

On Fortitude

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton, MA
Sermon delivered Sunday November 9th, 2008

Part 1: Overcoming the Worst in Ourselves

Fortitude is another of the four cardinal or “hinge” virtues, along with prudence (which we discussed a couple weeks ago), justice and temperance (which we’ll be discussing in the coming weeks). We talked about how prudence governs all the virtues by helping us find the high road between two chasms of excess – between recklessness and cowardice, for example.

If prudence is the virtue that helps us find that path for each virtue, fortitude is the virtue that helps us actually walk it, living our values no matter what the cost may be. Fortitude is the strength of mind, heart and will that helps us live as we know we ought. In this way, fortitude helps us combat hypocrisy so that we may live up to our values and ideals.

Fortitude is thus more than the power to overcome fear. Thieves and murderers must overcome fear to commit their crimes. That is audacity perhaps, but not courage. To be the virtue of fortitude, we must overcome fear in the service of others, not for our own selfish motivations.

Fortitude is moral strength in the face of temptation, danger or suffering. When Howard Thurman prays, “Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve,” he is praying for fortitude. We call on that virtue because, in the words of Comte-Sponville, “... without courage, we cannot hold out against the worst in ourselves or others.”

“The worst in ourselves and in others” seems to divide fortitude into two types. The first part of this sermon concerns the fortitude we need to overcome the worst in ourselves, while the second deals with overcoming the worst in others. The worst in ourselves is, I think, strongest in the extremities of our human condition. On one hand, the worst in ourselves may tempt those in positions of wealth, power, and prestige to do wrong.

Greed, lust for power, vanity, or cunning may lure us to the edge of the chasms that lie on either side of the virtues. Fortitude keeps fresh before us the moments of our

high resolve, giving us the courage to step back from the moral precipice. When we do fall, it helps us return to that path, repairing any damage we may have caused along the way.

This “worst in ourselves” may also rise at the other end of the power spectrum, when we find ourselves powerless in the face of either injustice or what some people call the “natural evils.” The “natural evils” include physical suffering as a result of disease, disability, or accidents. Natural evils also include disasters like floods, fires, earthquakes, drought, or famine.

These are perhaps not so much evils as facts of life that come with having tender bodies in a sometimes-harsh world. Fortitude helps us to bear such difficulties, tragedies even, with patience, serenity, and inner strength.

In these cases, fortitude is more about overcoming pain than fear. When faced with the reality of mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual pain, fortitude helps us to bear it well. It gives us the strength to cope with infirmity or grief without succumbing to self-pity or negativism, or giving into the impatience or despair that may lead us to lash out at others.

Perhaps we most need fortitude when our situation is beyond hope, as when a terminally ill patient faces the certainty of death. Comte-Sponville says it may take more courage to do this than to be a sailor in a storm, because the sailor may survive the storm to see a welcome port.

The idea of needing fortitude in the face of illness or death brings to mind images that I had not associated with fortitude in the past. For instance, the terminally ill woman who drew her six year old daughter unto her bed in hospice house, and softly explained that after she died she would be her daughter’s guardian angel and therefore with her always.

Ethicist Robin Lovin says, “We see courage in people who face serious illness and death without losing their capacity to care about others or their concern for the future.” The selflessness of this woman, the serenity of her expression, her acting to reassure her child even as she faced death, are all signs of moral fortitude.

Other images come to mind as examples of this kind of courage. The person with a degenerative disease whose expressions show joy and an abounding love toward others

is a person of fortitude. People losing physical ability as they age, who cope with that loss with dignity and grace are people of courage. The person whose child has died reaching out to console another grieving parent is a person of fortitude and generous spirit.

People of all races and classes risking injury to themselves in order to rescue earthquake victims are people of fortitude. People risking their own health and wellbeing to save others from fires, floods, disease, from famine and drought, are courageous people. We're getting into the realm of extraordinary fortitude here.

What helps people act so bravely? Some traditions say fortitude is a gift of the spirit, or a character trait in order to explain why some folks have it and others do not. This seems too easy to me. It lets people off the hook. They could just say, "Oh, it's not one of my gifts, not one of my traits. Sorry."

I prefer to think of virtues as habits of right living rather than gifts or character traits, because we can all acquire habits. We all know it's easy to pick up bad habits, right? It takes a little more effort to acquire virtues. Whatever our starting point the more we practice a virtue, the stronger it becomes. The stronger it becomes, the more natural it seems as a response to all situations. We can learn to be brave, or just, or prudent. We can acquire the virtue of fortitude.

