

So, it is my hope that we might grow even more infectious!

That we might catch courage from each other and spread inspiration  
to act more boldly than we have ever imagined possible.

The question that must be asked, though, is what for—to what end?  
For what purpose could or should we gather up our collective courage?

That's not an easy question for a bunch of Unitarians to answer.  
At least not together, in a unified way.

The American humourist Garrison Keillor, as a devoted Lutheran,  
often has, as you may know, something of a field day with Unitarians.

Recently he poked fun at the conception  
that we lack focus and commitment.<sup>2</sup>

He told of a football game between the U.U.U.U.  
(the Unitarian Universalist United University)  
and Gesthemane Seminary for Bible-based Baptists.

“In his skit, the Unitarians[, who haven't won a game in 87 years,]  
are a team that stands around

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<sup>2</sup> Based on a telling by Julie Stoneberg.

arguing in a huddle and then runs off in all directions.”

Not exactly a football powerhouse.

“The cheerleaders chant: ‘Give me a U—if you want to!  
Give me another U—if you’re comfortable with that!  
Give me another U—unless you have to get going!  
Give me another U—as long as it’s approved by a committee!’”

He says, “Their team was just out to have an interesting football experience and then a post-game discussion.”

As it turns out, in a cruel twist of fate at the end,  
the Unitarians, having bet their entire \$6 million endowment on  
the other team, actually go on to win the game,  
but end up losing everything because they didn’t believe in themselves.

Keillor has, in my opinion, a bit too much fun at our expense.  
But humour, if it really works, always has a kernel of truth.  
And, clearly enough, Keillor has been around enough Unitarians  
to be on to something. . .

While we may easily feel the courage of our own convictions,  
as individuals, we can, indeed, often be found  
running in very different directions on the field.

I often wonder what it would take  
for us to find the courage of shared convictions.

I wonder what would happen if we were better able  
to work toward common goals, sure in the knowledge  
that we can accomplish so much more together than we ever can alone.

These are not idle questions.

Not when we live in a time of such dramatic upheaval,  
when it feels that so much of what we love about this world,  
this country, and this city is going to hell in a handbasket.

The writer Annie Dillard is on to something when she says:

When people come [into a worship service]  
they should not be handed an order of service with a smile,  
but should be given hard hats and life preservers;  
because [a religious community] should be a dangerous place,  
a zone of risk, a place of new birth and new life,  
where we confront ourselves with who we truly are  
and who [our faith] is calling us to become.

Dillard is speaking of congregations as testing grounds,  
as the place where we discover what we're made of  
and put the best of who we are in service to the needs of a hurting world.

I believe that is why we are here.

Not merely for good company and interesting conversation.

But to be a loving laboratory of the human spirit,  
where we instill in one another the courage needed  
to meet the challenges of this life and make all the difference we can  
with what we do with our time on this earth.

A wise person recently reminded me that courage requires hope.  
And so it does.

At the heart of this great faith is a hope that a better world  
can be brought into being through our commitment  
to live lives of integrity, justice, compassion, and peace.

To put a finer point on it, our purpose is to love the hell out of this world.

So let us do more a whole lot more of that, together.

On this day when we renew our commitment  
to the financial well-being of our congregation,  
let us also strengthen our resolve to work together for the common good,  
both within and beyond these walls.

Let us summon the courage of our collective convictions  
that we may serve Life in ways that inspire and encourage  
people across this city to do likewise.

Let us come together, not so much as a Society of Timid Souls,  
but as a people who dare to dream and take real risks,  
a people learning and yearning  
to live lives of deep courage and conviction.

So be it. Amen.