



October Theme:
What does it mean to be a People of Courage?

Everyday Courage

Sunday, October 8, 2017, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m

Call to Worship “Bold and Courageous Together,” by *Erika A. Hewitt*
(Please see insert.)

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones and Rev. Geoff Rimositis

Rev. Nancy:

Let us begin in the spirit of prayer and meditation. Would you please join me there?

Spirit of Life and of Love—Life that pulses through us and all around us; Love still longing to be born from within us—we Unitarian Universalists may not have a creed but there are two things that we hold to, that we value most: One, that every person, every creature, has worth and beauty, worth and dignity; and two, that we are all connected, what happens to one matters for all. This means that tragedies like the Las Vegas shooting a week ago, or the fate of folks still living without power and running water in Puerto Rico, or ... we pause here for each of us to fill in the blank with what troubles us most, near or far [*pause*] ... this means that all these tragedies hit us hard. We here at First Unitarian have family and kinship connections to each of these tears in the fabric of Life—family who were at that concert in Las Vegas, or living in Houston or Florida, or kin in Puerto Rico. Let us hold a moment of silence for all those who are grieving or suffering ...
[*long pause*]

Now we ask for help with our broken and overloaded hearts, for a space to reconnect with ourselves and each other, a tender, loving space where we can find the courage that we need in order to be a People of Courage. In this spirit, we turn our hearts and minds to the creation of this brave space, together. Amen.

On the goldenrod insert in your order of service, you’ll find the words for our Call to Worship, adapted from Rev. Erika Hewitt. This is a reading called “Bold and Courageous Together”:

Rev. Nancy:

The word *courage* comes from the Latin *cor*, which means heart. Poet Mark Nepo says that originally *courage* meant to remain steadfast to one’s core: an idea that “reinforces the belief found in almost all traditions that living from the Center is what enables us to face whatever life has to offer.”

Rev. Geoff:

To “encourage” means to hearten, to impart strength and confidence. This is our work, as a religious community: to encourage one another; to be bold in engaging the world around us, as well as what scares us internally; to give one another the confidence and heart to live as fully as possible.

Congregation:

With full hearts,
we affirm our relationships with one another;
we recognize our agency and our connective power;
and we accept our responsibility to be bold and courageous.

Rev. Nancy:

This month, may we see our chalice with fresh eyes: as the symbol
of all that we are,
of all that we have done together,
and of all that we will bravely become.
May our shared ministries *encourage*—give heart to—
all those within, and beyond, our walls
so that we may remain steadfast to our core.

Reading “What Does It Mean to Be a People of Courage?,”

by Scott Tayler, Soul Matters Sharing Circle *Amy Lorenzen*

Our reading today is adapted from the Rev. Scott Tayler, who heads up the Soul Matters Sharing Circle. This is a group of Unitarian Universalist congregations that we belong to—all of us seeking ways to deepen our spiritual lives and grow stronger in our solidarity in these chaotic times. Rev. Scott starts with this quote from Mary Anne Radmacher:

“Courage doesn’t always roar.”

Then he goes on:

Courageous people change the world. There are so many examples of that this month. October is LGBTQ history month and reminds us of the many who bravely moved (and continue to move) our world toward greater acceptance and affirmation. The revolutionary prophet of peace, Mohandas Gandhi, was born on October 2. Our Christian friends celebrate Reformation Day and Martin Luther’s courage that changed how we all think about religious authority. And there are many many more.

Most of us don’t feel as courageous as the folks who change history. But here’s what we can help each other to remember:

In addition to the heroic acts that alter history, there are also the daily choices that prevent history from altering us. Battling evil and bending the arc of the universe toward justice deserve praise, but there's also the ordinary work of integrity and not allowing ourselves to be bent. There's the bravery of embracing our own beauty even when it doesn't fit the air-brushed images surrounding us. There's the courage of calling out the microaggressions that happen almost every day at work. The list is long: Turning down that drink one day at a time. Making yourself get out of bed when the depression tells you to stay there. Holding your partner's hand in public.

There are dozens of ordinary acts of bravery to which we rise up every day!

Or maybe we should say: there are dozens of ordinary acts of bravery to which we *help each other* rise up every day. Courage is contagious. Our ordinary courage keeps each other going. Watching someone else make it through another day helps us endure. Witnessing someone else confront bigotry allows us bravely to be more open about who we are. They say that courage is found by digging deep, but most often it is passed on.

