On Choosing to Risk One’s Significance

preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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It requires us to overcome ourselves, says Chaplain Tyger. I choose to risk my significance, writes the poet Markova. Dave talks of doing the work because we have to, not because we will necessarily see an effect. What does it mean to risk our significance? This question has been on my mind for quite some time. And I think it’s interesting as we explore the topic of courage, because we do often think of courage as these grand gestures of bravery that mere mortals dare not attempt – happily removing ourselves from the responsibility of even trying, leaving it to the giants like Galileo, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Neil Armstrong, Rosa Parks, and the like...who were, after all, mere mortals too.

I have to wonder, of course, what kind of disease plagues those who dispel their pain with a big violent splash in the headlines, destroying lives and bodies and families – our largely American phenomenon of the mass shooting such as took place last week in Las Vegas, to such devastation. I have to think that in some warped way the shooters think of themselves as brave, though we cannot. And as I processed my dismay and grief this week, the words of Mr. Rogers came to mind. He said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary thing sin the news, my mother would say to me ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” Those, of course, are the ones we know as courageous.

So, I do think we have to reframe the questions, what does it mean to be a people of courage? One thing it doesn’t mean, in my opinion, is that you will be remembered in history like Galileo, Martin Luther King, Jr. Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Neil Armstrong, Rosa Parks and the like. That you will be remembered by those knew you, yes, but by the history books, not necessarily.

The next time I’m in the pulpit – and that will be two weeks from now, we’ll be exploring the UU White Supremacy Teach-In that was conducted last springs in many of our sister congregations, and will be happening this fall again in many UU congregations. For years, our movement has yearned to reach more people than its historically white, middle class, educated base. And for all the education of our leaders and our base, we have largely failed in this regard. I have seen incremental improvement. We sometimes attract well educated people of color, and have begun to attract people who are not financially secure – but we do not look like a very diverse congregation overall. I’m speaking of our UU congregations across the continent, though Vancouver appears to be no different.

Decentering Whiteness. It has only been in my vocabulary this last year, though the article by that title was published in 2015. When I think about the implications of not putting white culture in the center, for me, of course, as a white woman, it comes down in a way to choosing to risk my own significance. Choosing to not put my culture, my identity, my preferences and biases in the center, but rather to set them aside and let other cultures, identities, preferences, etc. take up more room. That line from the poem brave space I’ve been referencing recently – “we amplify voices that fight to be heard.” I like the possibility and the implication, even though it suggests that people like me – middle aged, white, lifelong UU – might have to overcome ourselves. I might have to risk my significance, or at least my understanding of the world. And that may take courage, the everyday kind, not the big splash kind. It reminds me of a story of a congregation that has been decentering
whiteness well before the publication of the article by that title. Perhaps it has a big splash, but it also has a lot of mundane everyday acts of courage.

All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK began in 1921 – so it’s older than this church. It was a proud proclaimer of the liberal religious message in a traditional mainline Protestant style of worship. The building is a typical New England style UU church – if you don’t know what that means, it is white, the sanctuary is rectangular in shape with tall windows along the side wall, and a window behind the pulpit, an organ, and plain pews in rows facing forward – no decoration – in the Puritan style - except for the simple views of trees outside the large windows. First Unitarian Portland is in that style, only the brick building is red instead of white. the style is similar.

The ministers who have served that church have been theists, so they speak of God and talk of Jesus more frequently than, say, this church. Tulsa, certainly, has its share of religious humanists and atheists in the pews, but continued a history of language that included God and Jesus more frequently than you may hear it here. This is an important difference for you to understand between our congregations in the story I’m about to tell.

Here’s the story. Perhaps you even heard some of it on This American Life – a weekly public radio show broadcast... The episode I refer to was called Heretics and was bfirst roadcast in December of 2005. I’ll quote the promo for the show:

“Carlton Pearson's church, Higher Dimensions, was once one of the biggest in the city, drawing crowds of 5,000 people every Sunday. But several years ago, scandal engulfed the reverend. He didn't have an affair. He didn't embezzle lots of money. His sin was something that to a lot of people is far worse: He stopped believing in Hell.”

