

**“SPIRITUAL COURAGE”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
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Call to Gather: from Jane Hirschfield

To live fully and willingly in the world of the living is more brave even than going open-eyed toward death. All too often we do neither, and, clinging to some safer middle ground, end up feeling neither our terrors nor our joys.<sup>1</sup>

Reading: “Beginners” by Denise Levertov

*Dedicated to the memory of Karen Silkwood and Eliot Gralla*

*“From too much love of living,  
Hope and desire set free,  
Even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere to the sea—“*

But we have only begun  
To love the earth.

We have only begun  
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?  
— so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?  
— we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision

how it might be  
to live as siblings with beast and flower,  
not as oppressors.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Nepo, *Facing the Lion, Being the Lion* (San Francisco: Canari Press, 2007), p. 166.

Surely our river  
cannot already be hastening  
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot  
drag, in the silt,  
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet—  
there is too much broken  
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other  
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must  
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.<sup>2</sup>

### Sermon

It was a very scary night on Madeline Island. My kids and I were in a tent as a storm raged around us. The rain and wind pounding the tent was bad enough. Worse was the lightening. We knew the lightening was close not just because of the nearly instantaneous thunder, but also because we could feel the impact of the percussive thunder rolling through the ground. Huddled together on our sleeping pads, terrified, we desperately wished for the storm to move on. But it seemed like the storm had somehow stalled right over us. Finally it let up just enough to feel like we could make a mad dash to the van and the relative safety of being in something with rubber tires and a thicker-than-canvas shell. Sleeping mostly up-right in the front seat of the van actually felt like a relief, and I was able to fall asleep as the storm finally moved on.

The next morning I noticed a woman and a toddler milling about in the next campsite. “Oh, man,” I thought, “it must have been a rough night for them. How terrifying!” Awhile later they strolled by our campsite. “Wow,” I said, “that was some storm!”

“Yeah, I noticed everything is pretty wet this morning. I guess we must have slept through it.”

I wanted to say “Are you kidding me?” but I could tell that she was being very genuine and not just putting on a brave front. I mumbled something stupid as I pictured my kids and me wide-eyed, terrified in our tent, and this woman and her child sleeping soundly in their tent a mere thirty yards away.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.panhala.net/Archive/Beginners.html>.

Fear comes easier to some people than others. So does fear's opposite: courage. I'd say—charitably—that courage does not come naturally to me. Maybe some of you feel the same way about yourselves.

When we contemplate courage, we tend to conjure up images of bravery we can see: a soldier fighting courageously in battle, a person with cancer courageously battling the illness, a mountain climber scaling a dangerous peak. I've had mild forays into this sort of courage through backpacking—last summer, for example, when I joined a group hiking across the Grand Canyon from the South Rim to the North Rim. Even then courage is clearly all relative. After completing a very challenging four days and three nights trek through the Canyon, we ate a celebratory breakfast the next morning at the North Rim Lodge. The waitress, a small twenty-something woman, responded to our bragging about our feat by saying, “Oh, I did that last week. On Wednesday. Alone.”

Today I want to explore another form of courage that I find every bit as difficult: courage in our inner lives—what I would call spiritual courage. The truth is that the spiritual life takes as much courage as any of these external expeditions.

There are several tasks common to all spiritual paths. Each of these tasks requires an extraordinary amount of inner courage.

The spiritual writer Mark Nepo defines inner courage as “standing by one's core.”<sup>3</sup> To be able to do this, you first need to know your core. So the first and most essential task on any spiritual path is to look at yourself as you really are. You need to know who you are—your good points and your bad, the parts of you want the world to see and the limitations and failures and demons to which you don't even want to admit in the privacy of individual meditation or prayer. You need to see it all. And you need to know the principles and beliefs that are most important to you and that (theoretically at least) guide your actions.