So don't worry so much if you haven't changed the world yet. And certainly let's stop comparing ourselves with those giants. Our work rests less in looking up to them and more in looking over at and gaining strength from each other. And remembering that others are looking over at and needing strength from us.

Sermon "The Courage to Come Out" *Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

"Take down these walls that divide us," the choir sings just a little bit ago. "Take down these walls so deep inside us." Everyday courage—helping each other to take down these walls that keep us from being our truest, best selves. It's the "ordinary work of integrity," Scott Tayler says, that capacity to live from our core, even when it's uncomfortable, and still stay in relationship with each other.

On September 21 this year, a group of folks gathers in the Peace Plaza at Santa Clara County headquarters for the county's first-ever raising of the Bisexuality Flag. The flag, County Supervisor Ken Yeager [who is gay] explains, is a band of pink on the top, for those who are attracted to the same gender as themselves; a band of blue on the bottom, for those attracted to the opposite gender; and where they overlap, there's a band of purple in the middle for those attracted to all genders. It is beautiful, this flag, and on this day, with the sun shining brightly and a strong breeze blowing, the flag billows and ripples as it joins the rainbow flag for LGBTQ pride and the blue, pink, and white transgender flag. We live in a great county!

Supervisor Yeager goes on to say, "Here in Santa Clara County we strive to make everyone to feel welcome and included *throughout every aspect of their*

lives.” He talks some about how bisexuality is all too often ignored or discriminated against by both straight and gay people. So, he says, “it is vital that we hear from the speakers that we have assembled today to reflect on their coming-out journeys and their struggles for acceptance. **It is by listening to each other’s stories that we can learn and grow as a community.**”

As I sit there in the front row, listening to him, I feel awed, and inspired, and moved ... and downright surprised that my story is one of the ones he’s talking about. When Maribel Martinez from the county office of LGBTQ Affairs calls me a couple of weeks earlier and leaves a message asking if I will speak at the flag-raising, one of my first thoughts is “How does she *know*? Am I that ‘out’ already? Maybe I’m just being asked to represent the all-embracing love of Unitarian Universalism.” Either way, it’s a matter of integrity for me to say yes—yes, I will be there, yes, I will speak. Yes, it is an honor.

Then I see that the publicity for the event lists the names of us three speakers as “members of the bisexual community.” Well, OK then. Here we go! I am called to grow that much more into a full and public naming and claiming of my core self.

When this congregation calls me as your senior minister in 2005, you have a brave and sparkling history on LGBTQ inclusion, having called the first out lesbian minister in any major denomination in this area. And you did this in 1985, 20 years before my arrival. So during our interviews and conversations back in 2005, you naturally ask me—I’m then married to a man—you ask me how I will work with our gay and lesbian and trans members. And among other things I say, “Well, you know, I’m not all the way over on the meter myself.”

But at that time, in 2005, having lived a mostly heteronormative life, I didn’t think I really could claim or should claim a letter in the alphabet of LGBTQ.

It’s only about four years ago, really, in 2013, when I am single again, that I finally, *finally*, lay claim to what has been true all along. I start by claiming the B in LGBTQ, bisexual. But some friends help me to see that that word is too binary, too limited. So the label I currently like best for myself is “queer, all-gender loving.” I love the reclaiming of that word *queer*, with its resonances of being a little deliciously off-kilter in terms of the “norms” imposed by society, a little beyond strict definition or expectations. And yet, my darlings, I have to admit that when I send out my all-church email on Friday and tell you that I will be preaching about the courage to come out as queer, my fingers tremble on the keyboard as I type that word.

And then “all-gender loving”—meaning that if and when I fall in love again, the right partner for me could be anywhere along the wide beautiful spectrum of gender identity.

Four years ago, I was just tiptoeing into this new naming and claiming of a fuller self. But it’s only *13 months ago*, called by the communities I love—our

interfaith community-organizing group People Acting in Community Together or PACT; you, the beloved community I serve; the people of San José at the Equality March in June; and now the county—only 13 months ago that I began to come out more publicly. Just four times; today’s the fifth.

I did not think coming out would be a big deal for me. Surely I could not be held by a more loving and accepting community than I am here at First Unitarian. Surely this story is a deeply familiar one: an older woman who has been married to men realizing she can love more genders than that. In fact, the cliché factor was one reason I really didn’t want to come out! Especially when the truth of my sexuality may seem “theoretical” as long as I remain single.