People who perform acts of bravery without even thinking about danger to themselves are people who have acquired the habit of fortitude. Robin Lovin says that practicing fortitude in our daily lives makes us ready to respond to calls "for sudden acts of great risk or of steady endurance in the face of truly overwhelming dangers."

In other words, the common fortitude we practice in coping with the temptations and challenges of human life can help us gain the strength for acts of uncommon courage.

I'd like to share with you a pastoral letter from the president of our association calling us to this sort of fortitude at this time.

An Open Letter to Unitarian Universalists Regarding 2008 Marriage/Family Ballot Initiatives

November 6, 2008

From Rev. William G. Sinkford President, Unitarian Universalist Association

Dear Friends:

Thousands of you worked tirelessly to promote equality during the long months leading up to Tuesday's elections. I want to take this opportunity to thank you and to honor your efforts to defeat divisive ballot measures in California, Florida, Arizona, and Arkansas. This work was—and remains—profoundly important, in spite of disappointing results at the polls. Please know that your work was not in vain.

I know that your hearts are heavy, because mine is, too. We are all saddened by the setbacks to family and marriage rights. We empathize with bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people and their allies in these four states and beyond. The defeats are hard, but I truly believe that they are temporary.

Our faith community will continue to fight for marriage equality for all people, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. We will continue to offer steadfast and passionate support for all bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people. And we will continue to defend the rights of all committed couples to marry and to extend loving family environments to children in need.

Marriage equality will one day be a reality throughout the country. As we mourn our recent losses, we also renew our commitment to education, advocacy, and love. In spite of the setbacks, we are making progress, one state at a time. Justice is knocking, and our work is helping to open a very heavy door.

Our patience, passion, and determination will carry us through the disappointments. We will continue to stand on the side of love. And we will win, because love will win.

In faith, Bill Sinkford

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To remind ourselves that we all have it within us to overcome difficulties and injustices, let us sing together “We Shall Overcome.”

Part 2: Overcoming the Worst in Others

We've spent some time considering the sort of courage it takes to cope with the temptations and difficulties we face by virtue of being human, that can bring out the worst in us. The other main type of fortitude is the sort we need to withstand and overcome the worst in others, the unnecessary suffering caused by what some have called “man's inhumanity to man.”

When we meet with oppression, prejudice, poverty, violence, and injustice, this extraordinary fortitude helps us stand in the way of hatred, and even danger, in the cause of what is right. It gives us the strength to act to bring about the change we wish to see in the world, to paraphrase Ghandi.

We can all call to mind people who have had the fortitude to face down the worst in others that comes out as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. We may have done this ourselves. Some of the people who stand up against these sorts of oppression are the targets of these structures of injustice, and some are allies who choose to stand with them in the cause of right and goodness.

In order to do this, allies take a different path. They could just fade into the background, not taking a stand, going along with the flow. In order to stand up for what's right they must overcome the temptation to do this.

Allies in these struggles must also find the courage and the honesty to face the part they may have played in supporting such structures. They must find the fortitude to put the good of others so substantially before their own that they are willing to dismantle the very systems of injustice that give them unfair advantages. Allies in these causes must use their power in order to give it away.

For people targeted by these systematic human evils, the road is different. For one thing, they must learn to overcome the victim mentality in order to claim and use their power wisely. This requires the type of fortitude Robin Lovin is talking about when she writes,

“We see [courage] in people who go about their lives with dignity in the face of prejudice and discrimination and in those who steadily resist the threats of their persecutors, even when their resistance has little chance of success. We recognize courage in leaders who risk unpopularity to stand up for principles.”

By this definition, fortitude is the hallmark of both the soldier and the conscientious objector, of both the warrior and the reformer. The courage to stand up for your principles, to speak truth to power, is the courage of prophets who stand in the public square and denounce systematic or institutional injustice. This is the courage it took to gain voting rights for people of all races, and more recently to gain marriage equality in our state.

Uncommon valor is the fortitude of those who go beyond speaking to engage in acts of resistance in the places of ordinary living – the streets, the shops, the restaurants. People who do this, both targets of injustice and their allies, place themselves visibly in the path of people who hate them. This can feel more personal and therefore more threatening.

We have such exemplars in our history. Today, because of this week's historic election of an African American man as president, I'd like to honor especially the fortitude of those who suffered and died in the cause of civil rights. Some civil rights martyrs were those targeted by racism – people like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, and the 26 year old Jimmy Lee Jackson, who died in February of 1965, after being shot by a state trooper.

Though President Johnson did not respond to his death, it sparked a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called on religious leaders to join them in Selma to organize the march. Our denominational headquarters received his telegram on March 8th, 1965 and immediately called on ministers to lead the way. Three of them, the Reverends Orloff Miller, James Reeb, and Clark Olsen were among forty that left for Selma that same night.

