

Courage

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson July 5, 2015

They say, that when the young man took out his gun and opened fire in a prayer meeting in Charleston, a grandmother pushed her five year old grandchild down to the floor and lay down on top of her, giving her a better chance at life. Her son, aged 26, tried to talk the shooter down and was slain. And the five year old, no doubt terrified, lay quiet, and survived. Upstairs in the pastor's office, Jennifer Pinckney was watching her own 5 year old daughter play in her husband's office. Hearing the shots, she called 911, turned out the office light and hid with her daughter under the desk. Only after the police found them and took them to a hotel across the street did she know for sure that her husband and 9 others were dead.

Courage. Courage under fire. The courage of self sacrifice. The Wise courage which does not give way to anxiety, does what needs to be done and stays out of danger. There are many kinds of courage.

A person found lacking in courage is called a coward. A coward gives in to their fear, we say. It's worth noting that in popular usage lately, we have been using the word "coward" when we actually mean "despicable", as in, "the 911 terrorists were just cowards."

To call someone who just died in the service of what they believed in a coward would be sort of extraordinary, even if you don't believe what they believed and even if you abhor the killing of others. But in times when the actions of others leave us speechless, the word "coward" comes often to mind as the most damning thing we can say in our anger and our grief and retain our dignity and quotability. It tells us how much we admire bravery.

So...what is courage, and who can be called courageous? What an interesting question! I've been thinking about that these last few weeks, and have seen the

news in the light of those thoughts, and I'm thinking that there are three kinds of courage: fast courage, deliberate courage, and the courage to endure.

Fast Courage is the courage of battle, police action, house fires. It is to take risks for the common good in the midst of danger. The people who exhibit this kind of courage often say that they don't remember deciding to sacrifice their safety, they just acted...and they often remark that "anybody would have done the same." What they seem to mean by that extraordinary statement is that they themselves didn't hesitate, and didn't experience a deciding...they just did what needed to be done. Lots of people, perhaps most people, wouldn't have done it, for a variety of reasons, beginning with, they knew they couldn't succeed at the task, or don't think fast enough in a crisis....that would be me, who has been known to dial information instead of 911 in an emergency.... or they didn't do it because they had critical responsibilities to others and couldn't risk the self sacrifice, or were simply afraid.

Our religious compatriot Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a poem for the July 4, 1837 placement of a marker on the spot by a creek in Concord where, as he so memorably put it, the embattled farmers "fired the shot heard round the world." They dared, he wrote, to die and leave their children free. That's courage...at that moment, the fast courage that stands in danger, for the common good.

We admire the person who jumps off a dock to save a drowning swimmer, who pulls a buddy to safety in battle, who confronts a shooter, who jumps into the subway well to push a fellow passenger to safety... this kind of courage in special, usually split second situations, is worthy of its headline, because it reminds us all of a precious human value. Many of us will never be confronted with a situation in which it is appropriate for us to exhibit this kind of courage, and if we are wise we will be humble about imagining what would happen if we were.

Not every risk taken is courageous. Some risks are taken for show, rather than for the common good. I resist calling the fellow who tightrope walks between two tall building courageous. I call that person an attention seeker, a thrill seeker, an adrenalin junkie, if I pay any attention at all. Some risks are taken so foolishly that no good gets done...sometimes even harm gets done. The person who dives off a

dock to save a drowning swimmer is brave...but only if they can themselves swim. If they can't swim, they are foolish, and perhaps even in the way of a better rescue. You can't really call tilting at windmills, Don Quixote style, brave.

When we think of courage, we first think of fast courage is not the only kind, or even the most common kind of courage.

There is also deliberate courage: the courage to plan to do something that is a risk taken for the common good...not in the heat of battle but in the cold of a sleepless night or an empty office or walking a deserted street.

This week a man named Nicholas Winston died in England. He was 106 years old. That in itself might have made news, but his life story also was told...or a few months of his life story, anyway; a few months at the beginning of World War II, when he was asked by a friend to abandon a planned ski vacation and go to Prague, about to be occupied by Nazis, and help get Jewish children to safety. Mr. Winston, a brave master of logistics, ended up creating a mass rescue effort and brought more than 600 children to safety in England. It involved dangers, secret contacts with the Gestapo, bribes, forgery, nine railroad trains, an avalanche of paperwork and a lot of money. In the end he got exasperated with the slow moving British bureaucracy he simply forged entry permits for the children.

This was a long-term crisis, and although some of the work was done from the safety of his home in England, some involved real danger. Mr. Winston didn't talk about these actions, indeed, he actively hid them for 30 years, even from his family. When His wife found a box of mementos while cleaning the attic and insisted on hearing the story and sharing what he told her with others, Mr. Winston got a lot of attention...he got knighted, even, and well-deserved. It seems likely that he had more than a few sleepless nights in the months that he worked, wondering how much danger he was putting himself in, but he didn't seem to remember that. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 2001, he said, "One saw the problem there, that a lot of these children were in danger, and you had to get them to what was called a safe haven, and there was no organization to do that. Why did I do it? Why do people do different things? Some people revel in taking risks, and some go through life taking no risks at all."

Although it may seem to those who decide, suddenly or deliberately, to take risks for the common good, that “anyone would do it,” and that there was really no decision to make at all, that does not mean that this kind of courage comes out of the blue, or that all humans are equally likely or unlikely to take exhibit it under fire.

There was an interesting study done years ago with people who had taken in Jewish families during the holocaust, at great risk to themselves. Researchers asked questions about their values, their parents’ values, their upbringing and so on. I couldn’t find the study this week, but I remember some of the results. Researchers found that those willing to take the risks of saving someone their culture considered an “other” had been raised in homes and schools where there were people who were different from them. They knew from experience, in other words, that these others were human beings like themselves. Because of their cosmopolitan and compassionate upbringing, their hearts were already big enough to hold self, family, country, AND strangers.

