Erika Hewitt who wrote the chalice lighting words we’ll be repeating each Sunday this month, reminds us that:

“The word courage comes from the Latin cor, which means heart. The original use of the word courage meant to stand by one’s core: a reminder... that living from the Center is what enables us to face whatever life has to offer.

“To ‘encourage’ means to hearten; to impart strength and confidence. This is our work, as a religious community: to encourage one another; to give one another the confidence and heart to live as fully as possible.”

I agree with her, and that’s one reason I think asking the question What does it mean to be a people of Courage? is the right question for our times. By learning to live as fully as possible, we are able to give as much as we are able to help a world in crisis, a world in crisis on so many fronts.

The counter-intuitive results of research by Brené Brown is that courage and brave acts require heart and vulnerability. She calls it “wholehearted living.” We are used to thinking of vulnerability as a weakness, a fault, but her research shows just the opposite. I’m sure many of you know this probably having seen her Ted talk or read her books. For some of you this may be an introduction to her work.

What does it mean to be a people of courage? It means to be vulnerable and to take risks. It means to have heart. Norm’s story of calling out a racist boss required taking the risk of being fired. He knew, however, with all his heart, that what was going on was wrong, and he couldn’t sit by watching any more. So, he took that risk, and fortunately for Norm and Jeanette, it went well.

His story brought me back to my days in the classroom, teaching English language learners in Chelan and then Wenatchee, Washington. The times I’d walk into the teachers’ lounge and an immediate hush would ensue – my gut telling me the conversation was derogatory of the students I taught, or an outright racist joke about Mexicans. Norm’s story took place in 1963. Sadly, mine was 33 years later. What these last two years of presidential campaigning and election have told me is that the racist notions this country was founded on have not dissipated. We have not evolved like the narrative we used to tell of brave founding fathers who, limited by their time and place, couldn’t imagine the inclusive, democratic, multicultural country they were founding.

R. Derek Black, “was raised by the leaders of the white nationalist movement with a model of American history that described a vigorous white supremacist past”, he wrote in an August editorial in the New York Times. In that editorial he was responding to the president’s response to the violence in Charlottesville that killed counter-protestor Heather Heyer, who was – well, in language we are used to – standing on the side of love. She was protesting the white supremacists and hate groups who had gathered for a “Unite the Right” rally. I’m sure many of us in this room have been at such protests. I attended one in Portland my first day off as your minister and recommended one my first Sunday in the pulpit here. We are not strangers to protest, but rarely do we believe we are risking our lives.

What caught my eye in that editorial in the New York Times, however, was this paragraph. Wrote Black, “My father observed many times the quotation from Jefferson’s autobiography embedded on the Jefferson Memorial is deceptive because it reads, “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these
(the Negro) people are to be free.” End quote. Black goes on to say, “It does not include the second half of that sentence: “nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them.” End quote.

No, it does not say that part on the Jefferson memorial, nor do I share such words by Jefferson when I brag that two of the first three, or four of the first six, presidents of the United States were Unitarian. I liked my former narrative, that given the time and place, the founders – some of them Unitarian - were envisioning a better time and place and we are becoming that more inclusive, democratic, multicultural better, more loving, place. And yet the trajectory is not so clear. Or it is not a given.

When Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Unitarian preacher, Theodore Parker, by saying “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” he was cognizant of just how very big a universe is – not something the spec of a human life would be able to grasp or see – and so, yes, the 33 years between Norm’s teaching in a California school and my teaching in a Central Washington school is not even a tick in the universe of time – and the racism at the founding of this country was there in 1961 and 1994 and now, but that does not mean we cannot contribute to its undoing.

But to do so, requires courage. The definition of courage that speak of heroic and brave deeds fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about our experiences, says researcher Brené Brown, the ordinary courage that must be exhibited each and every day to succeed in such a goal.

It is easy to decry the racism of Empire, the doctrine of discovery, our founding fathers, or avowed white supremacists and nationalists. It is harder to speak openly of our confusion when encountering someone whose identity differs from our own, or our pain when words of another sting or a look makes us feel out of place. It’s hard to speak openly of our shame when we’ve confused Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with Michael Jordon, or just didn’t get the joke when the former introduced himself as the latter at the Democratic Convention.

I had the honor of speaking to a trans person who helped me understand that my use of the term “transgendered” with an -ed felt like it put her identity as if something had happened to her, rather than who she is. Transgender, she corrected me, felt more affirming. And it’s not about politically correct language – don’t confuse the intellectual concept, the framework, the words, with the heart – her telling me how it made her feel unseen, unknown, un-understood. I should point out, too, that she is a younger woman, and we talked about how language changes generation to generation. One generation may have felt affirmed being called transgendered, but not so much now. We noted that our own UUA pamphlets in our vestibule use the term transsexual, which is really out of date and unaffirming.

