

“Moments of Truth”

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Meditation Words

From Michael Valpy’s obituary for Ursula Franklin, the Canadian physicist and UofT professor, as well as a Quaker, a peace activist, and a long-time friend of our congregation, who died almost five years ago.

Valpy said at her funeral: “[The late, great] June Callwood once asked [Ursula Franklin] how she acquired ‘an exquisitely developed conscience.’”

Dr. Franklin replied: “You tune it like an instrument. You know, when people start singing they develop an ear. They develop their voice. They begin to hear dissonances that they didn’t hear before. You become attuned to having to make responsible and moral decisions. . . . [In Quakerism we] don’t have a creed, you don’t sign something; the only proof of your faith or lack of faith is how you conduct your life. Consequently, it’s like singing. At every point you [ask yourself], ‘Am I in tune?’”

Sermon: “Moments of Truth”

We can never know when a moment of truth will arrive—
a moment that will define our lives by whether we rise to it,
or yield, whether we let the moment pass,
or summon the courage to meet it face to face.

Such moments of decision come to define any life—
and they come to define our lives over time.

By what we have done and by what we have left undone
is the record of our days on this planet written.

And the thread that weaves through each of those days
is the question of courage.

The question of whether we can find within us
the courage to act when a defining moment is upon us.

There are, of course, many types of courage—
or at least many ways we measure and describe it.

Courage is sometimes synonymous
with nerve and moxie and pluck,
with valour and grit,
with fearlessness and audacity.

Sometimes we speak of someone who is daring or brave
as being courageous, though I'm not so sure
bravery and courage are actually the same thing.

Each of these words shares shades of meaning with courage,
but true courage speaks, more than the others,
to matters of the heart.

The word itself, of course, comes from the French word *coeur*,
that precious organ that beats out the pulse of life
within each of us.

Courage, then, calls us to *take heart*.
To take heart in the face of what frightens us.
To take heart knowing that our lives—
and maybe even our souls—depend on it.

“Courage,” the pilot Amelia Earhart said,
“is the price that life exacts for granting peace.
The soul that knows it not,
knows no release from little things:
Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,
Nor mountain heights
where joy can hear the sound of wings.”

The cost of courage can sometimes seem well beyond our budget.
A price we're unable or simply unwilling to pay.

So often, though, when cowardice overcomes our courage,
we fail to account for the high cost exacted
by not taking the more courageous path.

That cost is frequently paid in regret and remorse,
in guilt and grief, over lost opportunities, and roads not taken.

That's because when we let a moment of truth pass us by,
something in the soul of who we are shrinks,
and our lives become a bit smaller than they were before.

Too often we see the moments that call for courage
as being the stuff of distant and ancient battlefields—
the moments that have defined the lives
of heroines and heroes down through time—
rather than simply being the stuff of our every day.

The call to courage, the call to live by heart,
is an ongoing invitation made to each us,
in the here and now, with each passing day.

That said, there are moments that stand out.
Moments that are more trying than others.
Moments that are a true test of our mettle.
Moments that take the measure of our courage and our character.
And reveal the degree to which we have been prepared
to meet such moments when they come.

* * *

Though the well-known stories I'm about to share
are now the stuff of history,
I hope you'll take in these two iconic moments of truth
with an ear to just how ordinary, how common,
were the circumstances that surrounded them.

One is of a woman on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama;
the other of the Unknown Rebel of Tiananmen Square.

Both tell the story of people thrust to the front lines
of a larger struggle for justice and human dignity
that intersected with their workaday lives.

The Unknown Rebel, the Tank Man, as he is called,
boldly stood down a line of armoured tanks in Beijing,

all the while holding grocery bags in his hands.

I'm sure you know the image.

He had just been shopping, when he walked into history.

Little is actually known about him.

His identity is uncertain.

It's widely thought he was swiftly arrested and very likely executed.

His memory today, while known around the globe,
is largely lost within his homeland,
as the famous photo of him standing down a line of tanks
has been suppressed in China since the uprising there in 1989.

But what endures for me is the question of what prompted
someone strolling back from the store, out running errands,
to confront that array of tanks rolling through the square.

It's likely impossible that we'll ever know.

But, as powerful as the defining image
we have in our heads from that day is,
what I find even more powerful
is another photo of the scene that was released a few years ago.

It was a photo taken from ground level,
not from the hotel balcony six floors up and at a safe distance,
but from the sidewalk, at street level, 20 to 30 metres away.

What is seen in that image is a man determined and defiant.
He is standing alone in the middle of the street,
as people are running for cover, fleeing in every direction.

At the moment the photo was taken,
the tanks are still probably a hundred metres away.

And there he stands, steady and calm.

It turns out he didn't dart into the street at the last minute.
This was not something he did on a whim.

He stood there with intention,
and he let the tanks come to him.

When they drew close and saw that he wouldn't budge,
they tried to go around him.

He then simply moved into their path,
again and again until they stopped.

He then climbed up on top of the first tank
and engaged the driver in a conversation.

Eventually, he made his way back down,
and then parked himself in front of the tank again.

The stand-off only ended when two people in blue uniforms
whisked him away to a fate unknown to this day.

There's some speculation that if he is still alive,
given the suppression of the photo within China,
he may not even know of his fame around the world.

