

“The Cost of Courage”

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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.

“Courage,” she said, “is the price that life exacts for granting peace.”

These knowing words by Amelia Earhart,
speak to the deep costs that courage can entail—
they point up the truth that for some action to be genuinely courageous,
it must involve a meaningful amount of risk.

While today she’s best known as a pioneer in the field of aviation—as the
woman who went missing on her ill-fated flight around the globe—
Amelia Earhart knew something more of courage and its cost
than is generally understood.

She was ridiculed as a child for being a “tomboy,”
She saw the horrible stress of her parents’ troubled marriage
and the family’s financial ruin,
all brought on by her father’s alcoholism.

After graduating from high school, she continued in a small college program,
but after less than a year, decided to abandon her studies.

Upon leaving school, she visited her sister, who lived in Toronto,
at Christmas in 1917.

She decided to stay,
and here received training as a nurse’s aide from the Red Cross
and worked as a volunteer at the Spadina Military Hospital—
that fabulous if dilapidated Gothic Revival building
that still stands in the Spadina Crescent roundabout,
just north of College Street.

In the halls of that building, at the height of the Great War,

she cooked for and dispensed medications
to the wounded soldiers who had recently returned from the front.

Tragically, many of those soldiers brought the Spanish flu home with them.

As the pandemic of 1918 reached its peak in Toronto,
Earhart herself became a patient,
suffering from pneumonia and terrible sinusitis.

She spent two months in hospital, fighting to survive.

Eventually, she had multiple surgeries in hopes
of stopping the constant drainage of her sinuses
and relieving the pain and pressure she felt around one of her eyes.

But the operations failed to fix the problems,
and she suffered with chronic headaches and horrible sinusitis
for the rest of her life.

Such challenges would be difficult for most anyone to endure,
but, of course, they could be absolutely debilitating
for someone determined to become a pilot.

Into her later life, sometimes even on the airfield,
Earhart wore a bandage on her cheek to cover a small drainage tube
used to alleviate some of the pressure.

Knowing all of this, knowing more of her story,
makes, for me, her complete poem about courage mean all the more.

Courage 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 bitter joy can hear
The sound of wings.

It's never completely possible to peer into the lives of others
and understand the exact ways in which they wrestle with life.

To grasp the particular peace they are seeking,

and the steep price they're willing to pay by way of courage
in order to achieve it.

To appreciate the escape their souls seek from the little things of living.

To know something of their encounters
with that forsaken feeling that comes with fear.

Or that lofty place where life's bitter joy at last takes flight.

But, we can know something of these things within ourselves.

And we can better understand our own struggles
in the light of the struggles we share with others
by the simple fact of our being human.

Of course, looking to people known for heroic acts of bravery can inspire.
We can feel encouraged in seeing courage in others.

But, frankly, we can also easily be intimidated by it,
and left completely immobilized
by the sneaking suspicion that we are likely made of lesser stuff.

Maybe that's why I prefer my heroes to be at least a bit flawed.
People who did and do great things, in spite of their shortcomings.

That is, I think, what's at the heart of our being human.
So, I take much more inspiration from people who have struggled
than from people who have simply skated through life.

I, for one, need shining examples
of people who have come through their failures,
people who've overcome the timidity in their soul to make a difference,
people who've put themselves on the line when it mattered most,
even though they might have been shaking in their boots.

I need those examples, and I think we all do,
because we make mistakes, we know failure,
because our souls can be too timid for their own good,
and because life itself asks us over and over again
to risk something of ourselves in order to truly find ourselves,

to find and live a life more abundant.

The writer Anais Nin said that,
“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”
And so it does.

In thinking about the price that such courage involves,
my mind quickly turns to the word sacrifice.

It’s not a term often mentioned in Unitarian Universalist circles,
but it should be.

It’s an idea that has largely gone out of favour in the wider population, as well.

Indeed, an online tracker of word usage
shows that it’s been on a sure and steady decline since 1850,
though there does seem to be a recent, if minor, uptick in its usage,
for the first time in a century and a half.

We usually think of sacrifice meaning the giving up of something valuable
in hopes of attaining something even more so—
of offering up something for a higher purpose.

