

Courage and Keepin' On
Lynda Sutherland
Oct. 15, 2017

“A hero is no braver than an ordinary person, but they are braver five minutes longer.” -- *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Trouble is, that five minutes is tacked onto the end of – how long? We don't know. *And not knowing is what makes it so flippin' hard.*

I have come to the conclusion that there are really two distinct types of courage.

One is the courage we show in times of disaster. When disaster strikes, when the crisis is upon us, people tend to act swiftly and decisively, even heroically, because the need for such action is so obvious. When the bullets started raining down in Las Vegas, many people were heroic – shielding loved ones, going back to help strangers who had been hit and could not run – we focus on helping one another through the danger, almost instinctively. In fact, such a crisis can often bring out the best in people, acts of selflessness and courage that are told and re-told, reminding us that we can still have hope in our human race.

But where do we find the courage to keep on fighting the odds, facing our fears, acting out our courage in the day-to-day grind of adversity?

There is a movie that came out a few months ago on PBS called “Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War.” If you haven’t yet seen it, I highly recommend it. You can stream it on the PBS website. It’s the story of Unitarian minister Waitstill Sharp, and his wife Martha, a trained social worker, from Wellesley, Mass. In 1939, on the precipice of World War II, they left their children behind in the care of their parish and boldly committed to a life-threatening mission in Europe. Over two dangerous years they helped save scores of imperiled Jews and refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation across Europe.

Two things strike me about the Sharps’ story.

First, when they began this mission, our country was not yet at war. This was not one of those clear-cut crisis situations where people are galvanized into action because a defining crisis has hit and it is obvious the peril is upon us. The Germans had been pursuing a war of aggression across Europe, yes, and the situation was creating a huge refugee crisis. But this situation didn’t directly threaten the Sharps, or anyone near to them at the time.

Second, when they left their home and family, they had no idea how long they would be gone. Again, the U.S. was not in the war, and at the time, there was no guarantee that Hitler’s armies could be stopped. Yet, they went. They went knowing that they were the only ones who had answered the call to go, even though all the Unitarian ministers had been contacted. So there was no relief on the way. They were it, they would be needed, as far as they knew, indefinitely.

They went, and they stayed until they were no longer needed there. Day after day, for two long years, missing their young children who were growing up without them, with no idea how long they would be there, facing danger, facing the heartbreak of all those refugees they *couldn't* get out in time – they summoned their courage every day, they did what needed to be done.

So I wonder, what feeds that kind of courage, the courage to keep on keepin' on, one day at a time, five minutes at a time, when we have no idea of an end in sight? When life presents us with the challenge of rolling the stone uphill, day after day? That stone might be a personal challenge – health issues, family troubles, a hostile work environment, caring for a loved one. I would be willing to bet that the majority of those here have some sort of personal situation that calls on their courage on a regular, even a daily basis. When we add outside factors such as climate change and political instability, that stone can get pretty big.

A few days ago a message arrived in my email from Susan Frederick-Gray, the new president of our Unitarian Universalist Association. It was a letter of encouragement and hope, sent to ministers and other faith leaders, but what she said is so applicable to all of us, I'd like to quote some of it here:

The past three months has been a time of repeated tragedies and traumas. These have included political traumas including the Transgender Military Ban and the rescinding of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. They have also included the devastating natural disasters of fires out West and Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria that devastated parts of Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. And there have been the violent human tragedies of Charlottesville and Las Vegas.

This is no time for a casual faith – the very real challenges and heartbreak of this time in this country and the world require a deep practice of our faith. These realities require a practice that makes room for us to bring our pain and our anger and our vulnerabilities, but one that also continually calls us back to love and to our human capacity for compassion and hope.

Today, as I awoke, the words of Adrienne Rich were on my heart:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power
reconstitute the world.*

I cast my lot with you. We will not give up hope.

Yours in love and faith,

Susan Frederick-Gray

She notes a need for “a deep practice of our faith... one that continually calls us back to love....compassion and hope.”

What *is* the deep practice of our faith?

We have a long and distinguished history in UUism, passed down from our Unitarian side from our Puritan forebears and before that from the Protestant Reformation all the way from Martin Luther, of engaging our minds. This is understandable, since those Protestants felt that the Catholic leaders were telling their flock to basically park their brains at the door. The priests, the religious leaders, would read the Holy books, would do the thinking for them, would tell them what to do, and if they obeyed they would get their reward. As one might expect, this

opened the door to a lot of abuses, and Martin Luther and others challenged the idea by claiming that people could, and should, reason for themselves in deciding right from wrong.

In our UU churches today, we tell visitors and new members, "This is a place where no one will ask you to park your brain at the door."

Now, I think this is a GOOD thing. Having experienced one of those branches of religion where the authorities tried to tell me what to think, I can tell you that it can really mess you up. It's painful, it can even be abusive. I have worked hard to recover my confidence in my own ability to learn, to figure out for myself what is right and wrong, to act and learn and change my mind when need be.

Now, we know it takes more than brain and reason to build community, to commit to justice, to courageously show up for what it right. It takes heart.

Brene Brown says, "Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is *cor* - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But in my opinion, this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly...speaking from our hearts is what I think of as "ordinary courage." - Brene Brown

Some of the ways we speak of courage suggest that we really know this: when someone is brave on the sports field, we say they "have heart." When we are afraid, we say, "I lost heart."

This is what I have been experiencing, way too often, this past year. I keep losing heart.

How do we re-connect with our hearts when they keep being called on to push that stone uphill?

What deep practice of our faith will bring us back into our heart-space, our *cour*-age?

We have some. Coming here to be together on Sunday morning is one of my practices. Singing our songs together, sharing Joys and Concerns, considering things of worth together, all of these feed my heart, nourish my spirit.