For most of us, this self-knowledge is a very difficult task. Our true self buried deep within us is like an undiscovered and unmapped country. Traveling there contains all the mystery and fear that sailing beyond the edge of an apparently flat world inspired in the pre-Columbian Europeans. But travel there we must or we will never gain the insight necessary to avoid repeating our mistakes. In the worst cases (think: Hitler), being out of touch with our true self potentially results in violence and evil perpetrated on self and others.<sup>4</sup>

Why is this voyage of self-discovery so difficult and daunting? Why would any of us willingly forgo the journey and risk becoming Hitler-like? If we take an unblinking look at ourselves, we will undoubtedly see some things we really don't want to see. We will unearth wounds that we buried deep long ago. We will open ourselves to pain that we have long walled off. Mark Nepo compares the difficulty of this quest for self-knowledge to running into a burning building.<sup>5</sup> We are afraid because it truly is dangerous and potentially very costly work.

But the potential rewards are also very great. They include cleansing and healing ourselves. Wounds and pains sealed away do impact us. We know that physical wounds and pains leave our bodies ripe for infection and decay, especially if they get no air. Interior wounds do the same thing. Another reward of self-knowledge is that we also

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<sup>3</sup> Nepo, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65, 103.

may see our good qualities and strengths. Too often we wall these off, too, in our effort to quarantine the places of dis-ease.

I see one other plus of knowing our true self. In my theology, this core within each of us is one of the primary places where we can come encounter the divine. With Emerson, I believe that the divine—if there is a divine—is a Oneness that exists at the heart of everything and everyone. The only way to come into direct contact with that within us is to journey deeply into our self.

Another task common to all spiritual paths is to look outside ourselves at the world around us with the same sort of unblinking honesty that is necessary to looking within. As with our inner selves, the external world around us has good qualities and unfortunate qualities. It's tempting to live in the world as we wish it would be. We have the capacity to live in denial of unpleasant truths not only within us, but in the world around us—in our families, workplaces, communities, and the natural world. Seeing the world as it really is also takes a lot of courage.<sup>6</sup>

Another spiritual task is to be ourselves. Joseph Campbell said that the highest spiritual ideal is to lead an authentic life—that is, to be true to yourself in your words and actions. This is not easy, either. We often fear that being ourselves might put at risk our popularity, our employment, and most importantly the acceptance and love of others. It often feels safer to be who we think others want us to be rather than our real selves.<sup>7</sup>

A final task inherent in every worthwhile spiritual path is doing our small part to help heal the world. Not only do we need to strive to live consistently with our beliefs and principles, but we also need to make sure our beliefs and principles acted out in our lives are in fact a net gain for the world. If our actions cause net harm, then we need to examine and overhaul the beliefs and principles that underlie our actions.

So these are the four tasks common to all spiritual paths: know yourself, know the world around you, be yourself, and do your part to help heal the world. Walking this path helps us live an authentic, meaningful life. Let's be clear, though: none of this will shield us from suffering. As the Buddha taught, suffering is universal. Bad things will undoubtedly happen regardless of how spiritual your life is. The good thing about living spiritually, Mark Nepo suggests, is that we won't experience "the terror of life without honey or light."<sup>8</sup> Spirituality helps us see both the good and the bad in life from the perspective of the whole. That's worth a lot!

Without a doubt, fear is a—maybe the—major enemy of doing these four spiritual tasks. So cultivating our inner courage is infinitely helpful. What are some ways we can do this? I posed this question to the Lawrence University Unitarian Universalists yesterday at our weekly meeting and received a great deal of wisdom from these young adults. With the help of their wisdom, I have put together a Top Ten list of how to cultivate inner courage for the spiritual journey:

- #10—Understand that the spiritual path is inherently one of trial and error, not perfection. Fear of failure very effectively undermines our courage. But here's the truth: as hard as we try and as wise as we and our teachers are, each of us will sometimes misapprehend the truth about ourselves and the world around us. Each of us will sometimes fail to live in accordance

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<sup>6</sup> Nepo, pp. 239, 241, 260-261.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 78, 224.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

with our deepest self. Each of us will do things that harm rather than heal the world. It's okay. We're human. Humans make mistakes. What we need to do when this happens is realize we made a mistake and figure out how to do better the next time. As Denise Levertov's poem asserted, we are all beginners. Even the most advanced spiritual people among us are on journeys full of trial and error.