Act 1 of this episode was called “Rise” and about the story of Carlton Pearson from young man to a Pentacostal Bishop, with close personal relationship with Oral Roberts, TV and White House appearances. Just as the congregation peaked with 5,000 attending each week, Rev. Pearson started thinking about Hell and wondered, as did Hosea Ballou, 200 years before him, he wondered if a loving God would really condemn most of the human race to Hell. Posing the question itself, I believe, was an act of courage. Act 2 was called “Fall” and tells how he started to preach his own understanding, the Higher Dimensions church starts falling apart with the departures of his pastors and exodus of his congregation until they are only a few hundred left.

That’s where the public radio show program ends, but the story just begins for the membership of All Souls Unitarian. Their minister, the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, a young white Unitarian minister, was friends with this African American Pentacostal preacher – both residing in Tulsa, OK.

When Higher Dimensions became New Dimensions, and was declining rapidly, Marlin invited Rev. Pearson to come worship at All Souls. Everyday courage. No big deal. I’d do the same. When it became clear that New Dimensions would not survive as a church, Marlin welcomed them to All Souls and Rev. Pearson joined All Souls and encouraged his now much smaller congregation to go with him. Marlin hired their music director and Rev. Pearson’s personal assistant, both African American like many of the New Dimensions folks. Perhaps that took a little more courage.
Great story, huh? There’s much more to it. Because, as I said, All Souls, founded in 1921 still had this traditional Protestant Unitarian liturgy and service. The organ played, the congregation was quiet. People sat in the pews and listened to the preacher preach. (You might call this white culture church)

New Dimensions, however, coming out of the Pentacostal movement, were not used to sitting still in the pews and listening quietly as the preacher preached. They spoke in tongues and got out of their seats and waved their hands in the air and talked back to the preacher as he preached. You can imagine how well that would go over here.... Well, I can hear you talking back to the preacher, but I can’t quite hear you speaking in tongues...

I had the opportunity to visit All Souls in 2009 and Marlin was frank with us at the time. The congregation had been through a time of heated conflict, and it was not over. There was concern about how the decision got made, and some legitimate polity questions. And, of course, there are the hard-to-change attitudes – those in the congregation who want the diversity, as long as the new folks come and worship like us. There were two Sunday services at All Souls when I visited. The first was a traditional Protestant UU service – complete with that organ music that they've always had there. The second service is more pentacostal in nature. The sermon was the same, but there is praise music before the service – singing hymns whose lyrics are projected on a screen that automatically descends in front. The New Dimensions chorale - a choir that won multiple awards on the fundamentalist circuit, sings before the service and throughout the service, leading the congregation in song. An electric keyboard replaces the organ in this service, and sometimes the piano is played by the other music director in tandem with the New Dimensions director of music on the keyboard – an amazing sound. O, yeah, and the drum set. It sits in the sanctuary all the time, but is not played at the first service, and some folks don’t like having to look at it...

I found it exciting to be in a place so alive that there was conflict – the healthy kind of conflict that says we have competing important values and we are going to have to manage them because they all can’t come first. They were needing to prioritize competing values. Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing unsolvable problems is one of the books I read while on that sabbatical. One of the competing values their leadership is grappling with is that of managing individual initiative with common direction. This requires that everyday kind of courage.

The initiative to invite New Dimensions to All Souls came entirely from the leadership – from the relationship between the ministers of the two churches and their lay leaders. The time was ripe and they jumped at the opportunity. The downside was, that the entire congregation hadn't bought into the concept – they wanted to be more diverse – but they hadn’t considered this particular strategy for becoming more diverse, and because the process was out of necessity quick – New Dimensions was about to fold - some in the congregation felt quite left out of the process.

Polarity management and conflict transformation are necessary tools for life with various people who have a diversity of opinions or worship styles, or culture or theologies. When we claim to welcome diversity, I think we commit to respecting the conflict that differences naturally create – conflicting values, conflicting loyalties, conflicting ideas, conflicting feelings...

