

Heroes¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our theme for October is Courage. We rarely give ordinary courage the honor it is due. On a daily basis, the threats we face are not usually dramatic dangers, but inner fears that keep us bound to the safety of our routines. What do heroes look like? Maybe not what we expect.

Our Reading today was the poem by David Whyte, "Start Close In."² Excerpt:

Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step you don't want to take.

Sermon

What is a hero? Sometimes it couldn't be more clear. Dawn was a principle and Mary was a school psychologist in an elementary school in Connecticut. Early one morning during a staff meeting, they heard a popping sound in the hallway. Most of the staff dove under the table, but Dawn and Mary leapt up. They told the other staff to lock the door behind them, and they ran toward the sound of bullets.

Brian Doyle wrote:

The next time someone says the word hero to you, you say this: There once were two women. One was named Dawn, and the other was named Mary. They both had two daughters. They both loved to kneel down to care for small beings. They leapt from their chairs and ran right at the boy with the rifle, and if we ever forget their names, ...if we ever forget that there is something in us beyond sense and reason that snarls at death and runs roaring at it to defend children... then we are fools...and what good are we then?³

And so I say their names today, Dawn Hochsprung and Mary Sherlach, and remember their heroism at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

But sometimes the definition of a hero becomes a little less clear. There has been a surge of controversy this past week about Colin Kaepernick and other NFL athletes taking the knee during the playing of the National Anthem at the start of a game. One might say these athletes are heroes—using the power of their visibility to speak up for racial justice. And perhaps this, too, is “beyond sense and reason,” snarling at death, and yearning to defend the lives of black children.

1 Copyright 2017 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 From his book, *River Flow*

3 <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/452/dawn-and-mary> Dawn Hochsprung and Mary Sherlach were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December of 2012.

But too many others, including the very president of this nation, have called them names or said they should be fired. And in fact, Kaepernick has not been signed to any team for this season. Several other athletes lost their endorsement contracts. A restaurant owner in Wisconsin even called for them to be killed. Isn't it a form of heroism to speak up, or kneel down, for what you believe in, even at the cost of your livelihood? Or threats to your life?

Eric Reid, a teammate of Kaepernick's who was one of the first to join him in his protest, wrote an OpEd in the *New York Times* this week, explaining his decision. He writes:

[After Colin had first chosen to sit on the bench during the national anthem last year], I approached [him] ...to discuss how I could get involved with the cause but also how we could make a more powerful and positive impact on the social justice movement. We spoke at length about many of the issues that face our community, including systemic oppression against people of color, police brutality and the criminal justice system. We also discussed how we could use our platform, provided to us by being professional athletes in the N.F.L., to speak for those who are voiceless.

After hours of careful consideration, and even a visit from Nate Boyer, a retired Green Beret and former N.F.L. player, we came to the conclusion that we should kneel, rather than sit, the next day during the anthem as a peaceful protest. We chose to kneel because it's a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy.

[He goes on,] It baffles me that our protest is still being misconstrued as disrespectful to the country, flag and military personnel. We chose it because it's exactly the opposite. It has always been my understanding that the brave men and women who fought and died for our country did so to ensure that we could live in a fair and free society, which includes the right to speak out in protest.⁴

The protest has actually gained momentum after the president's negative comments. According to the Associated Press, only six players had taken the knee prior to those remarks. Last Sunday, about 200 football players and team staff either sat, kneeled, raised a fist or did not take to the field during the national anthem in a show of solidarity.

And in case anyone were to imagine that taking a knee was an empty gesture, I believe it is important to mention that last year, Kaepernick pledged to donate \$1 million and all proceeds of jersey sales from the 2016 season to "organizations working in oppressed communities," such as the Black Youth Project in Chicago and the health center at the Standing Rock Water is Life camp.⁵ He not only spoke out by taking a knee, but also by giving of his wealth to help others.

I think Kaepernick is a hero. His kind of heroism is not popular—it makes people uncomfortable, it has been misunderstood, and maligned. But as one of my former professors posted on Facebook, "Protest must make some people uncomfortable. Otherwise, it's call 'business as usual.'"⁶ Certainly renowned heroes like Gandhi, whose birthday is celebrated tomorrow, or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made people uncomfortable when they were alive. They were only named heroes after their deaths.

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html>

5 <http://kaepernick7.com/million-dollar-pledge/>

6 Posting by theologian Susan Thistlethwaite.

So perhaps a hero is someone who is willing to be uncomfortable and make others uncomfortable because of what they believe in.

Sometimes, someone becomes an accidental hero—I think of Heather Heyer, the young white woman who was killed in Charlottesville this past August while part of a counter-protest to a white supremacist rally. One of the white supremacists drove his car into a group of the counter-protestors, killing Heather and injuring 19 others. Heather wasn't expecting to face her death that day. But she was living out her values, by marching for justice. She believed in speaking out against injustice, racism and hate. On her Facebook page, she had posted the heading: “If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention.” She could have been any one of us marching for justice at Monument Square in Portland. So while she never leapt out toward a man with a gun, she took the steps she could take to defend the lives of those deemed less worthy than her own.

What is a hero? Our theme for this month is courage—and I wonder, what kind of courage does it take to be a hero? Jean Shinoda Bolen says, "Our word 'courage' comes from the French word *coeur*, 'heart'. Courage is a willingness to act from the heart, to let your heart lead the way, not knowing what will be required of you next, and if you can do it." Courage starts that close—in the strength that arises from the depths of our own heart.

