

The Courage to Be...come

Sermon by Audette Fulbright

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All Souls Church, New York City

“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid.” - Frederick Buechner

This is the world. Terrible things have happened, we know. The overwhelming horror of Las Vegas. The ongoing heartbreak of Puerto Rico. The burgeoning brutality of Catalonia. The myriad struggles right here in our city, in our neighborhoods, in our own lives. Oh, the list can go on, and on, and on.

But you already live in the world. You must have arrived here this morning, already with spiritual stress cracks and with your heart sore, in need of sustenance. Even in the best days, this is why we come to church. On days like this, we need Buechner’s affirmation: do not be afraid. Like the angel that visited the shepherds who kept watch over their flocks by night, we need that solemn word: **“be not afraid.”**

“Be not afraid.” I’m not sure that’s realistic, or even relevant. I don’t know about you, but I’m afraid quite a lot these days. I’ve never personally known a government so lacking in compassion, a leader so unconcerned about the effects of his actions. The evidence of human impact on the world, and the gyrating needs of an unstable and changing environment and the political effects that pertain...well. Again. I know you arrive here, aware of the suffering and fraught nature of the world. The real question is, how does our shared life in this place, our covenant with each other, our shared Unitarian Universalist faith...how does that sustain us in such times?

“Sometimes standing against evil is more important than defeating it. The greatest heroes stand because it is right to do so, not because they believe they will walk away with their lives. Such selfless courage is a victory in itself.” - N.D. Wilson

My original intention today was to build out on the powerful theological and humanist ideals of Paul Tillich, and to address the implications of a country, which, even now, cannot relinquish the perverse adoration of a mass murderer and failed idealist like Columbus. There is so much to say about the real history of Columbus, and the reasons for choosing, with care, love, and deliberation, to replace the relatively modernist idolatry of Columbus Day, established in 1937, with the respectful honoring of Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Christopher Columbus never set foot in North America. He thought he was in China when he landed in Cuba, and presumed Hispaniola was Japan. He slaughtered and enslaved people. He died unrepentant and our celebration of his devastation has long been a sign of our careless valuation of conquerors over those conquered; our loveless agreement that “history is written by the winners,” and facile collusion with that notion, even when time, distance, compassion and evidence show us otherwise.

Alas. Even from this distance, we seem to value a long weekend and holiday sales more than the truth of history and all it teaches us.

"Courage is acting out of self-respect for doing the right thing. To not act, or to do something different other than the right thing, is soul murder. Not being true to

oneself and others leaves one diminished and in some ways less than human." - Harry Holleywood

But let's not abandon Tillich in the sorrows of our age. Tillich believed in his day - and I think you will appreciate it in ours - that the stress of the modern age was *meaninglessness*, and the fruits of that suffering were **anxiety and fear**. What did faith offer, in Tillich's view? "Life has become complex and complicated. How does one believe in love in the face of hatred, in life in the face of death, in day when there is but darkness, in good in the face of evil? For Paul Tillich what is needed are *courage and faith*." ¹ "Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt." To do this, of course, one must have courage - the courage which comes when one accepts a larger truth than the confines of one's own, limited self: "Tillich describes this as 'self-affirmation...[which] presupposes participation in something which transcends the self.' (165)." ²

I can, in the classic manner of Unitarianism, continue to quote the philosophical underpinnings of Tillich's theology. He was, in my opinion, a genius of spiritual thought. But is that what we need? In a time when we are distracted, overwhelmed and pulled in too many directions, are we most sustained by intellectual reflection?

Here's what Tillich wanted us to know, and to experience:

"Faith is an act of a finite being who is grasped by, and turned to, the infinite."

Tillich wanted us to understand that faith was an act that gave life meaning and transformed anxiety and fear. It was not an anti-intellectual act, the giving in of our rational mind to an irrational "something" -- but only the seeking after that which is worthy of our deepest consideration, and our most profound commitment. He believed in a Ground of Being or God that transcended any symbols...for Tillich, only a broken symbol, such as the cross, could point toward the profound infiniteness of a God large enough to invite and hold and welcome and overcome all that this life might manifest. Says Tillich, "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."