I think one of the best ways to accomplish diversity is to recognize, accept, and celebrate the differences that exist here now – get good at understanding one another, prioritizing competing values, at managing polarities, at being flexible with one another – so that when the opportunity knocks, as it did in Tulsa, we are
ready to take advantage. Aprovechar – in Spanish, means to take advantage. It doesn’t have the negative connotation of taking advantage as it sometimes sounds in English. To jump at the opportunity.

What I like about this notion of managing polarities is that it recognizes that decisions get made over and over again. So, it’s not the end of the story if we choose one route today and another later. In fact, polarity management requires that you purposefully choose one direction and then, over time, another to balance out unsolvable problems that will be with us forever. Let’s go over the polarity of individuality vs. community... all of our communities struggle with this, but we’ll use All Souls as our example.

So, when I visited in 2009 – so please know this is not necessarily what is going on for them now, the way that church managed the different worship styles of its congregants was to hold various worship services. In addition to the traditional Protestant Unitarian worship first service, and the more Pentacostal-like Universalist worship second service, they also held a monthly service that more fully embraces the Pentacostal tradition where people really do speak in tongues, and they held a monthly Soulful Sundown service that is more secular in nature and uses rock music to attract young people.

But you can imagine that this solution might lead, down the road, to division, if they don’t manage the polarity well - if they don’t make sure that these diverse worship services intentionally repeat the same themes and theology so members have a similar enough experience to feel like they belong to the same congregation. You could imagine how problematic it would be if all the African Americans drifted to the Pentacostal style worship and all the European Americans stuck to the organ music – fortunately, that’s not at all how it was turning out. First of all the Pentacostal movement and New Dimensions was always a more diverse congregation than All Souls, so it was not an all black congregation to begin with. And, All Souls is finding that their newer white members, especially the younger ones and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans population, have joined the second service and can’t imagine worship without the New Dimensions chorale and contemporary music. But they will have to monitor the situation closely and manage that polarity – individual choice vs. community experience – in order to keep this very large church on the same mission. It will take courage, to continue to risk such radical change and continue to have the courageous conversations that lead to deeper community building. I’m hoping this community is willing to consider DeCentering Whiteness something our movement at large is attempting, and risking each of our own significance in favor of a larger common goal.

What is that goal? Well, I’m new here. I’m not quite sure yet. But I’m hoping you will all come help me determine some of the next steps for the congregation. In a month – the first Saturday in November, you are all invited – you don’t need to be a member – to a Start Up conversation about this new ministry we’ve begun together. From 9-12 here in the sanctuary. It really matters that you come participate. I need help from you, to learn who you are, where you’ve been and who you want to become. Often, for these workshops, it is only the already most involved and committed folks who participate, but if we’re going to explore who it is we want to become, it is really important that newer folks join the conversation. If you’re visiting here the first time this morning, you are welcome to join us for this Start Up Workshop. There’s no homework, you just show up. If I’m going to lead you into your future, I need your help. So, please, save the morning November 4th on your calendar and join us for that important conversation.

I don’t believe that Galileo, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Neil Armstrong, Rosa Parks, and the like set out to be Courageous and Change the World. I believe they did what they had to, and by so doing it changed the world. Somehow they managed to get out of their own way. They knew, with
Gandhi and Sam and now Dave, that “whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.” Let us live, so that which came to us as seeds goes on to the next as blossoms, and that which came to us as blossoms goes on as fruit. Let us be a people of courage.

If your heritage is European American, it may take some courage to sing our next song, which is based on a Chinese folk tune, in a major pentatonic scale unfamiliar to most Western ears, though the popularity of this song may have bridged cultural differences.. For others of you, the tune will be familiar and most welcome. We embrace all of our identities and will help one another with Patrick in the lead. Will you please rise in body or in voice to sing hymn #194 Faith Is a Forest?

**Benediction**

Though storms threaten and burdens weigh our hearts, we have the courage to go on. We practice courage every day which allows us to recognize that whatever we do will be insignificant by some measure, and it is very important, nevertheless, that we go forth and do it.

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