Similarly, we’ll be singing a hymn as we close, one which many of you know by its former title, Standing on the Side of Love, by Jason Shelton. But Jason changed the words. Not be to politically correct, but because he had been told again and again by people who move in this world in chairs or scooters, people with whom he was in relationship, that the singing of “Standing on the Side of Love” after everyone has been asked to stand if they are able, made them feel unseen, unknown, un-understood. He also had the experience of breaking his leg – or foot – I don’t remember – but his temporarily able-bodied self was no longer able to climb the steps – steps like these – to his own pulpit. And that also changed his perspective on the song he had written which became so popular in our movement. It became the slogan for The Standing on the Love Campaign launched after the 2008 shooting at Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville. So, it took courage, I dare say, to go back and change the lyrics of his own song, the title of his own song, after it had become so important to so many of us, but he had inner strength and that level of commitment required to speak honestly and openly - and hear others speaking honestly and openly – about our experiences.
Brené Brown’s conclusion that speaking from our hearts is “ordinary courage,” reminds me of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our Unitarian ancestors, American Transcendentalist and Essayist. In his famous Divinity School Address of 1838, he said:

_I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon. A snow-storm was falling around us. The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it._

I’m sure you’ve heard speakers like that, whether in the lecture hall or the church sanctuary. Who gave the information, the research and data, but never seemed to have lived it. That’s certainly does not describe researcher Brené Brown, professor at University of Houston Graduate college of Social Work, who describes herself as having a breakdown or spiritual awakening upon discovering the results of her own research and then taking stock of her own life.

Contrast that with Barzalai Frost, Emerson’s minister, who ignored the snowstorm about him and gave the sermon as if nothing remarkable were happening about him. Or the foreign scholar of Eastern religions who came to inquire about Zen. Well, he said he came to inquire about Zen. But he didn’t, really. He came to talk about what he knew about Zen, and failed to connect his request and his own actions. He got in his own way.

How many times do we get in our own way, I wonder?

What does it mean to be a people of courage? It means to be vulnerable and to take risks, it means to listen to your heart, to listen with your whole body.

The Zen master uses her mind, doesn’t quit learning, but once she’s learned something, she steps back and tests it with her living. Empties herself of her preconceptions and tries to see the world as it is, not as it should be, how she wanted it to be, how she was told it was, but as it is in her experience, even more importantly, in the experience of others. She risks asking when she doesn’t know. Risks being the fool, and having to apologize.

I began here mid-August, and right away in September I had the opportunity to attend a district workshop for Boards with most all of your governing board. And much to my surprise and delight, the facilitators — your district staff — led with Brené Brown and her model for trust, the acronym which spells BRAVING. Because the definition of trust she works with is “choosing to make something important to you vulnerable to the actions of others.” And doesn’t that take courage? Isn’t that what Norm did when he spoke to the superintendent? It was important to him that the kids in the school he taught be treated fairly and not be talked about disparagingly by the principal, knowing that such an attitude can spread in a school. But of course, he knew what was in his heart, not what was in the superintendents…. And so, he left himself vulnerable to the superintendent, who was, fortunately, worthy of his trust, but could just as well not have been. That is courage. As is the every day courage that requires inner strength and the commitment to speak honestly about one own’s experience. So Brown links courage, being brave, and trust— the trust that requires courage is trust in oneself. That is not a little thing. BRAVING. It stands for — and this is just a teaser, because this could be an entire sermon but for those of you who are dying to know what BRAVING is, I thought I’d at least spell out the acronym.
OK – so maybe she had to work hard to get the V in there. I think the others are self-explanatory. But Vault refers to keeping and maintaining confidences and not sharing other people’s stuff. Keeping your mouth shut tight like a vault.

This is the breakdown of the characteristics of trust found in Brown’s research, and its not accidental she uses the acronym of braving.

So that Saturday in September the Board talked about this “braving” and the very next day, my first Sunday in the pulpit, I talked about brave space, citing the poem used to begin dinners for the 100 days 100 dinners movement.

“Together we will create brave space, because there is no such thing as a “safe space.” We exist in the real world. We all carry scars and we all have caused wounds. In this space, we seek to turn down the volume of the outside world, we amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere, we call each other to more truth and love.”

Isn’t that what church is, an opportunity to practice being a people of courage? A place of brave space, where we call each other to more truth and love? I think it is, and I’m glad to be creating that brave space with you.

To be a people of courage, we meet one another on the ground of our experience. We throw our prior conceptions or categories or assumptions away, and meet each other in what is. We honor our boundaries, are reliable and accountable, hold confidences as if they were in a locked vault, we act with integrity, non-judgment and generosity. Braving our way into creating that brave space, into being a people of courage.

Because, frankly, the world needs us to show up. There is too much talk that might makes right, too much posturing and insulting, too much violence, too much racism and all the oppressions that injure the humanity of another. Too much fear. And as much as I’d like some grand heroic gesture of courage to be the solution for us all, it is more ordinary than that. Speaking from our hearts is the ordinary courage that is needed now.

The arc of the moral universe is long – longer than the blip of a human life can grasp, and our moment is not even a tick in the universe of time -and yet Theodore Parker and Martin Luther King Jr. knew and told us, that our actions matter. And they do. With full hearts, we will become a people of courage that the world so desperately needs. May it be so.

*Benediction*

We answer the call of love by cultivating courage, creating brave space and taking risks. May we take our ordinary courage out into the world that needs us, emboldened by faith and hearts beating as one, live as fully as possible.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form