

# “Have Courage”

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August 23, 2015

All across our land, we are living in anxious, fear-filled times. Whether it's another act of violence, or more threats of terror, or, like we saw this past week, another big drop in the markets, just keeping up with the news can bring on an instant anxiety spike. And then there are times in all of our lives that can seem to demand more of us than we have – trouble at home, trouble at work, or both, no work, a diagnosis that comes out of nowhere and changes everything in an instant, the loss of someone close to our heart. It can all come with the living of a life.

The truth is: the living of any life in this world requires courage, sometimes more courage than we think we have. In nearly all of my meditations, I ask for courage, courage both for myself and for the people I love and serve. The wish for courage is an ancient plea, probably as old as human language itself.

The Hebrew Scriptures, in nearly a dozen different passages, tell us to *“be of good courage.”*

What is courage, and where do we find it? Courage comes from the heart. Look at the word itself; the Latin root of our word “courage” is the word “*cor*,” which means “heart.” The wisdom of the Psalms, too, points us toward the heart, with the words, *“Let your heart take courage.”* No “headwork,” no dictionary entry, however well-crafted, can help us to know what courage looks like, in real life. To know, in our bones and in our souls, what it means to “have courage,” we turn to “heartwork”-- we listen to stories.

What courage stories do you know?

Who in your life taught you something about courage?

When you think of courage, whose face do you see?

When I was a young girl, Amelia Earhart was my hero. Whenever I thought of courage, I saw her face. I don't remember not knowing about her, and maybe that's no surprise, since, my mother, like Amelia, was a pilot. In our home, Amelia Earhart and her story were part of the atmosphere, as familiar as the old family rocking chair; among my mother's piles of navigation charts and aviation magazines, Amelia's face shone a message of determination, confidence and courage. Nearly every time my teacher told us to read a biography, I chose one about her. Her story, in some small ways, reminded me of my mother's. Amelia was born in Kansas; my mother came from a tiny Missouri town just minutes from the Kansas border. They both wore their hair short, and they wore pants, at a time when most women still wore skirts.

Amelia's story matched my mother's in some big ways, too. Neither woman was content to “know her place” and stay there. Both women, instead, rose up, spoke out, and pushed on.

About Amelia's eyes, the poet Judith Sornberger writes:

*“a brazen/blue that never knew its place,  
believed the sky its sister,  
flew to her.”*

The poet's words remind me of my mother's spirit.

Both Amelia and my mother were drawn to the sky, with a passion that reached the spiritual. They knew the open sky as their sanctuary. I keep a book of words I have collected, poems and passages that speak to my heart. For years, I have carried with me these words from Amelia Earhart:

*“Courage,” she wrote, “is the price Life exacts for granting peace.”*

What about you? Do you count yourself among the courageous? Maybe some of us would not be so quick to say “yes.” We’re wrong not to see the courage we bring to the living of our days. Sometimes acts of great courage are so much a part of one’s being that the courage in what we do can seem invisible, both to one another, and to ourselves.

I think now of my mother and the time she returned home after her only plane crash. She flew a Luscombe, a small single engine plane often used for aerobatics. One summer day, the plane’s wooden propeller broke in mid air and stopped its only engine. That plane was going down. But she managed to guide the plane down so that its wings were cradled safe and sound in the branches of a grove of Mississippi pine trees. She avoided what might have been a life threatening, hard impact crash. When I heard others talk about what skill and what courage that must have required, I remember thinking, “So? That’s no big deal. Of course, that’s what mom would do.” My twelve year old eyes were blind to my mother’s courage.

Just as we can be slow to see courage in the people closest to us, we can be even slower to see courage in ourselves. I would bet, this morning, that as I stand here and look out from this pulpit, I see the faces of the courageous. Maybe you stand by family and friends when life gets hard; you keep on, you say “yes” to life. You might say, “No big deal. It’s just what I do.” I say that’s what courage looks like.

Maybe you have known great challenges in your life – setbacks, illness, times when it seemed your whole world had been turned upside down. Despite it all, though, you didn’t quit. You picked yourself up and kept on; you said “yes” to life. You might say, “No big deal. It’s just what I do.” I say that’s what courage looks like.

