

“The Quiet Work of Courage”

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 18, 2026

Our high school years, that tumultuous time of impenetrable cliques, dominating “in” groups, ostracized “out” groups. Caught in the turmoil of teenage angst, some people respond to their own anxiety and insecurity with anger or judgment. I reflect on these years from time to time, and some recurring memories arise. I remember one student in particular – we’ll call him Jim. Quiet, awkward, shy, hiding behind long, unkempt hair and baggy black clothing. Most of the students simply ignored him and went on their way – which is demoralizing enough. And there were others who chose to bully him, in word and deed—they simply couldn’t let him be. So, Jim walked through the hallways, ducking his head in fear. And yet, one day, something unexpected happened. Another student – large in stature and even larger in courage – interrupted the barrage. And he did it again the next day. And the following week. His mere presence was enough to keep the bullies at bay. And Jim changed. He walked taller. He smiled more. He said “hello” in the hallway. He raised his hand in class. Having an ally transformed him. A simple act of courage made a lasting difference.

Today we talk about ordinary courage. This isn’t about being fearless, for that is unachievable. Courage means living in alignment with one’s values, choosing what morally and ethically matters over what is easy and convenient. Could there be a distinction between bravery and courage? Bravery is seemingly living with a lack of fear - bold and daring. Visibly putting one’s life in danger for the sake of another. Big, public, dramatic. Running into a burning building. But courage is inner, moral, emotional work – the strength to act despite fear – going against the grain, speaking out, stopping a bully.

And there are extreme acts of courage. Think of all those who hid Jews during the Nazi era, concealing entire families in floorboards, attics, and closets, risking death to help innocent people escape the unimaginable. Or think of the safehouses strategically placed along the Underground Railroad, where abolitionists sheltered those escaping bondage, risking their own

lives to help others reach freedom. Extraordinary, heroic, admirable. And yet, I believe we each have the chance to be ordinary heroes.

Being an ordinary hero means interrupting a cruel joke, even when everyone else is laughing. It's including those who are often excluded. It's admitting we were wrong and acknowledging the hurt we have caused. It's choosing life and hope in the face of illness. Sometimes, courage simply means persisting. Letting go of the woes of the day, heading to sleep knowing that tomorrow is a new day with new opportunities. In this way, we are met with the opposite of despair: not giving up but beginning again. As poet David Whyte writes "Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life."¹ These words bring to mind one of my favorite lines from Mary Oliver, quote, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"² Perhaps it is to embrace joy abundantly, to grow through what has broken us, and to keep becoming who we are called to be. Whyte's words deepen Oliver's invitation. We are called to embody and make conscious the values, convictions, and morals we hold deeply within, to live them openly, knowing that we are making ourselves vulnerable - and to choose to live despite the consequences of this profound vulnerability. We choose love though we know loss. We choose hope though we know fear.

I feel I would be remiss to talk about courage without briefly lifting up the tale of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee Atticus Finch is a small-town lawyer in a racist community who defends an innocent Black man, knowing he will likely be convicted regardless. Atticus uses the experience to teach his children. Quote, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting an idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what."³ We see failure on the horizon, yet we act anyway, following our moral convictions rather than the status quo. Courageous people act, not because they are certain they will succeed, but because they cannot reconcile their conscience with doing nothing.

¹ "Courage" by David Whyte

² "The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver

³ *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

So, we spoke of bravery, of large and small acts of courage, of acting despite the outcome, despite the vulnerability. Now I want to talk about what we cultivate within – the quiet courage that offers us a deeper sense of wisdom: the courage to question our deeply held convictions – to reconsider what we believe and change our minds.

It begins with humility, writes author Thom Hartmann. It requires, quote, “acknowledging that your understanding was partial, that your perspective was limited, and/or that the world is more complex than the story you once told yourself.”⁴ And this takes courage because our beliefs are often woven into our sense of belonging. Changing what we believe can mean risking the communities and identities that have helped define us. Think of the changes we may have to make to live more fully into the shared values of our own faith tradition. Think of changing our political convictions about immigration or a woman's right to choose. Think of turning away from a judgmental, vindictive image of God. Think of questioning a professional culture that prizes overwork and the accumulation of wealth. Or think of examining questionable family dynamics we have accepted for decades.

Changing our mind is both a source of wisdom and a way of cultivating it. This courage isn't loud or abrasive. It is quiet, yet powerful. Remaining open to changes shapes us – our beliefs and our identities. It makes us more resilient and adaptable. Remaining open to change keeps us connected to our own humanity. This openness allows us to see reality with a greater clarity and to recognize that our understanding of truth can evolve. We move incrementally closer to the values and principles that are life-giving and life-affirming.⁵ I think of our own faith tradition, born of questioning the status quo. Of challenging doctrines of sin. Damnation. Of emphasizing compassion. Love. Forgiveness. I think of Michael Servetus, the sixteenth-century Unitarian theologian who challenged established Christian teachings about the Trinity and was executed for heresy. Our ever-evolving, ever-questioning faith has been shaped by courageous yet ordinary people challenging the status quo – open to imagining something different.