That’s the idea behind ancient acts of animal and human sacrifice.

For the giving up of the life of this animal or this person, it was thought,
we’ll appease the gods and get good weather or abundant crops in return.

I’m sure this idea probably made a lot more sense
to those not actually being sacrificed. . .

Fortunately, the idea has evolved.

Today, of course, we speak of parents making sacrifices
so their children might have a better life.

Or of someone sacrificing a promising career to follow her true passion.

Or of a batter in baseball sacrificing his own chance to get on base
for the greater benefit of a run batted in for the team.

But the more meaningful use of the term would be one, I believe,
that points us to what we treasure so deeply
that we are willing to pay a precious price for it—
a price paid through acts of genuine courage.

Sacrifice means “to make sacred.”

And, in my liberal religious dictionary,
that means treating what we cherish with all due reverence and respect.

It means honouring the great covenant we have with each other,
with the planet, and with life itself.

It means risking something of ourselves,
putting our hearts on the line,
making ourselves vulnerable,
in order to save and secure what we most deeply love.

A story.

On the top of a hill in Japan once lived the village curmudgeon.

No one knew why the farmer was so ornery,
but the fact was that he never had a kind word to say.

No one knew why he was so inhospitable,
or why he wouldn't even open his door to visitors.

No one knew why he lived such an isolated life
at the top of a hill that was so difficult to reach.

What everyone did know, though,
was that he very much wanted to be left alone.
And alone he was.
Year in and year out.

Each autumn, everyone in the village
would come together for a festival.

The women sang, the men told tall tales,
and the children played, screaming at the top of their lungs

as they ripped and ran, trailing long streamers behind them.

Everyone in the village would turn out—
except for the farmer at the top of the hill.

One autumn, it was the ruckus down in the village
that drew the farmer outside in a huff
to see just what all the commotion was about.

Looking down the hill, he could see the village festivities, and he gasped.

But it was not the bright sights and sounds of the celebration
that took his breath away.

Looking beyond the village, out to the sea,
he noticed that the waters of the ocean had retreated far into the distance.

Though he had never witnessed this in his very long life,
he knew well what would come next: powerful waves
rolling toward the shore with tremendous speed.

Though his house was safe, up on the hill,
he knew a tsunami was heading straight for the village.

The farmer immediately yelled out a warning.
But because of all the festivities, no one could hear him.

He jumped up and down and even waved his arms.

But everyone was having too much fun to notice.

The farmer was frantic.
Something stirred deep within him, and he wondered
how he could he possibly stop the tsunami
from drowning the entire village.

In an instant, the answer came to him.

Though he might be ornery and inhospitable,
he knew the people of the village were not.
They had always reached out to him with kindness.

So, in that moment, the farmer did the only thing he could think to do.

He rushed into his fields and lit all his crops afire.

A raging inferno ensued,
as the dry vegetation quickly wilted and crumbled in the flames.

Who saw the flames first? No one knew.
Perhaps a bright-eyed child,
or an elder with a nose finely attuned for smoke.

Whoever it was, the cry of “Fire!” spread quickly
and all the festivities stopped as the villagers’ eyes turned toward the hill.

In short order, people swarmed toward the farm,
with blankets and buckets of water drawn from their wells.

As they reached the top of the hill,
they doused the fire as quickly as they could.

Though, by then, most of the farmer’s crops had been destroyed.

Yet no one from the village drowned in the tsunami.
And they all, by then, knew why.

As wave upon wave crashed upon their shore
and erased their homes from the landscape,
the people from the village fell to their knees in gratitude for their lives.

“Life shrinks or expands,” the writer reminds us,
“in proportion to [our] courage.”

That afternoon, amid the devastation of the village
and the sacrifice of his crops, the old curmudgeonly farmer
was living an expanded life free from “little things”
and ushered into a heightened understanding of life’s “bitter joy.”

He had acted with courage, at great cost to himself,
to serve needs greater than his own.

And the villagers responded in kind with courage, too.

Let us go and do likewise.

Let us summon the courage required to pay the price for life's peace.

Let our timid souls learn to live large,
and sacrifice, when need be,
to honour what we hold most sacred.

So shall we serve the common good, and make our own days glad.

Amen.