I also thought I didn’t deserve to come out because I had benefited from all the power and privilege of my straight-appearing life. But as I have stepped, and sometimes leapt, into this deeper integrity, I have had to realize how deeply discrimination has impacted me. Scott Tayler says that ordinary courage is “living with integrity and not allowing ourselves to be bent by the injustices in the world”—but my mind has been bent. There are stereotypes around bisexuality, pansexuality, bi+, queer all-gender loving sexuality—all of these labels and more can be claimed by people like me—there are stereotypes about us that are so embedded in our culture that I didn’t even realize until I began this coming-out journey that they are also embedded in me: the ideas that “it’s a phase”: “it’s not even a thing,” “it’s not real”—you must either *really* be gay or straight; “you just want more options”; even “you just want to be different or special”—remember what I said about the resonances with that word *queer*, about how I like feeling a little different, a little special?

In truth it *has* been scary to feel I am “setting myself apart.” It turns out that both straight and gay people have prejudices about bi people. Yikes, for someone who longs to be connected to as many people as possible—the idea that this truth about myself might actually *disconnect* me is terrifying! Is that why it has taken me so long?

I’m not one to regret the past usually, those things we cannot change, but I have had the “what if?” and “if only” thoughts about my identity: *what if* I could have come out earlier? What difference would that have made in my ability to love and trust and connect? What difference might it have made for my self-esteem? What have I lost? What do *we* lose when systemic oppression—fear, ignorance, violence, hatred—silences or invisibilizes any portion of our human kindred? How much potential for love and joy and productive energy do we lose as a community, as humankind?

Something changes for me, though, on the day that we raise the Bisexuality Flag in the Peace Plaza of Santa Clara County headquarters on W. Hedding St. The words

of Supervisor Yeager and of the other speakers, Vera Sloan and Moria Merriweather—all three of us affiliated with this congregation—invite me to take my place fully in this particular community, to recognize that my story too is part of the struggle and part of bending the arc of the universe toward justice, one inch at a time. As Ken Yeager says about the significance of this small gesture—the raising of a flag, he says: “Together we can honor the courage it takes each and every one of us to live our lives openly and authentically.”

Here I am, mid-leap, yet mixed in with the complicated feelings are also relief, and joy, and mystery about what may come, and sheer wonder at the evolving of this human life.

So, dear ones, where do each of us find the courage to live our lives openly and authentically?

I believe that courage is like a muscle that we can exercise and grow stronger. I found courage in a Soul Matters spiritual exercise from September (this is a plug for taking part in our Soul Matters Reflections Group!)—this spiritual exercise that invites us to “notice all that we’ve welcomed into our lives.” When I look at the leaps I’ve made—into acting, into ministry, into relationship, into this new claiming of my authentic identity—I notice that they have always come about with the support of community: some friend who says, “why didn’t we think of that before?!” as I change careers, or “of course we knew that” about my identity, and “congratulations” at each step. But they have also most often come out of times of deepest depression. Often, I think, that depression seeded by not honoring some truth in me. Until finally the pulse of Life itself demands that I move forward, take that leap ... Over the course of my life, welcoming in challenging vocations—and they are both challenging—and relationships, and roles in the community, and grief—this has helped my courage muscle to grow stronger.

And like Alec’s story of changing careers, we can find the courage to become our full selves in a community that *encourages* us to grow, to live from our Center.

The great twentieth-century theologian Howard Thurman—we Unitarian Universalists sometimes try to claim him as our own, we are so close—Howard Thurman says: **“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”**

So I invite to move into a time of meditation, to let all these words settle deeper into our own minds, hearts, bodies, spirits. Maybe you’ll want to ask yourself the questions you’ll find in your order of service:

- *What’s holding you back from doing something that you hold deep inside you?*

- *To what and to whom can you turn for the courage to take your next steps?*

Into the silence, into the silence ...

***Benediction**

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

The Talmud says—I'm paraphrasing here!—"The day is short and the work is great. It will not be finished in our lifetime. But that doesn't mean we can stop working" to build a world of love, justice, and compassion. So, as we go from this place, may we help each other find the courage to do what makes us come alive, and to live from our core.

Amen. Shalom. Salaam. Namaste. Ashé. And blessed be.