- #9—Mark Nepo suggests that we need to unstrap our armor, not thicken it in order to cultivate our inner courage.<sup>9</sup> This is counter-intuitive, but it is wise. Building up our armor so often goes hand-in-hand with denial of the reality about our inner core and the world around us. The armor can become so thick that we become our armor rather than ourselves. It takes courage to unstrap some of our armor, but doing so and surviving reinforces our courage.
- #8—Try to control our anxiety. Nothing deflates courage more than anxiety. The Zero's or whatever we're going to end up calling this decade has been chock full of anxiety: book-ended by Y2K and the economic meltdown, with 9/11 and two wars in between. The Lawrence young adults noted that this decade comprises half of their lifetime and that they are as a result in some ways the anxiety generation. In the face of this free-floating and often pervasive fear, we need courage now more than ever. Don't let all of the anxiety in!
- #7—Detach from the spiritual ends we are pursuing. Each of these spiritual tasks takes a long time to complete. Actually, they take forever: even if we thoroughly get to know ourselves, for example, we will no doubt change—and then we'll have to learn about ourselves all over again. There is nothing static about ourselves or our spiritual journeys.
- #6—Practice welcoming everything. A positive attitude does help us cultivate courage. We never really know for sure whether the challenge staring us in the face is a blessing or a curse. I think about one of our Fellowship members. A few months ago she had the terrible fall down her basement stairs that left in the hospital. Categorizing that as a curse rather than a blessing seemed like a no-brainer. Then in the course of her treatment her doctors discovered a nascent cancer in her kidney—a cancer that would have likely gone undetected for a long time had it not been for her fall. And what's the greatest tool in fighting kidney cancer? Early detection. So maybe the fall was a blessing. Maybe it saved her life. Absent the power to know how things turn out, greeting everything that comes our way with a spirit of welcome can stoke our courage. So can developing a sense of faith and trust that one way or another things will work out—or at least that we have the resources to get through this next life challenge.
- #5—Look for role models and teachers who can help us cultivate our courage. This is part of why I continue to study and contemplate the life of Abraham Lincoln. Here was a guy who knew himself—warts and all—

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<sup>9</sup> Nepo, p. 269.

and was adept at looking at the world in a clear-eyed way, too. He was always himself, even when this exposed him endlessly to ridicule as a poor country bumpkin. And he kept his eye on the prize of healing the world even when the cost of doing so seemed so horrendously high. Another role model I have is my colleague in ministry Dottie Mathews. Here's a person who is very skilled at courageously looking at the truth in herself and in the world around her. And no one I've ever met maintains a more welcoming spirit toward every joy and challenge that comes her way.

- #4—Practice compassion, toward both yourself and others. It's easier to act courageously if you care. One of the Lawrence students shared a lovely quote from that fount of wisdom, Dr. Seuss. It comes from his book *The Lorax*: "UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."<sup>10</sup>
- #3—Practice forgiveness of yourself and others. Maybe I'm ranking this high because some of you thought I cheated this quality in my recipe for my understanding of God. But it is very important, even transformative. And surely it stokes our courage. I think it's especially important to be gentle with ourselves: nothing can stymie our courage more than self-loathing. So when you start thinking those nasty judgmental thoughts about yourself or others, hit the mute button!
- #2—Be in community. None of us needs to walk our spiritual path alone. Walking with others can be a tremendous help. Others can encourage us, challenge us, teach us, support us. They can help us muster our courage even when we're feeling afraid.
- #1—Engage in a spiritual practice. Doing so can really help us take regular clear-eyed looks at self and our world. A spiritual practice can help us find the courage to be ourselves. This weekend our Coming of Age youth are engaging in the spiritual practice of a vision quest. My hope for them is that they will find ways in their spiritual lives to continually return to the questions they pondered this weekend: Who am I? What do I believe? There is no better way to do so than through spiritual practices like meditation or journaling.

I'm going to end with a prayer written by the great Indian writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore that is in our hymnal:

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,  
But to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain,  
But for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not look for allies in life's battle-field,

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

But to my own strength.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved,  
But hope for the patience to win my freedom.

Grant me that I may not be a coward, feeling your mercy in my success  
alone;  
But let me find the grasp of your hand in my failure.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Responsive Reading #519 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).