2004-1-18 Courage
Mark Belletini and Tony McDonald

Opening Words

We are here
to worship on a winter's day
with rested bodies, open hearts and agile minds.
Here with music, silence, word and story
we consider how our lives are spent,
as we remember other lives that bid us
join them, and also face our days with courage.
Praise the gift of another day!
And praise that we can say in peace**:**

May we live fully, love deeply, learn daily and speak truly that we might together leave the sacred legacy of a better world.

Sequence:

Quiet as a maple branch, black against the sky.
Quiet as a pond, frozen past the cracking.
Quiet as a head all bundled up against the cold.
Quiet as the very moment we slip into sleep.
Quiet as a room when all the guests have left.
Quiet as a snowflake falling onto the tongue.
Quiet as a babe at breast.
Quiet as a friend bowing to a friend.
Quiet as a wren gliding over the park.
Quiet as everything beyond the edge of this tone

Silence

Quiet as the whole story of our lives
behind us and before us,
of which this slender transparent moment
is just a small cross-section.
Quiet as our heart within our center,
our minds, overflowing with love for those

who have been there for us, challenged us,
sang to us, blessed us, nurtured us, taught us.
Quietly we see these wonders before us.
Quietly, we speak their names.

Naming
Quietness gives way to spirit now,
as the quiet between our breaths gives way
to the in-and-out sighs that keep us alive.
Quietness gives way now to what keeps us alive, the spirit, signed by this music…

The Anthem

The First Reading *comes from Martin Luther King's famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail 1963*

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you…when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

The Second Reading *is a poem written by the famous pilot Amelia Earhart back in 1931*

Courage is the price that Life
exacts for granting peace.
The soul that knows it not,
Knows no release from little things:
Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,

Nor mountain heights where bitter joy can hear
The sound of wings.

Sermon: Courage

Mark:

It was sometime back in 1998, my first year here, when Chip Roush and I had a conversation about how best to express our Unitarian Universalist approach briefly, in some pithy affirmation. We offered each other several examples, filled with words like *reason* and *freedom*, but in the end, they didn't satisfy. They seemed too wordy. They seemed too abstract. We began to wonder if it was impossible. I think we both wanted to just mutter the old saw "Deeds, not creeds," and forget it.

I said something to that effect, and that's when Chip said, "Hey, I think I can summarize our faith tradition in just one word… 'courage.'

I think Chip Roush is on to something.

Courage.

Many of you, I'd guess, know the famous questions of the Cowardly Lion in the film *Wizard of Oz.*

What makes a King out of a slave?
What makes the flag on the mast to wave?
What makes the elephant charge his tusk,
in the misty mist or the dusky dusk?
What makes the muskrat guard his musk?
What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder?
What makes the dawn come up like thunder?

And my personal favorite

What puts the "ape" in apricot?

To which the answer is always, of course: Courage.

The song is fun, sure. But I don't think it really tells us much about courage.

So, what is it?

Well, people I know talk as if they know what it means. For example, folks used to tell me *I* was courageous when I lived in a poverty-tattered neighborhood in

Oakland, California, that was rife with drug lords, gunshots, theft and daily, desperate, but very creative scams.

I used to say to folks who called me brave for living there: "Brave? Hey, it's my neighborhood. It's where I live. Anyway, do you feel 'brave' living in *your* much more upscale neighborhood, so filled as it is with hidden family violence, alcohol abuse, hidden drug usage, and homes chilled with the bitter silence of terrible communication skills? If not, why not?" You see, I never thought I was being particularly courageous to live where I lived. I thought I was just living my life in my neighborhood, a very interesting place.

Courage can be a very tough word to define. I used to be a bank teller at a Bank of America in the Tenderloin Neighborhood in San Francisco, another pretty rowdy neighborhood. Every two weeks, all the tellers were forced to watch this clever movie about what we were supposed to do if someone came up to us, pointed a gun, and said "Your money or your life!"

The short film minced no words. It clearly insisted: "Give *everything* in your drawer to the person demanding it. Do not be heroic. Do not press any buttons. Do not call for help. Just give them the fool money. Your lives are more important than *any* amount of cash."