When you are falling asleep at night, what is your comfort? What quiet cry does your heart make? What is it you need, what do you long for? When you wake, what would bring you joy and encouragement? What do you wish for your own life and for our shared life on this planet? These are the questions that should be the center of your life. As you lie down, as you rise, and at every peace-filled moment you can create in your days.

"The reward for conformity was that everyone liked you except yourself." - Rita Mae Brown

The truth is this: even though we live in a world beset by distraction and mayhem, this has always been true. Human beings have - for most of our existence - lived lives beset by uncertainty and pain, loss and fear, war and disease. Every age feels theirs is unique - and it is.

¹ From the other side of doubt – overcoming anxiety and fear: Paul Tillich's "courage to be" and Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian realism" Yolanda Dreyer Department of Practical Theology University of Pretoria (<https://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/viewFile/639/540>)

² *ibid*

Ours is deeply interconnected, and we have access to more knowledge and power than any before us. But that doesn't change our human needs.

We still need silence and time for reflection. We still harbor deep need for connection with other people - time to play, laugh, dance, sing, make love, be with those who are younger and older than ourselves. We need to serve something we find meaning-filled -- whether that be through vocation or avocation. We need time to dream and create. The fact that we can fritter away our time, fill it with endless banality or work, pay too much attention to the cruel and vicious antics of those who want to keep us distracted and unnerved...these are not excuses. Every age has its challenges; these are ours and this is the value of our faith - to come together, separate the wheat from the chaff of our days, and center ourselves in that which will help us remain whole and courageous in times such as these.

Here's what I want you to know: if you feel exhausted, depleted, overwhelmed, despairing, or numb - you are not alone. And that feeling can pass, if we love one another, if we reach out, listen, share our truth, and remember that Life needs us and wants us.

“Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’” - Mary Anne Radmacher

I think if we can hold on to three simple things, we can be encouraged in this hard time. The first is love yourself as you would have yourself love others. The forgiveness and care you would give to a beloved child, give to yourself. Drink water, care for your body, rest.

The next is, become Wesleyan. John Wesley said, “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.” In this, he was clever but not perhaps so original - after all, in the Bible, Micah chapter 6 verse 8 says, “And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” In Islam, the faithful are urged to have “*sabr wa iman*,” patience and faith. Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, for ever so long as you can.

And lastly, place your faith in something larger than yourself. For some, this is easily called God, and understood infinitely. For others, Tillich is a better fit - one places faith in *something*. “Faith consists in being vitally concerned with that ultimate reality to which I give the symbolical name of God. Whoever reflects earnestly on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith.” God, ground of being, the ultimate concern, Love, life itself...place your faith in something that transcends the narrow interests of your limited experience, knowledge, and presence. We are part of the interconnected web of all existence. We are part, but not the sum.

Care for yourself. Care for others and for the world. Have faith in something that is larger than yourself. These remain the first principles for a life that can withstand the vicissitudes of a dangerous time.

In closing, I want to share with you a few more words that call me to Life, and a courageous practice that asks us to remember that we are NOT alone in this. The courageous practice will come during our benediction, but for now, these words from the author Ann Voskamp:

“What the world desperately needs is more dangerous disciples of an unsafe God. You can only be safe if you've fashioned for yourself a God small and tame...because grace is a dangerous thing...and real love is never safe. There are Pharisees — and I've been one — who are alive and

well and who feel far safer with a dead God, one they seal up in a coffin of mere theory, one they bury under the sod of human rationality and tidiness...Maybe faith isn't as much formula as the mystery of being drawn to, surrendering to, the overwhelming love and will of the most dangerous Reality in all the universe?...Those who have [God's dangerous love] in their bones aren't ever safe. Open flames are always dangerous."

May we have the courage to Love wildly and live freely in a dangerous time. *Amen.*