

“Calling All Cowards”

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Reading: “For Courage” - John O’Donohue

When the light around you lessens
and your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside.

When you find yourself bereft
of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
your whole heart
and it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
that darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes
to find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.

Close your eyes.
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark.
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you toward higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!

Sermon: “Calling All Cowards”

You know, as soon as I had committed to the sermon title “Calling All Cowards” for today, I started to have second thoughts.

I was suddenly afraid no one would show up.

Maybe no one would want to identify as cowardly in any way.

Or, worse, maybe people would be angry at me for suggesting that at times they might be anything less than courageous.

I thought maybe I should back off a little...perhaps be a little more understated.

After all, you don't know me and I'm a visitor here. I wouldn't want to insult anyone.

Maybe I should have called my talk, “Calling All Cautious”...or, “Calling All Careful.”

That describes me sometimes and maybe some of you can relate to it. Maybe that would be more appropriate and inoffensive.

On the other hand, maybe I could come at the subject in a more direct way: “Calling all Courageous!”

Now that would get the Unitarians coming out in droves, wouldn't it? A clear affirmation of our ability to stand up for what's right.

Nothing self-deprecating or confessional here...just something confident!

“Calling All Confident!” How does that sound?

Does that ring true for you today?

I'm told that throughout the month of November, people here were "called to contribute!"...

Because it was time for the "canvass."

And I'm told that indeed you have been courageous and generous in your contributions.

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Today, though, I'd like to consider those times when we don't feel courageous at all.

When we'd like to pull the covers up over our heads and creep away, rather than take the actions we are called to, in order to build a world of peace and justice.

We began today's service with the familiar hymn, "Come, Come, Whoever You Are."

I believe it's a hymn more necessary today than ever.

Most of us, whether we like to admit it or not, are "lovers of leaving" when the going gets rough.

We are familiar with the times when as John O'Donohue writes,

*"The light around you lessens
And thoughts darken..."*

*"When you find yourself bereft
of belief in yourself."*

Today, if we only called on confident people, I'm afraid we wouldn't rally very many.

And I don't know you very well, but I'll bet that each of us can recall times that we haven't been as courageous as we'd like.

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In a wonderful book called "Callings," author Gregg Levoy writes about the courage needed to make any change in life...even if it's clearly called for.

He writes, "We all have a part of us...that simply fears change and reacts to it with a reflexive flinch, the way snails recoil at the touch and birds bolt for the sky."

He goes on, "Resistance is not only universal but also instinctive.

It may be contrary to the open-mindedness and resilience we would prefer and that seem so necessary to getting through life with a measure of grace, but it's still involuntary.

Our brains are wired for [resistance.]"

"Given that we each invest years, decades even, in our own status quos, we're naturally loath to part ways with them," he says.

"...and the harder-won the status quo, the less inclined we'll be to risk getting grass stains on our pants."¹

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¹ Gregg Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 190.

Speaking of getting grass stains on our pants, that reminds me of the book we read for the Story for Young and Old this morning.

“We’re Going on a Bear Hunt,”² is twenty-five years old this year. My oldest child is twenty...and it was an important book for us.

It’s been translated into 18 languages and has sold more than eight million copies around the world.

In an interview celebrating the book’s anniversary, the author Michael Rosen praises Helen Oxenbury’s beautiful illustrations.

He writes that “she puts little people in huge landscapes as if she is saying, ‘Look at this huge problem, this huge world.’ It’s pretty powerful stuff,” he says.

It was originally a “lion hunt” by the way, and the parts about the snowstorm and the forest were added in, so the book would be long enough for publication.

I think those are my favourite parts.

In those sections we can see that the family is actually scared, quite reluctant to go into those dark places, even though they claim that they’re not.

Over the course of the story, the challenges get more intense until ultimately come face to face with the bear they fear so much...

And then they do something that’s completely human and instinctive...they run away.

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² Michael Rosen & Helen Oxenbury, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt* (London: Walker Books, 1993).

In Unitarian Universalism we're encouraged to see books from popular culture as wisdom texts.

It's useful, too, to see how they resonate with older forms of "scripture."

Because I'm speaking with you here in a synagogue as well as a UU place of worship, it seems especially appropriate to recall the story of Jonah from the Hebrew Bible or what Christians call the Old Testament.

Jonah was called to preach to the people of Nineveh.

Jonah didn't consider himself up to the task, and nor did he consider the people of Nineveh to be worth the effort.

*"One voice had commanded his whole heart,
but it was raven-dark."*

So instead of going to Nineveh as he'd been called, he high-tailed it in the opposite direction. He caught a boat to Tarshish.

As the story goes, God saw what was happening and sent a huge storm.

Instead of facing the storm, Jonah decided to go to sleep in the bottom of the boat.

Here I'm reminded of the family at the end of the story, huddled together under that puffy pink comforter.