That's all very touching and everything, but did we take it seriously? Not on your life. You see, we were held up weekly, almost daily. We found such things simply *annoying.* And so what did we do? What many would do when annoyed: respond to it *without thinking.* One teller said to the man sticking her up, "You're *robbing* me? I don't think so!" And she reached across the counter, slapped him upside the head and grabbed his gun right out of his hand. The man, startled, ran, tripped, and within minutes, was arrested. Another teller just burst out laughing when she was held up. The robber couldn't get her to stop laughing and just left, disgusted and frustrated. Another teller just folded her arms, looked the robber in the eye, and said, "Like hell you are, fool!" Again, the befuddled robber just blanched and stumbled off, undone by the red glare in her eyes, aimed right at him.

When people heard these stories, they would exclaim, "Oh, you people are so *courageous!"* But I wonder. Were we being courageous?

Or could you say we were rudely pushed, with our back against the wall, and that we just reacted? That's what I think, at least. Our responses certainly seemed more reactive than chosen, more impulsive than virtuous. At the very least, I'd say, for courage to mean something significant, it has to be more than mere reactive impulse.

But then you hear the story of Ruby Bridges,
the story we told to the children this morning.
In her story, courage seems reactive or impulsive. It's slow and dramatic. A lot more people are involved. Burly men in uniform. Judges writing orders. Gathering crowds, shouting. A slender African American child dressed in white. Protesters surrounding her with signs. Signs with words on them so vile that the great and street-wise Nobel Laureate, John Steinbeck, who happened to be there and saw them, was shaken to his core. (By the way, you can find his report on this event in *Travels with Charley.*)

When she went to church the day before she went to school, *she prayed for courage to do what she had to do.* What did she have to do? She had to go to school like every other child in the state of Louisiana. But she had to go to school with the governor of the state against her. With most of the white townsfolk against her. With the white preachers against her. With the principal of her school against her. The only person who was *for* her, besides her remarkable family, was her white teacher from Boston, Miss Henry. I'd like to suggest that her prayer in church was not the main spiritual event in her story. The main spiritual event in her story is her daily walk, step by step, into her classroom, walking on past all those folks who were against her. Why do I say this?

"Fearlessness," said Mahatma Gandhi, "is the first requisite of spirituality. Cowards can never be moral."

Wow. For me, that's a powerful, true and deeply disturbing statement. I have been working to grasp it, to grapple with it, ever since I first read it. And yet, by Gandhi's definition, the world is not very moral. And the United States, a significant nation in this world of ours, with all of its greatness, lost its moral and ethical center for many years because of our terrible history around oppression. And it took the courage of a child like Ruby Bridges to begin to redeem our distorted history.

I say Ruby Bridges was, and remains, the real emblem of courage in the last century. A child with books under her arm. A girl still losing her baby teeth. A fragile child. Yet I set her against all the uniforms and crowds and curses, against all the cruel laws, against all the immoral blather taught by the churches. I see her as a spiritual giant. In church she prayed for courage. (sung) *"Hold my hand, while I run this race!"* But in Gandhi's terms, spirituality isn't a time of worship or prayer or meditation. It isn't song or dance or a Chinese exercise. Spirituality is first and foremost Ruby Bridges taking one step, and then another, and then another, right into that school. The spiritual life is the courageous life.

Gandhi's disciple, Martin Luther King Jr., was courageous too. He was just as deliberate in his steps. He looked at his own children, who were losing baby teeth just like Ruby Bridges. He looked at how American society, American law, and American custom joined forces to say they were "nobodies." He knew this was cruel oppression, pure and simple. He knew that what Gandhi's compatriot, Sarvepalli Radakrishnan, said is correct: "True religion is the inveterate enemy of oppression, privilege and injustice." And he felt that his own religious principles demanded that he had to walk forward, step by step, into a place where privilege and oppression were no more. He knew he had to bring his children into a world where they could shout on a roller coaster no less joyously than the white children across town. And his movement forward, slow and deliberate, is what I mean by courage. No, it doesn't put the "ape" in apricot. But it does put the Spirit back into a spiritless world.

Tony: I have never participated in a civil rights demonstration, never been attacked by dogs or fire hoses, never had an angry mob scream threatening racial epithets at me. Thank heavens. I believe those types of things leave permanent scars. But I *have* been the first black person to integrate many situations; and I have had some of the experiences mentioned earlier. That young girl whom Martin Luther King mentioned in his letter, his six-year-old daughter, the one who could not go to the amusement park…. that could just as well have been me.