Courage comes from the latin word cour...heart. To have courage is to have and act on a big heart....a heart for a buddy, for a Jewish child otherwise condemned to death, for the hapless swimmer or the poor soul hanging out of a burning window.

Sometimes the big heart we have to have is for ourselves...to act on the basis of our own needs and good. The person who takes the risks of leaving abuse, of abandoning drink, of getting healthy, of leaving toxic relationships....that is also courage. Being a healthy, sturdy human being is just as much a part of the common good as raising a healthy sturdy child or rescuing a person from death or righting a common wrong.

It takes discernment to take risks to better our own life, especially in the face of opposition, but the health created ripples out, sometimes spectacularly, to the world. Consider young Malala of Pakistan, who spoke out for her right to go to school, the right of other girls to go to school, and who was shot by the Taliban. Her nation reacted in outrage, the world with compassion. After she had recovered, she had a chance to speak at the UN on the importance of schooling.

That's a dramatic example of both the potential cost and the potential benefit of speaking up for oneself. More often the risks we take are of relationships and the benefit that ripples strengthens only our family and friends...but you never know. We are all connected.

Caitlin Jenner was given the Arthur Ashe Courage award when she, who had been Bruce Jenner the athlete, asked the world in a very public way to accept her as a woman. The Arthur Ashe courage award is named after the first African American professional tennis player who firstly endured nearly unending racism in the world of tennis whites, and then, after contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion before that disease was well understood, went to bat against the prejudice and fear that was rampant in the early 1990s. Both of those roles took great public courage, and, of course, courage is one of the many traits that come into play when a person develops a lethal illness. I'm not sure how much courage it took for Bruce Jenner to come out as Caitlin; my sense is that the courage required to become Caitlin was much more critical to Bruce in days before "Transgender" was even a word, much less a social phenomenon. But there was another rather extraordinary display of courage going on around this bit of news, and that's the courage of Sam.

Sam Lamott, much written-about, now young adult son of popular author Anne Lamott.

Anne Lamott was not comfortable with the Jenner transition, and she tweeted her thoughts in a very crude and unfortunate way to an enormous audience. And her son had the courage to weigh in. Her responded to her, in a tweet, that her "tweet is not truth, love, or funny. I'll explain it all. Let's start by deleting it."

And then he tweeted something which will probably go down in history as a quotable quote, "You can be part of the noise, but when the noise quiets down ... you'll wish were part of the change, it lasts longer."

And while he educated his mother in private, he also fielded the outraged sensibilities of his mom's liberal fan base.

“Everybody gets to make mistakes. It’s a shame this lesson is so public, but the best lessons are often painful and embarrassing.”

And....

“I know. It’s shocking. When the adrenaline wears off, remember that before you knew about trans issues, you didn’t know.

This is deliberate courage of the interpersonal form...that is, taking risk not of body of safety but of losing precious relationships. It is deliberate courage of the moral form...taking risks to do what is right, to try to make a wrong right, taking the risk to stand up for the wrong-doer among her outraged fans.

Most of us don’t get to battles, are not first responders to house fires, and never see children about to drown. But all of us have regular occasions to take moral and interpersonal risks. We all have the opportunity to try to right the many wrongs around us, to deliberately wade into the social fray, for the common good.

Then, there is the courage of endurance. The courage to live in pain, the courage to stay in it for the long run, the courage to finish, to fail and try again, to go back for yet another treatment, to stay with another’s distress, to deal wisely with what will not change.

The courage of endurance, like other kinds of courage, can be misplaced. You can endure something that you shouldn’t endure, that does nothing but damage you, or that serves evil rather than good. Sometimes we think we are bravely enduring something that others, or even later, we ourselves, see as being in denial.

Courage doesn't always roar, said Mary Anne Radmacher. “Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.”

My colleague, Army Chaplain George Tyger spoke of endurance to men and women deployed to Afghanistan. Even there, he pointed out, most of them did not face the need to muster fast courage. The courage they exhibited was the courage of endurance... hard weather, hard benches, loneliness, boredom, getting

up each morning and doing the same difficult or painful or tedious thing again. A sacrifice...an action made sacred by loss and love.

The courage to endure...another kind of courage, a common kind of courage, to take what is and face it, find what is good in it, and keep on keeping on. Most of us have to draw on all our stores of that kind of courage at least a few times in our lives.

That kind of courage is honed by small endurances, hopefully from childhood. Children who face some adversity in childhood, a disability or a struggle, learn this by necessity and early. Children for whom everything is smooth sailing, or who get their every whim catered to, sometimes don't get to express the courage of endurance until they meet the sometimes unforgiving school of hard knocks.

But there is just as much mystery about the courage of endurance as about the other kinds, and while we can admire the courage we see around us, we want to always have compassion for those who can't muster it, for who knows all there is to know about another's life?

Emerson, who wrote of the courage of the farmers, ended his poem with a prayer, and in that prayer we see his belief that courage is not only a virtue but a gift of Spirit, which, like most such gifts, is unevenly and often surprisingly given. He ended his poem,

Spirit that made those spirits dare
To die and leave their children free
Bid time and nature gently spare
This shaft we raise to them, and thee.

On this Fourth of July weekend, let us honor the courage we see around us...from the courage of those who fought to make our land free, to the courage of those who endure great difficulty, who try, try, again, who free themselves, who serve others, who take risks for the common good. Let us honor the courage we find in ourselves to do the same.