And there are those weeks when the demands of the world deplete my spirit before the next Sunday can roll around.

What I really need is a way to rest, feed, and nourish my spirit daily.

I need to make paying attention to my spirit, my heart, the core of my being, a daily practice.

What spiritual practice does our faith teach that can form a foundation for me in times of adversity? Well, we get to choose our own. Which is lovely and hard, too.

Now, I have a confession to make: I am working on having a spiritual practice. Does that seem like a strange thing for a minister to say? After talking with a lot of ministers, I can tell you with some assurance, that is pretty common. Ministers get just as caught up in the day to day as anyone else. There is *always* something to do, someone to visit, something to write, something to read...It's so easy to put it off. Can you relate to that?

UU minister Jordinn Nelson Long wrote in her blog the other day:

"I don't think our movement is good at teaching spiritual practice (though in the last 10 years or so it has begun to talk a good game). I think it's because many of us come from traditions that equate "doing spiritual practice" with "feels like punishment," and our own raised-UUs of the last generation equate it with "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

So it's part of my missional focus to offer a different lens, having come from another place with this. Spiritual practice is the thing you intentionally make time for (THAT'S the discipline piece- it's just scheduling. Crawling on your knees is not only optional, unless you've got an intentional-bodily-asceticism thing going on, it's often not spiritually engaged.). It's what you make time for THAT NOURISHES YOUR SOUL.

Truly. Those two things are enough: make the time, feed your soul.

On which note, I have 30 minutes. It's a gorgeous, sunshine-laden autumn day here on the south coast of Massachusetts. There are lots of things I **could** be doing, but what I **am** doing is going for a walk. On which I will look at pretty cards from our town. I am claiming this time, and naming this purpose as holy.

I am nourishing my spirit.

What is yours hungry for, and what will you practice today?

Sometimes I honestly don't know what my heart is hungry for. When I am in an anxious or depleted state, it's hard to remember sometimes what things actually help restore me. So I made a list:

- **Routine.** My life is full of spontaneity and interruptions, and I am fortunate to have a lot of control over my own work schedule; but when my spirits flag, I long for predictability. I'm blessed with a spouse who helps me set up a routine for meals, bedtime, etc. Lately, I find I need routine more than ever, and I'm trying to build that into my work week.
- **Self care.** When I lose heart, I often have trouble facing what I need to do until I have taken care of myself. It's the principle of putting on your own oxygen mask first. When I feel like I can't face another thing, I have learned to ask myself, "what do I need right now?"
- **Food.** A good, nourishing meal is fortifying. I really have trouble summoning my courage, even for little things, when I am hungry.
- **Rest.** Same thing for being tired. Something that looks like a fearsome monster at night is usually cut down to size in the morning, when I am rested. I'm learning to take naps when I need them too, whenever my schedule allows for it.
- **Exercise.** A walk, yoga, stretching out the stiff muscles, whatever gets my body moving seems to help.
- **Coffee.** This is my go-to treat, comfort food, and fortifier. For others, it may be tea, or hot chocolate, or a sticky-bun, or maybe kale chips. A comforting, fortifying treat.
- **Humor.** Laughter is the best medicine. It gets us out of ourselves for a moment, letting things get back into perspective. What makes you laugh? For me it's talking to my sister on the phone – Ginger always knows who I'm talking to because I just can't stop laughing. And cat videos. And a couple of TV shows that I sometimes binge-watch.

- **Meditation.** Some people make it a practice to meditate, sitting still in silence. That is not my style. For me, meditation happens when I listen to music and let it sweep me away, or walk by myself and let my mind wander where it will.
- **Helping someone else.** I always find it easier to face my fears, to buck up and rise to the occasion, when I'm doing it for someone else.
- **Taking an Anxiety Sabbath.** I need regular times of leaving it all behind, not engage with anything that reminds me of what is difficult and scary. What does that for you? Reading? Going to the theater or for a long walk or a Sunday drive? I have a minister friend who goes Geo-caching with her spouse, another who skis, and another who finds a beach to spend the day on. Whatever it is, it can help a lot to leave that burden behind for a short time, on a regular basis.

I invite you to make your own list. That way, when it seems too much to keep going on, when you lose heart, you will have some ideas for things that will feed your spirit, and restore enough courage to be brave for five more minutes, for one more day.

I invite you to *consider* making a regular practice of some of the things on your list. Because courage, spirit and heart become stronger with practice. It takes discipline to practice, to schedule something into our busy lives. The more we practice regularly, the more we will be prepared to face whatever life may have in store for us.

What is it that you most need to practice in your life, right now, in order to fortify your heart to answer the call of our faith to Love, to care, to show up day after day to face your fears and do what needs to be done? There is no right practice; there is no best practice. There are lots of good ones, and none of us, not one of us, can possibly do them all. So pick one. Whatever it is, whatever practice is calling to you, that's the one. Whatever your heart is calling for, feed it.

Cerrissa Snethen, a friend of mine in Decorah, IA, wrote this the other day about courage:

"Brave is hard. I struggle. But I think that bravery is magic: when insight and intuition collide, like tectonic plates in your mind. In your heart. And that new plate forms such a strong foundation that you know you have enough to stand on. To fight for. And that you're willing. Because the earth has moved. And so should you."

This is what can happen when we engage in the deep practice of our faith: we build a strong foundation to stand on.

In their song "Ours is a Simple Faith," the UU singing group Mustard's Last Stand proclaims: "Life's not a goal or race, it's about heart and faith, and living a life of grace, *every day*." Let us fortify ourselves, through simple daily practices, so that we can daily meet our challenges with courage, with heart, with the Love to which our faith calls us.