In the mid-1950s, I lived in Washington D.C. Right outside the city, in Virginia or Maryland, I don't remember which, there was an amusement park named Glen Echo. I knew it well because we often drove past it, and I could see the big roller coaster over the fence. I even remember to this day the commercial for it on TV: (sung) *"Glen Echo, for the time of your life. Try it today!"* But when I asked about going there, my parents always said "no." Finally, just before we were to move out of the area, in 1958, I asked again about going "just one time before we move." My parents said "no" again and when I asked why not, they finally said to me what they had avoided telling me all that time: "Because they don't allow Negroes in there."

I was a bit surprised. I had heard something about segregation, but it had not really applied to me before. My school, my neighborhood and every place I went seemed integrated. But I did not argue with my parents. They had said "no" in a rather absolute way. (You didn't argue with my father anyhow.) Still, I didn't get it. I knew I was a Negro, as we were called back then, but I was eight years old and *I wanted to go to Glen Echo.* I didn't think that was a very good reason not to let me in. Was that all? But I did not get to go. I was disappointed, though I did recover when my folks took me to Disneyland a year later.

When I see films or read books about those early civil rights struggles, I am always impressed with how hard it was. It was hard to be the first black person at an all-

white school, hard to integrate a lunch counter, hard to march in a demonstration. Such actions were an invitation for physical danger, attack and verbal assault. It was hard to stand up to all that, whether you were six or 36.

Unrelated to preparing for this service, I happened to see a movie a few weeks ago called "Crisis at Central High," about the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Made in the 1980's, it was told from the perspective of the Girls' Vice Principal. The film does not try to be edgy, like a Spike Lee film. In fact, it even has almost a Disney flavor. Still, I was amazed at how they could not soft-pedal the vehemence and anger that was leveled at these nine students every day they went to school. Crowds of men, and women, were yelling the worst names and insults, carrying those signs with the vile words, and threatening violence at any moment, their individual faces distorted with hate. It was just like what happened to Ruby Bridges. I don't know if I could have taken it.

Yes, it was particularly hard to do those things that bucked the status quo, that stirred up the situation, that brought the racism out of the closet. But I think it was also hard just being a black person in the south in those days, and for centuries before. There was a very strict code of behavior for blacks, and if you crossed the line, even in the smallest way, you could instantly suffer the worst consequences. I think it took courage just to get from day to day. Sure, you did not worry about it every moment. You probably thought, this is my home, this is where I live, like Mark in his Oakland neighborhood. But you were never safe. It was like living in an occupied country where your life, your livelihood, or your home could be in danger at any time for the slightest "offense." It could all be taken away from you at the drop of a hat. This is why the case of Emmett Till was so important. You may remember the case of a 14 year old black boy in Mississippi in 1955 who was beaten and murdered and thrown in a river because he looked at, and dared to say two words to, a white woman. Unlike most other similar incidences, which happened more often than we know, this one was publicized nationally, and the shock and horror of it told the whole country how hard it was just to be a black person in the United States of America.

But today I am not so sure that only black people have it hard. What if, instead of being threatened by the social order, you were part of a system that perpetuated injustice and inequality, and that profited from it? What if you were able to ignore it all, to be a part of "a great denial" that kept these problems far from your doorstep? What if you could live your life and never have to deal with any of it? And what if exposing that system meant personal sacrifice for you? How hard would it be to stand up and name this elephant that is sitting in the middle of the room, the one that everyone is trying not to see?

So I believe that courage takes many forms. Yes, it takes courage to willingly face physical danger. It also takes courage to do things that will leave you unpopular,

rejected, or despised, things that will cost you your comfortable life. It takes courage to speak the truth that you know to others. I mean friends, family and associates, who won't necessarily understand, and who may not want to hear. As hard as it is to act on injustices that you see outside of yourself, it is equally hard, maybe harder, to look inside yourself and realize your responsibility for the things you see.

There has been a lot of dialogue on the Unitarian Universalist Anti-racism list-serve recently about white privilege and how difficult it is to expose. Several Unitarian Universalists tell stories of how their congregations were engaged in fighting racism and attempting to become more diverse until such activities threatened the privileges they did not even know they had. Then these people of good intention simply shut down. Their discomfort became a barrier that could not be crossed. What would it take to tear that barrier down and go into uncharted emotional waters?