The captain of the ship woke Jonah up and reminded him that he was the reason the storm had been sent in the first place and the reason the crew was at risk.

Suddenly awakened to his responsibility to others, Jonah finally does act courageously and offers to throw himself overboard to stop the catastrophe.

At that point we rejoin the story that perhaps we're most familiar with.

Cast into the waves, Jonah spends three days in the belly of a whale, before he's coughed up on the beach at Nineveh...which is where he belonged in the first place.³

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Earlier I said that I hoped the family would go on another bear hunt again after all.

The baby is playing happily with a stuffed bear in one of the last pictures, so that's a bit of foreshadowing.

And the very last picture, which I'll show you again now, is evocative of the Jonah story.

It's a beach.

You'll see that the bear looks benign and disappointed, walking alone...

Perhaps hoping that the family will return again to meet him face to face, and this time they'll stay awhile.

³ The Jonah story is also told in Gregg Levoy's *Callings*, p. 191-192.

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Today we are all called to do what we can to rescue a world in trouble.

To do so, we have to confront not only the forces that threaten the planet and the well-being of all the people who live on it...

People of all races and circumstances...

But also confront our own fears of standing up to those threats.

This week, I was reading about the courageous protestors on Burnaby Mountain in British Columbia.

As I'm sure you've heard, the corporation Kinder Morgan, a company based in Texas, wants to run a pipeline through the mountain.

If it's built, the pipeline will carry 890,000 barrels of diluted bitumen from Alberta's tar sands through Burnaby every day.

Oil tanker traffic through Burrard Inlet is expected to increase six to seven-fold if the pipeline is built.

Already Kinder Morgan has cut down cut trees in the Burnaby Mountain conservation area without the city's permission.

Citizens have held vigil on the mountain ever since.

On Friday, the B.C. Supreme Court refused to extend an injunction that would have allowed for drilling to continue, and it also threw out civil contempt charges that had been laid against the protesters.

Fifty-three people had been arrested, including the author of “The 100 Mile Diet,” a professor of molecular biology at Simon Fraser University, and David Suzuki’s grandson.

In her recent book “This Changes Everything,” Naomi Klein writes that “during extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the peak of the civil rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” and “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life.”

“Activists were, quite simply, everyone.”⁴

That is certainly true when you look at the pictures from Burnaby Mountain, where along with the First Nations people on the forefront of the movement, there are people of all ages and social groups and occupations.

The same was true this week as people have turned out for vigils and protests for racial justice, in the wake of events in Ferguson, Missouri.

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I think it’s important here to acknowledge that some of us—including myself—may not be courageous enough right now to be arrested in the cause of justice.

I think we have to meet that awareness—which we may fear—with some compassion.

As we face the significant difficulties of our times, some of us may feel paralyzed by our own inaction.

⁴ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 459.

Naomi Klein has suggested, though, that “part of the reason so many of us have failed to act is not because we are too selfish to care about an abstract or seemingly far-off problem—but that we are utterly overwhelmed by how much we do care.”⁵

I find that very helpful.

She also suggests that the way “through it”...the way through the dark forest of our fear and our reluctance to get out of our comfort zones...is to embrace interdependence and cooperation.

To build “collective spaces” like this one, as you have done this month in your canvass.

“Collective spaces” where people of all backgrounds, religions and cultures and can come together in support of common values, in a spirit of love and encouragement.

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In that spirit, I can tell you about a particular investment I held until recently that I didn’t feel fully comfortable about.

I wish I could tell you that the minute I felt the company was acting unethically that I divested my funds.

But actually I had to wrestle with that decision for quite a long time.

And I had to wade through the squelchy mud of my own fears and my desire to hold onto things in order to take that one step...

⁵ Klein, 461.

...and to take the many more that I know will follow in the days ahead.

I know many people personally who are far more courageous than me.

They have already trod these difficult paths...and I hope to follow in their footsteps.

I am convinced that the call forward comes from a loving Source far greater than myself.

A Source of love and wisdom that urges us all toward higher ground...

“Where our imaginations can learn to engage difficulty as its most rewarding threshold.”

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You see, I am convinced that we are all called to be the change the world needs...not just the people who are considered “leaders”...

Not just the people who know the most about the issues...
Not just the smartest people or the boldest people...

Or even the most compassionate or consistent people.

I believe that we are called, as we are, to do what is ours to do.

To do that requires our deepest courage and offers the deepest security.

You might have heard the story about Rabbi Zsusya who said,

At the end of my life, God will not ask me,

“Why were you not Moses?
He will ask me, why were you not Zsusya?”

As we all embark on journeys that will call us into storms of the soul,
May we come, whoever we are, and how-ever we are...

With the combination of courage and cowardice that is ours alone...

To fully face our fears, and not run away.
And when we do run away, to return.

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