



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Courage to Be”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 13, 2013

“Tis a gift to be simple,” we just sang, “tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.” I tend to hear this Shaker hymn as a call to lead a simpler life. And in these busy and complicated times, there’s nothing wrong with that.

But today, I’m hearing it differently, especially the part about coming down where we ought to be. I think it’s saying, “get in touch with who you are, deep down, at the ground level, at the root; in touch with the essence of who you are.”

In the middle of the last century, the theologian Paul Tillich came to understand that the idea of God as up there somewhere, and the image of God as person, a male person, was losing its meaning for people. Tillich thought people were looking in the wrong direction, and described God as “the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being.” He said, “That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the name itself.”

I certainly understand why some people give up on God and religion, when so much evil has been done by religious people, in God’s name. I’m thankful to be living in this time, when the religious landscape is changing and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning folks are, more and more, able to tell the truth about who they are, without shame or fear. But there is still a long way to go, isn’t there?

When I was in seminary, I had friends who were deeply faithful. They came from traditions that they loved. And out of their experiences in those traditions, they felt called to serve in the church. But too often, because they were gay, their churches told them, “You need not apply, because of whom you love.”

This creates a terrible bind. How do you deny a central part of who you are, in order to say yes to the call to ministry, to becoming who you feel called to be? Like our friend Cil, whose powerful testimonial we just heard--do you deny who you are, at the core of your being, in order to remain in your family, in your home, in your community?

We know, don’t we, that this kind of repression never ends well? That it’s difficult to live a happy and healthy life while denying who you really are? And we know, don’t we, that it takes all kinds of

courage to say “this is who I am,” when your parents, teachers, clergy, and society are telling you that is not an acceptable option.

So today we celebrate those who have had the courage, the resilience to be true to who they are, in a society that has not been very friendly to LGBTQ folks.

Most of these seminary friends found other faith traditions that welcomed them, and in which they are now serving with joy and pride. But still, there is pain in knowing that the church in which you heard the call to ministry won’t allow you to serve. And this is changing across many American denominations. I’m grateful for our UU tradition, which has been a leader. And for our minister emerita, Rev. Janet Bowering, who was way ahead of most of her colleagues, offering blessings for same sex couples in this sanctuary beginning back in 1984, almost 30 years ago!

It is a gift to know who you are, deep down, and to be able to be that person. That’s what I want to talk to you about today--the courage it takes, and the joy that comes, from simply being yourself.

As a straight, white man, I can learn so much from those like Cil, who have had to struggle to be who they were born to be. I am moved by your strength and courage, in awe that, despite what you have had to endure, you are here. You have survived, and not only that--you have thrived; you are openhearted and wise and strong and courageous, and that makes you beautiful. I am inspired by you, and I learn from you. We learn from you.

I don’t want to put anyone on the spot, but on this day when we lift up the power of coming out--of telling the truth about who you are deep down, of naming and claiming your identity--does anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, anyone who would identify themselves as queer--do you want to stand, as you are able, and let us see you, really see you, and express our love for you, our admiration for you and your courageous life?

Thank you. I bow to you.

Back in 1952, Paul Tillich, the theologian I quoted earlier, published a book called *The Courage to Be*. He understood that the old images of God were no longer useful, and were falling away. Tillich concluded that beyond these images we have for God, there is the “infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being,” and that is what those images are pointing toward. He said, “the courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God disappears in the anxiety of doubt.”¹

On the human level, Tillich said “the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself, in spite of being unacceptable.” Isn’t that precisely what Cil described for us this morning? Cil’s mother told her that being attracted to girls was unacceptable. “We’ve never had anyone like that in our family and we never will.” But Cil found the courage to accept herself for who she was, she found the courage to be, and we here are the beneficiaries of her courage. What a loss it is, when any of us are not able to live into the light of our own being.

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

Years ago a church friend, a gay man, shared these words by Theodore Rozak in worship. I was so moved by them, that we used them a year later at our son's baptism:

"You and I... we meet as strangers, each carrying a mystery within us. I cannot say who you are, I may never know you completely. But I trust that you are a person in your own right, possessed of a beauty and value that are the Earth's richest treasures. So I make this promise to you: I will impose no identities upon you, but will invite you to become yourself without shame or fear. I will hold open a space for you in the world and defend your right to fill it with an authentic vocation. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty."

Don't we all need to hear this affirmation and this invitation?, You are a person in your own right, possessed of beauty and value. And you need to become yourself. You have this one life--are you going to waste it trying to be someone else? Someone your parents wanted you to be, someone your teachers or church said you ought to be--someone who is smaller than who you really are? I'm not saying this is easy--even if you are not part of an oppressed group, the path to becoming yourself can seem like a perilous journey.

For me, heading into the ministry at midlife was about becoming who I was born to be. Saying yes to this call wasn't anything like the struggles some of you have known. But it wasn't easy, especially at the start. I wasn't convinced, and neither was my wife Tracey. Early on, she told me, "You know, I didn't marry a minister."

In those days I couldn't see the path ahead of me, and I'm grateful for friends and companions who helped show the way. One of those was a nun, who, reflecting on her own vocation, wrote, "God only calls us to be who we are."²

A couple of years after that conversation about not marrying a minister, I told Tracey, "You know what? You did marry a minister--just back then you didn't know it, and I didn't know it either. This becoming a minister is not me trading in my old life for a new one, its me becoming more fully who I am."

Mary Oliver has a poem about the journey toward becoming yourself, that begins, "One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began." We could also say, "one day you finally knew who you had to be, and began

though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.

² Elaine Prevallet, S.L., "Minding the Call," *Weavings*, May/June 1996.

But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do (who you had to be),
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
thought their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.³

The courage to be yourself, to become yourself, can come from within and without. It can come from deep inside, from that still small voice that says, "I am what I am." It can come from friends and companions who say, "I invite you to become yourself, without shame or fear. For as long as your search takes, you have my loyalty." And it can come from that ground of being, that source of life which has loved us from the start, and will never let us go, that says, "You are my beloved, and I don't make any junk."

We come into this world as particular people, with gifts and talents and limitations. The invitation is become yourself, to have the courage to be who you were born to be. I challenge you, this week, to come out in some way, to more fully become yourself, and to take pride and joy in who you are.

My colleague Wayne Arnason tell us
"Take courage friends,
The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.
Take courage.
For deep down there is another truth:
you are not alone."

Amen.

³ Mary Oliver, "The Journey."