Since W.E.B. Dubois's statement, a century ago, that the problem of America was the problem of the color line, we have known that race is the biggest ongoing social problem of this country. At least during the civil rights era of the 50s and 60s, the problems were clear and undeniable. Laws had to be overturned, and people like Bull Connor and George Wallace had to be stopped. Now, everything is more underground. We use code words to discuss racial issues, and if you ignore the code, you can ignore the issues. You have to read between the lines to know that education, housing, poverty, voting rights, crime, drugs, welfare and immigration are all racial issues, along with Affirmative Action, school vouchers and DWB (driving while black).

And whose problems are these? Who, I might ask, is accountable? Where is the responsibility? What is the onus for action? I'd like to suggest that it is not only with the victims, but also with the caretakers and beneficiaries of the system which creates and perpetuates the problems. Finding such beneficiaries and caretakers, and moving them to change the situation, that takes real courage.

Mark: And "Courage is the price that Life exacts for granting peace." So said Amelia Earhart, a courageous woman pilot in an age when women were not supposed to be pilots at all. I like her definition a lot. It suggests that courage and peace are not free gifts…they might just cost us something.

Now I cannot claim to have a great deal of shiny courage all stacked up inside me like gold bricks. After all, like Tony, I have lived a life with relatively little insult or injury. "No permanent scars," in his words. And although I'm not African American, it's also true that no one seems to lynch Italian Americans, like they used to, especially in Louisiana. Nor do they crack the skulls of gay men much any more, either. Unlike Tony, I *have* marched for civil rights of all sorts. Never been

hosed, though. Oh, I *do* get called "faggot" once or twice a month by drunken students driving by on High St. in the Short North. Still, for me, that's just an annoyance, like when we used to get robbed weekly at the Bank of America.

So, times have indeed changed. Both King and Tony were told they were "Negroes" when they were children. Today, many children have never even heard that word. The times don't appear to be as dramatic any more. Integration in schools is more common place. Personal rancor has diminished. But our neighborhoods are still divided and segregated by the freeways and loan policies of the post-World War II American government, "the system." Most folks are not conscious of that system, and what it did, quite deliberately, to make sure that economic and cultural segregation would be dominant in Post War American culture.

To face such realities, to become conscious of what is hidden, to unpack the system of unequal access, that will take courage. Real courage. The courage of true religion which is "the inveterate enemy of oppression, privilege and injustice." It will take courage like Ruby Bridges walking into that school. Not impulsiveness, like slapping a robber in the face. But the courage of a child's feet, one, two, one, two, forward, not backward. Moral clarity, call it. Ethical direction, call it. Or just call it courage. And such courage, Earhart reminded us, can grant peace, and even release from little things. Such peace transcends fear, she says, and can even lift us up on wings of joy.

Later in March, Tony and I are going to show some remarkable videos, which are meant to help make invisible history visible, make the unconscious conscious, and unpack that system. I was deeply affected by them when I first watched them. They surprised me, and helped me understand how much more I have to do in my one precious life. These videos even asked me for some courage. But without such courage, I assure you, there is no joy, no spirituality. And there is no real peace, no matter how much we want it.

A lot of the drama is past now. Sure. I under-stand that. But now it's time to go deeper. And to do it together.

Offering

This place must be a haven for all who would hone their courage, for all who would deepen their spiritual lives. To support such a place is a privilege and a blessing, a sign and a solace. Those who have committed to this congregation with pledges, tithes and offerings of various kinds, may now take the opportunity to give and receive the offering.

Preface to Prayer *(Barbara Holmes: Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently)*

It is nothing short of a miracle to live in a cosmos that keeps its secrets but reveals just enough to keep us intrigued. Each day that dawns is a celebration of the fact that we have been invited to consider how our lives are spent, how we embrace or recoil, how we relate to others. As we struggle toward justice, the universe itself invites us to expanded options, even as it defies our inclinations to control. However, we will not wrest an egalitarian order with swords drawn, or in fitful dreams of better times, but with alertness and commitment to the difficult work of knowing self, others and the universe. (For the race is not to the swift, but to the steady and enduring.)

Prayer: #348 Guide My Feet