And, yet, this very public moment of truth
is one that we carry with us as a profile in courage.

I've often wondered what compelled him to take such bold action.
What, if anything, in his life had prepared him for such a moment.

What speaks to us across the years and through those photos
is his enduring testament of defiance—
of someone doing something
that surely scared him to death—
and maybe, quite literally, brought about his untimely end.

* * *

The other image I'm holding in my mind
is the one of Rosa Parks on an Alabama bus in 1955.

The classic story is of a demure black woman,

on her way home from a hard day's work
as a seamstress in a downtown department store,
who was just too tired to give up her seat on a segregated bus
when it was demanded by a white man.

In the sixty-five years since that moment of truth,
Rosa Park's story has become the stuff of legend—
and the actual facts covered over in the mists of modern mythology.

As she told a reporter several years after the incident,
“People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired,
but that isn't true... the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

What history has had a hard time remembering
is that what happened on December 1, 1955
was not some single act of defiance.

In the twelve years prior to that defining day,
Rosa Parks had been kicked off buses
multiple times for her refusal to sacrifice her seat.

She had even faced off with that same bus driver at least once before.

And what is so often forgotten
is that she had been both studying and teaching non-violent resistance
for years by the time she boarded that bus that December day.

What she had learned is that you can practise courage—
that you can study it and prepare yourself
until a moment that matters arrives.

Yet, the study of courage presents something of a paradox.

To practise courage, it will do you no good
to hit a gym or study martial arts.

To become courageous, you need not hone
the powers of the body or the mind.

To live courageously, you must harness the power of the heart,
for the ultimate key to courage is vulnerability.

And, that's the paradox.

To be courageous requires opening ourselves to the possibility of hurt and harm, of insult and injury.

The courageous have a way of putting their hearts, and sometimes even their lives, on the line.

* * *

Brené Brown, the well-known researcher of human connection, about what binds us together and what gets in the way, noticed, early on in her work, an odd trend she couldn't quite explain.¹

As she puts it:

When you ask people about love,
they tell you about heartbreak.

When you ask people about belonging,
they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences
of being excluded.

And when you ask people about connection,
the stories they [tell are] about disconnection.

She struggled to understand this unnamed thing that unravelled connection and caused people to respond over and over again in this way.

And what she found was that this unnamed thing is shame—that sense that each of us, at least occasionally, has.

That pernicious feeling that “we are not enough.”

That we are not good enough, not smart enough, not beautiful enough, not, not, not... enough.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en

In her research, though,
she discovered a key difference between the people
“who have a strong sense of love and belonging
and the people who really struggle for it.”

And that difference boils down to
“the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging
believe they’re worthy of love and belonging.
That’s it. They believe they’re worthy.”

She plunged into trying to better understand how such a sense
could come about. And what she came up with
is that these people are “whole-hearted.”

She found that they shared a deep sense of courage.
Tracing back to the root meaning of the word,
these are people who tell the story of who they are
with their whole heart.

They had a capacity for vulnerability.

They could put it all out there.

They could put their imperfection on display
without worrying whether it might undermine their worth.

They could be compassionate toward themselves and others.

And, they could be their most authentic selves
because as she says, “they were willing
to let go of who they thought they should be
in order to be who they were.”

Warts and all, they were themselves.
“What made them vulnerable made them beautiful.”

They didn’t consider being vulnerable excruciating
because they knew that it was simply necessary
to living a courageous and connected life.

They displayed a willingness to risk their hearts and their hopes,

knowing there are no guarantees in this life.

And she found with the other group,
with the ones not quite living with their whole hearts,
that they had a way of resisting vulnerability, at all costs,
often numbing feelings of grief and shame and disappointment.

The kind of things we often would prefer not to feel.

And, yet, as her research makes so starkly clear,
“you [can’t] selectively numb.”

When we numb the emotions that we try to keep at bay,
we also numb ourselves to happiness, and gratitude, and joy.

The first principle of our Unitarian faith is that we
uphold and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

And, yet, I know a good number of us
find this principle much easier to apply to other people
than to ourselves.

Out of fear that we are somehow lacking, somehow less-than,
we numb ourselves to not only to the hard stuff,
but to the good stuff, too.

And, so, my prayer this morning
is that each of you might, with each day,
come to live with your whole hearts,
and with compassion for your own faults and imperfections,
and for your sins and short-comings.

To know that you are of intrinsic worth,
to know that you are enough,
simply by the fact of your being.

To know that you can live with courage
by living with a heart open wide.

To practice the art of vulnerability,
knowing that we can live for what we love,

rather than what we fear.

Our moments of truth may never call us
to stand down a line of tanks or refuse to budge on a bus.

But our moments of truth come, every day,
calling us to be courageous by being vulnerable.

May we trust deeply enough in our own worth
that we might risk an authentic life.

May we put ourselves on the line,
knowing in our heart of hearts
that “courage [truly] is the price that life exacts for granting peace,”
and yet be unconcerned about counting the costs.

So may it be,
this day and all the days of our lives.

Amen.

Closing Words

As our service comes to a close, let us take heart.

Let us encourage—literally instilling courage in—one another,
bearing witness to the precious worth of our own being.

Let us seek to live with wholeheartedness in all that we do,
that we might know the gifts of courage,
through all the moments that define our lives.

So be it.