Notice that it is our own heart that must lead the way—not someone else's heart. But the heart is not an isolated entity. The heart is our opening to the lives of those around us. The heart of an activist, who feels the pain of those who are oppressed. The heart of an athlete, who feels the pain of his own people. The heart of a principle who loves the children in her school.

Courage begins, not usually by doing great things, or risking great danger, but by letting our hearts be open to our own life and the lives of those who are around us. By letting ourselves feel, and feel with others, letting ourselves love. David Whyte says, “Start close in...

take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in...”

We draw our themes each month from the *Soul Matters Sharing Circle*, and each month we receive ideas and resources on the theme. In the packet for this month, one of the spiritual practices they recommend is Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone. They note

We rarely give ordinary courage the honor it is due. On a daily basis, the threats we face are not the dramatic dangers of burning buildings but the insidious hazards of our comfort zones. This reminds us that the enemy of courage is often not fear but safety and routine. Sometimes those routines support and structure our lives; sometimes they stifle and shrink them. So this month, you are invited to pursue the practice of ordinary risk and adventure. Your instructions are simple: Pick an activity that pulls you out of your comfort zone.

When was the last time you consciously chose to notice the boundaries of your comfort zone? That comfort zone will be different for each person, because we each have our own structures for routine and safety. Perhaps for some of you, stepping outside of your comfort zone might mean starting a conversation during coffee hour with someone you don't know. A small step of ordinary courage. For someone else, it might mean taking five minutes to sit outside in silence during the midst of a busy day. A small step of ordinary courage. For someone else, it might mean getting out of bed in the morning. For someone suffering from depression, that could be a big step of extraordinary courage.

When we notice the boundaries of our own comfort zone, perhaps each of us must also ask, “Is this a time to step outside my comfort zone, or a time to step back into my comfort zone?” What I mean is this—if we are facing a big change, or a difficult challenge in our lives, then we might find strength and courage by paying attention to familiar rituals and routines that can bolster our sense of safety and renewal. That would be a time to consciously step into our comfort zone.

But for many of us, we get into the habit of our routines, and can get stuck in our comfort zone—we avoid situations that might challenge us a little bit, and then become stifled by that safety and routine. Pierce Vincent Eckhart wrote:

When I was a Boy Scout, we played a game when new scouts joined the troop. We lined up chairs in a pattern, creating an obstacle course through which the new scouts, blindfolded, were supposed to maneuver. The scoutmaster gave them a few moments to study the pattern before our adventure began. But as soon as the victims were blindfolded, the rest of us quietly removed the chairs.

[He goes on to say:] I think life is like this game. Perhaps we spend our lives avoiding obstacles we have created for ourselves but in reality exist only in our minds. We're afraid to apply for that job, take violin lessons, learn a foreign language, call an old friend, write our congressman — whatever it is that we would really like to do but don't because of personal obstacles. Don't avoid any chairs until you run smack into one.⁷

To consciously practice stepping outside of our comfort zone, can loosen up those invisible obstacles that we've seen in our path, obstacles that might once have been there, but over time, have gone away. Only each of us knows, in our heart of heart, what takes courage for us. But by making a practice of small steps of courage, we grow stronger in our capacity for getting beyond our comfort zone, and finding the courage to take those larger steps. Maybe with a little practice, you might be able to risk talking to your uncle Fred about Colin Kaepernick.

Our values guide us in the direction of compassion, and we are living in a world that needs our compassion desperately. Sometimes that might mean compassion for our selves, and the courage to honor our limits and routines and challenges. Sometimes that might mean compassion for those closest to us, and the courage to bring a forgiving word to an argument. Sometimes that compassion might call us to reach out to a stranger with kindness and an open heart. Sometimes that compassion might call us to speak out on behalf of peace or justice.

7 Found in <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/352/sunbeams-352>

The spiritual practice of Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone, for me, becomes linked to stepping out into a Compassion Zone. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior said,

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question, 'Is it politic?' And Vanity comes along and asks the question, 'Is it popular?' But Conscience asks the question 'Is it right?' And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must do it because Conscience tells us it is right.

He also says, "Never, never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way."

We live in a time when our souls are constantly being wounded by the avarice and greed and indifference to suffering that are continually at the forefront of the news. I know how troubling this is to so many of us. For example, when I see what is happening in Puerto Rico—and knowing that we are only seeing the smallest fraction of the suffering there—when I see the disregard and callousness that is represented by our government, my heart breaks. No one is even trying to hide this anymore. There are blatant attempts to destroy health care for millions, to push through tax cuts for billionaires, to reject the pleas for help from refugees, to break apart immigrant mothers from their children—these public acts of violence wound all of us.

Only by opening our hearts, stepping out of our comfort zone and into a compassion zone, only by taking some sort of action—no matter how small and humble—can we find any healing for our souls, any healing for our society. So, let yourself notice the boundaries of your comfort zone. Let yourself notice the strength of your heart when it opens. This week, follow your heart and take one small step into your compassion zone. C. Joybell C. says, "Don't be afraid of your fears. They're not there to scare you. They're there to let you know that something is worth it."

Meditation

Our final song was "Nothing More" by The Alternate Routes, (which was written in honor of the Sandy Hook Elementary School.)

Excerpt: Heroes don't look like they used to. They look like you do.

Chorus: We are love. We are one.
We are how we treat each other when the day is done.
We are peace. We are war.
We are how we treat each other and nothing more.

Closing Words

May we remember how much power we have in our hands
to shape the world around us, to help, to heal.

May all of our hands bless the world.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.