

1/10/10 Sermon

“A Hard Right, An Easy Wrong”
Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

Our faith calls us to act with moral courage in a society that is increasingly self-serving and corrupt. Our seven principles help us to avoid such behavior and guide us to right relations.

In his book, *Moral Courage*, Rushworth Kidder writes, we must choose “the hard right against the easy wrong.” We must operate from a strong religious and moral compass practiced with a “daring courage” if we are to create a world that brings our values and hopes to life.

Acting morally out of convictions is not always easy or about right and wrong. Sometimes it is about right and right, and then deeply held values can clash. The conflict between fairness and compassion would be an example. Fortunately, most ethical situations are more clear cut – a terrorist bombing of an airplane is evil and immoral.

“Standing up for our values in the face of opposition is a defining feature of moral courage,” especially when one faces pressure to conform to a corrupt system. Congress has repeatedly acted without integrity and moral courage over health care reform by yielding to special interests, especially the insurance companies.

Often we lack the moral courage that lifts values from the theoretical to the practical and carries us beyond ethical reasoning into principled action. In the defining moments of our lives, values count for little without the willingness to put them into action. Without principled behavior, our cherished virtues crumble into rubble and hope for a civil society is lost. In the face of institutional and personal corruption, we must courageously commit ourselves to fight this moral slide.

Fortunately, individuals and institutions often surprise us and defy expected norm and do act with moral conviction. At times we act out of our core values if pushed hard enough by a crisis, the current war, or perhaps now over global warming. Sometimes, communal values conquer individual selfishness.

Anne Frank believed that until her untimely end, thanks to a moral neighbor. Throughout human history, courageous people have risen to the challenge of doing the right thing for its own sake. Each of you have within you the ability to seize the moment to rise to the betterment of gathered

community.

You don't have to be Jesus or Buddha to know what is right. Each of us possesses an inner knowledge of right and wrong and the courage to choose the good.

Such a defining moment in my life came while I was in seminary, as a result of the murder of Matthew Sheppard, who was brutally beaten and left tied to a split rail fence to die. I knew immediately that I had to go to Laramie to stand witness in that place of moral depravity.

I remember being afraid for my life; my sons pleaded for me not to go. They were afraid for me, but I needed to do something, to raise my voice against such horror. If something happened to me, at least I would have left my sons a legacy of courage – not the terror I felt. So I overcame that numbing fear and went and ministered to the gay and UU community there, and my pilgrimage to Golgotha one wind-swept morning was emotionally devastating.

This trip got me to thinking about what are the elements of moral courage. Surely it calls for, in Kidders words, "a commitment to moral principles, an awareness of the danger involved in supporting those principles, and a willingness to endure the danger." Courage is perhaps best defined the way the actor John Wayne put it, "Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway, regardless of the consequences."

Courage can be either physical or moral. Kidder writes, "physical courage may be principle-related but it is not necessarily principle-driven." The courage to climb El Capitan in Yosemite National Park takes guts but not necessarily moral courage. "Moral courage, however, is driven by principle. When courage is manifested in the service of our values to save lives and to support and sustain our core principles, we tend to call that moral courage.

"Moral courage is not only about confronting challenges that can cause physical harm – it's about facing mental challenges that can destroy your reputation, emotional well-being, self-esteem, financial security and health.

"If physical courage acts in support of the tangible, then moral courage protects the less tangible – principle not property, virtues not valuables. Often the physically courageous individual is bolstered with cheers of encouragement, while the morally courageous person often goes against the grain, acting contrary to the accepted norm.

"Simply put, moral courage is the courage to be moral, to adhere to the values of

honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion.”

We find moral courage at the intersection of our deepest values when they confront a threat.

Numerous examples of such courage exist in the lives of famous people – Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and others. We find it, too, in our faith communities. Unitarian Universalism is filled with people who act out of conviction. Emerson, Channing and Parker are exemplars, as was Michael Seviatus, who was burned at the stake by Calvin for his denial of the Trinity.

In the 1960s, the UUA published the Pentagon Papers in the face of government harassment and oppression – an act of moral courage that helped to end the Vietnam War. Your own acts of personal courage may be hidden but still matter in a world hungry for images of the bold and good.

Be not afraid when you face your own demons – illness, loss of a job, death of a loved one, the ending of a relationship. Take courage ... you can meet any challenge with our UU principles to guide you and your faith to sustain you. In such moments, we find the core of personal moral courage deep within. In such moments, we choose the hard right over the easy wrong.

May it be so!