The very next night, on March 9th 1965, all three of these white male Unitarian Universalist ministers were attacked outside a whites-only restaurant. Reeb was fatally injured and died two days later. Thousands protested outside the White House, which responded more to the death of a white person than it had to the death of Jimmy Lee Jackson, sad to say.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke movingly at Reeb's memorial service about what had murdered this man, who with his family had lived in Roxbury and worked to help low-income people, mostly black. King answered his own question, saying what had killed the Rev. James Reeb was the indifference of those who preach the gospel but do not live it, the churches that witness evil and do nothing to confront it, and everyone who by opting out of the struggle against oppression, chooses to support it.

Rev. King called people not to despair, but to have courage. He said the greatest tribute we could pay to James Reeb was to continue the work "he so nobly started but could not finish." King went on to say, "We must work right here in Alabama, and all

over the United States, till men everywhere will respect the dignity and worth of human personalities.”

This great man of courage concluded his eulogy by saying, “So we thank God for the life of James Reeb. We thank God for his goodness. We thank God that he was willing to lay down his life in order to redeem the soul of our nation.”

The day after Reeb’s funeral, Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a Unitarian Universalist lay woman and housewife from Michigan, decided to go to Selma. About a week later, on March 25th, she was shot and killed by three members of the Ku Klux Klan while driving toward Montgomery to pick up marchers.

All of these events pushed President Johnson to push the Voting Rights Act into law in August of 1965. There have been set-backs and deaths since then, most notably the assassination of Rev. Dr. King. He said in one of his last speeches that he might not get there with us, but he believed we would one day have a more just world. If only he were still alive today.

This week, a little more than 43 years later, the nation elected an African American man as president for the first time. This glorious outcome is a tribute to all who suffered and died for the cause of civil rights. It’s also important to acknowledge that is is part of a trend. In recent years African Americans have been appointed to important positions of power in our nation – acting as secretaries of state and supreme court justices.

The morning of Election Day, people from our denomination’s headquarters sent yellow roses to the families of James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, whose fortitude helped galvanize a nation. The cards that went with these roses said they were in memory and in tribute to their lasting influence on our country.

Ann Reeb, the daughter of James, responded with thanks and jubilation. She said her whole family wept tears of joy that day. She went on to say that their hearts were at peace knowing her father had not died in vain.

Sally Liuzzo, a daughter of Viola, wrote her thanks also, saying, "Thank you from my sisters and I, for never forgetting our mother. The three of us were totally overcome with emotion. I feel like mom's sacrifice has now been worthwhile. I am so proud of America.”

So much has been gained. It is important to look back to see how far we have come. Tuesday was a day of triumph on matters of civil rights around race. For many that same day was a day of disappointment and even despair as four states voted in laws targeted at limiting the civil rights of same gender couples.

We have come so far, and there is further yet to go. We will need all our fortitude to stand together for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. In doing this, we can continue to pay tribute to James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, to Martin Luther King Jr. and to Jimmy Lee Jackson, by continuing the work they started.

You see, I share Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that "one day our nation will fully live out its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal."

I have a dream that one day in the valleys and the mountains, in the plains and the deserts, people of every race, of every class, of every ability, of every gender identity and sexual orientation will be able to sit down together at the table of our common humanity.

I have a dream that one day our children will live in a nation where they are not judged by the color of their skin, nor by their religion, nor by their gender identity nor by their sexual orientation, but by the content of their characters.

If our nation is truly founded on the values of freedom and equality, then this dream must become a reality. So may freedom and tolerance ring from every corner of this great nation – from the Keys of Florida to the Golden Gate of California, from the deserts of Arizona to the Ozark Plateau of Arkansas, from the flats of Texas to the glaciers of Alaska.

If our nation is truly founded on the values of freedom and equality, this dream must become a reality, but it will not do so without our fortitude. History shows that liberty and justice for all do not come, even in our great country, without persistent struggle and consistent witnessing.

So as we go forth this day, let us keep fresh before us the moments of our high resolve, finding the fortitude to continue to realize that great dream, the American dream, the dream of the freedom land where all stand as equals in each other's sight.

Let us sound the trumpets of jubilation for all that has been gained. And let us again sound the trumpets, again and again, until the ramparts of intolerance and prejudice tremble and fall. So may it be. Let the people say "Amen."

Books cited in this sermon include

A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues by Andre Comte-Sponville 2001 Henry Holt & Co.

And

Christian Ethics, An Essential Guide by Robin W. Lovin, 2000 Abingdon Press