Maybe your choice just to be here, in this church, was an act of courage. Some of us were not born into this faith, but came here, on our own, as adults. Even if we couldn’t accept all of its teachings, the faith into which we were born can have a powerful hold on us. Or maybe this is the first faith community you have ever known. You came here despite swearing that you would never, ever, sit in any church, anywhere, on a Sunday morning.

I once swore I would never, ever stand in a pulpit, but here I am. About the time I was struggling to discern a call to ministry, I heard Garrison Keillor say, “God made the earth round, so we couldn’t see too far down the road.” When people hear that I moved with a husband and three children under the age of five from Arkansas to Cambridge to begin preparing for the ministry, they say something like, “Wow! That took courage.” The subtext, of course, is: “What *were* you thinking?” I have said, “No. At the time, it didn’t feel courageous at all. It was just what I had to do to follow my heart – to be who I really am, on the inside.”

Our faith stories are stories of courage. I hear from newcomers to our congregations they came to be a part of a faith where no one will tell them what to believe, a faith where we are free to be true to our deepest convictions. You came so that you could know the peace of being who you really are. That’s what courage looks like. *Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Some of us know the challenge and struggle to be who we are in a way that is basic, and deeply personal. I stand in awe of the courage I hear in the stories of folks who risked rejection, and sometimes their very safety, when they stood up and told their families and their world that they were in love with someone of the same gender. You had to, to find any peace at all, to be who you really are. That, too, is what courage looks like. *Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

We all, at some level, know the challenge and struggle to be who we really are. There are voices in our world that would have us try to live in all sorts of ways that are counter to who we are. And there are voices out there that would have us sound, act, and look like someone else, instead of the unique soul we really are. When we give in, though, and try to be someone other than ourselves, we cheat ourselves, and one another, of the soul we were born to be.

Think about your life. When have you lain low, stayed silent, held back, lived a lie, failed to say, or do, what you knew was right? And when, in your life, did you rise up, speak out, and push on? Which time did you feel more alive, more real, more whole, more at peace? Courage is not only being who we are, but doing what we know is right. *Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Sometimes, though, life asks us to do the one thing we most fear, the one thing we think we cannot do. Maybe it's something new or something hard. Or maybe whatever lies before us reminds us of old hurts and we can feel the weight of the grief we carry, what the poet names an "obesity of grief." I'm reminded of the time I was called to minister to a couple whose baby had died just after birth – the one call I was most afraid of, since not that many years before Roger and I had lost a new life to a miscarriage. Before the call came, ministering to that couple was the one thing I thought I could never do, but something in my soul, like a whisper in the wind, led me past my fears and I walked into that hospital room, putting one foot in front of the other and finding a quiet joy in doing what I had been called to do.

*"Always do what you are most afraid to do,"* Mary Moody Emerson once told her nephew, Ralph Waldo Emerson. *"Always do what you are most afraid to do."*

When we step out to do what we think we can't, despite our fears, we just might find our courage in the doing. We can begin with a single step. *"I believe in dancing,"* Robert Fulghum writes in a confession about his own self-proclaimed lack of grace on the dance floor, and his goal, he says, is to *"dance all the dances as long as (he) can."* Maybe there have been times in your life when you weren't so sure you wanted even to try, either literally or metaphorically, to dance, times when the fears of both appearing foolish or a failure kept you on the sidelines of life. I think most of us have been there.

Maybe right now there is something calling you to go out and give to the world, but you're holding back, resting on the sidelines, telling yourself you can't because you just don't have the courage. The sidelines can seem safe, but when we never step out onto the dance floor of life, we can quit living and die a slow death inside. When we step out despite our fears, despite past hurts and old griefs, we can embrace life, like the poet, we can *"hold life like a face between (our) palms . . . and . . . say yes, I will take you, I will love you again."* Saying "yes" to life is our only chance of finding true peace.

Our journeys are a series of steps. Sometimes the greatest act of courage is to put one foot in front of the other, day by day, and trust the journey. To live a life of courage,

*Be who you are*

*Do what you know is right; and,*

*Do what you think you cannot do.*

What is life asking of you?

How will you answer?

*Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Will yours be a story of courage?

Will yours be a story of peace?