⁴ “The Quiet Courage of Changing Your Mind” by Thom Hartman

⁵ *ibid*

Change lives in ordinary people willing to ask questions, reconsider what they believe, and change. Change lives in ordinary courage.

I want to pause to focus on something so apropos to today's political climate – the courage of dissent. Dissent within our family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers. I think many of us approach these moments with abundant trepidation. The words may be simple, but the words are profound: “I don’t think that aligns with my values.” “Just because something has always been done that way doesn’t mean it’s right.” “This politician is stoking hate, violence, and fear.” These words can be frightening to speak out loud. Audre Lorde invites us to ask, however, “what’s the worst thing that could happen?” Does this question give you pause? I imagine our minds turn towards the possibility of alienation, separation, heated arguments, anger, tears. And yes, these things may happen. People may interrupt us. They may take our words personally. Relationships may become strained. But the world will not end.⁶ We acknowledge, too, that friends and lovers may slip away. For some, that loss may be too much to bear—and that’s okay. There will be other opportunities to speak up, to act, and to live according to our convictions. Yet when we do speak out, we may discover a sense of freedom. We no longer need to hide our convictions or worry about what to say next. And if some relationships are lost, new friends, new connections, and new loves may find us—people who cherish us in all our authentic vulnerability. We cultivate courage through what we are willing to risk in order to live according to our values.

And what happens next can be profound. When we speak out against what we know is wrong, we connect more deeply with our own vision of what is right—with the morals, values, and ethics that guide us. Lorde offers, we begin to discover a vision for the world we may not even have realized we held.⁷ We begin to imagine—and live into—a world of greater equity, greater freedom, and greater love. We hold more firmly to our convictions, embody our values more fully, and bring them into the world with greater courage and less hesitation. Having already

⁶ “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by Audre Lorde

⁷ Ibid

faced the vulnerability of risking something we hold dear, we discover that we are capable of taking the next step, and then the next.

It's never easy or comfortable to be a lone voice, offers author Toko-pa, especially if it is with a group where we have felt true belonging. But, Toko-pa offers, quote, "if you can stand the terrible loneliness and doubt, there might slowly emerge the young tendrils of understanding in the hearts of others. Then, and only then, will you see that you've been tremendously brave."⁸ What may these tendrils of understanding be? Imagine a relative from whom you've grown apart reaching out to you once again. Perhaps, over time, their political convictions have begun to shift, sparked by a seemingly simple, yet meaningful, comment you once shared. Imagine a shy, quiet cousin who has long kept her convictions to herself, finally finding the courage to speak up and share what she believes.

I leave you with a story.

Let's call her Samantha. Samantha had a friend suffering from breast cancer. This friend faced her diagnosis with strength and courage. As she confronted the uncertainty of her illness, her world seemed to grow narrower. The trivial things fell away, and her attention shifted to the ones she loved, to the early morning chirps of the songbirds, to the simple gifts of being alive. One afternoon, Samantha went on a walk with her friend, and she found herself complaining about the maladies of daily life. Her friend gently reminded her of these small blessings that can go unnoticed – the gifts of simply being alive. Samantha was struck with the wisdom of a quiet, often unseen courage. Since then, when she finds herself falling back into lament, she remembers her friend and reflects on how lucky she truly is to experience the world and love the people around her. It was a ripple effect. Her friend, facing the possibility of great loss, cultivated a deep appreciation for life - and that courage rippled outward, changing how Samantha experienced her own. Courage spreads.

So go forth into this world with courage. May the laments of our days be replaced by birdsong; our maladies by the beauty of the sky. May the many tendrils we have nurtured reach toward

⁸ "Outing the Unspoken" by Toko-pa

what is good, what is life-giving and lifesaving. May our minds forever change, grow, and evolve. May apathy and animosity become the woes of yesterday, and compassion and empathy the commitments of tomorrow. Choose love, though we know loss. Choose hope, though we know fear. Like our forebears, may we draw strength from our faith and dare to question, question, question. May we dissent when dissent is needed, finding the strength to speak our convictions. Though we may face the impossible, the impenetrable, the immovable, may we persevere nonetheless, with courage. May the words on our lips be words of change, making each breath an invitation to a different tomorrow. And may we remember the Jims of the world. Be an ally.

So go forth and live your one wild and precious life with courage. With conviction. With compassion. And remember, courage spreads.

May it be so, and Amen