

MY SIMPLE BELIEF

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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After graduating from Yale in 2006 with a degree in economics, a young man named Colin O’Brady grabbed his backpack and surfboard, and set out to explore the world. He had grown up in modest circumstances in Portland, Oregon, where he had developed a passion for outdoor adventures and for sports, especially swimming and soccer. His family didn’t have the resources to travel internationally — he attended Yale on a swimming scholarship — so O’Brady had been painting houses during summers to save up money. After graduation, he headed out on a tour of Pacific surf breaks.

A year later, he and his best friend from childhood met up in Thailand, where they learned to scuba dive. One evening while they were on the beach, some local guys showed up for a popular pastime. They soaked a rope in kerosene, lit it on fire, and started twirling it to make a flaming jump rope. After watching others jump in the flames, O’Brady decided to jump in as well.

He mistimed his leap and landed on the rope, which tangled around his legs and splattered burning kerosene over his torso and arms. He suffered deep second-degree burns over a quarter of his body, requiring eight surgeries and three months of convalescing. Doctors told him that he might never walk normally again. Fearing that his future as an athlete was over, O’Brady sank into a depression.

His mother had different plans. Sitting by his hospital bed in Thailand, she told him to set a goal for himself. “Life’s not over, Colin,” she said. “What do you want to do when you get out of here?”

“Life’s over, Mom,” he responded.

“Just visualize something,” she insisted.

Spurred on by her persistence, he found himself imagining that he was completing a triathlon. It wasn’t something he had ever done in his life, but he decided to start training immediately — in his hospital bed. His legs were fully bandaged and immobile, but his arms were free, so he started doing dumbbell presses.

Months later, after he returned to Portland, he began to start walking again — one step at first, then five steps, and then then ten steps. It was nothing close to running a triathlon, but when he got discouraged, he remembered the image he first saw in the hospital bed in Thailand — the image of him finishing a triathlon. Then he’d get up, and take another step.

In her poem titled “Those Hours,” the contemporary American poet Joyce Sutphen writes:

There were moments, hours even,
when it was clear what I

was meant to do, as if
a landscape had revealed itself

in the morning light.
I could see the road

plainly now, imagining myself
walking towards the distant mountains

like a pilgrim in the old stories—
ready to take on any danger,

hapless but always hopeful,
certain that my simple belief

in the light
would be enough.

Visions of what we are meant to do and where we are meant to go come to us, Sutphen says, not on wings of good luck or good fortune, but their opposite. They come when we are hapless, when happiness and good fortune don't come our way. The road ahead becomes clear when we are out of luck, when times are tough. That's when we discover what we are meant to do and where we are meant to go.

When we see the way forward, Sutphen goes on to say, we become hopeful. We muster strength, ready to take on any danger — like a pilgrim in the old stories. We remain hopeful, she says, because of our simple belief in the light that shows the way forward.

The pilgrim she has in mind, of course, is the pilgrim in John Bunyan's classic tale *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published more than 300 years ago. Besides the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* is the best-selling book in English of all time. It's an allegory about a man named Christian, who undertakes a long and often tortuous journey from what Bunyan describes as the wilderness of this world to the Celestial City. Along the way, Christian passes through places like the Valley of Humiliation, the Slough of Despond, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Early on in the story, Christian comes to the foot of a steep and high hill called Difficulty. Although there are easier paths to follow — we learn later that one easy path around the hill is called Danger and another is called Destruction — Christian resolves

to follow a narrow path that goes straight up the hill. He begins the trek, saying along the way:

The hill, though high, I covet to ascend;
The difficulty will not me offend;
For I perceive the way to life lies here:
Come, pluck up, heart, let's neither faint nor fear.
Better, though *difficult*, the right way to go,
Than wrong, though *easy*, where the end is woe.

Christian is ready to take on any difficulty, any danger. He's hopeful because of his belief in the light — in his case, the light of the Celestial City. It reveals his path ahead and sets a fix on his destination.

There are moments in life when it becomes clear what we have to do, and we set out, ready to take on any difficulty, certain that our simple belief in the light that shows the way forward will be enough.

As we prepare to convene the 201st annual meeting of our congregation, we can look back over our history and see hapless times — moments when bad fortune came our way. Our three previous buildings either started falling down or burned down; one of our previous ministers died in a fire on passenger ship, and another was cut down young by esophageal cancer.

But at each of these points of fulcrum, our congregation was able to visualize the road ahead — imagine a vital congregation serving our city and nation as a source of strength and a beacon of hope. Five years ago, we did the same, when it became evident that our sanctuary had also fallen into disrepair and desperately needed to be restored and renewed. We knew what we had to do.

So we took the first step, and then another step. It's not been easy, especially as a \$7 million project ballooned into a \$12 million project. Nonetheless, sometime in the next few months, we will walk back in to a beautifully-restored sanctuary that will stand strong as a beacon of hope for spiritual seekers in our time.

We face other challenges on the road ahead. We need another million dollars or so to complete the work on our sanctuary. Our operating budget remains inadequate, and our capital reserves have been depleted to a troubling level. Addressing these challenges won't be easy, but we know what we have to do. We see a vision of a financially strong and spiritually capacious congregation, ready for any challenge that lies ahead. Our simple belief in the light that shows the way forward will be enough.

Eighteen months after Colin O'Brady's accident in Thailand, he competed in a triathlon in Chicago, where he had moved to take a job as a commodities trainer. Not only did he complete the triathlon, he finished in first place. In the years since, he has gone on to set numerous world records, including climbing the world's seven tallest

peaks in record time, and being the first person to walk across Antarctica solo and unassisted.

Looking back on the fire in Thailand, he says, “That was a huge turning point in my life, not only my athletic career, but also to really understand the power of the mind, and the power of what I believe we all have inside of us.” He adds, “We really can achieve so much more on the other side of setbacks.”

The same is true for each of us individually, and for all of us as a congregation. Even at our most hapless, we remain hopeful, because we can see the road ahead. We know what we have to do. Our simple belief in the light that shines upon us and out from within us is enough.