

## THE CADENCE OF COURAGE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
September 17, 2006

Sometimes, especially during these soft and sumptuous days when late summer drifts into early autumn, it's easy to believe that God is in her heaven and all is well with the world. At other times, however, we are reminded of what happens when God is absent and things go terribly wrong. For me, as for many of you, this past week was one of those times. Fear stalks this world hugely, and in many forms.

On Monday, the ceaselessly-replayed images of 9/11 reminded us that there are people in this world who would do us harm, and on purpose. Also on Monday, I read Lydia Polgreen's dispatch from Tawila in *The New York Times*. Tawila is a squalid shamble of makeshift shacks in the Darfur region of Sudan, where thousands of refugees languish amid pools of raw sewage and swarms of malaria-bearing mosquitoes. Polgreen writes, "It is a place where a grim struggle between the government and its Arab allies, and non-Arab rebel factions, has given way to a fractured struggle that pits non-Arab tribes against one another, fanning centuries-old rivalries and setting the scene for a bloodbath of score-settling vengeance should the African Union soldiers withdraw, as demanded, at the end of this month. Tawila is an apocalyptic postcard from the next and perhaps the grimmest chapter in Darfur's agony, a preview of the coming cataclysm in the conflict the United Nations has called the world's gravest humanitarian crisis."

Of course, one need not be the target of terrorism or genocide to know fear. Sometimes all it takes is being a woman. The women of Darfur know this. The BBC reports that episodes of organized rape have increased dramatically in the region, a development many observers believe is a precursor to the widespread slaughter that will come when the peacekeepers leave.

But women know fear even in places where civilization appears to have taken a firmer grip. Arianna Huffington, the noted author and popular pundit, spoke at All Souls several nights ago about her new book, titled *On Becoming Fearless*. I wasn't able to attend her presentation, so I read the book. She observes that too many women and girls today are afraid to be themselves—to inhabit the bodies they have, express the convictions they feel, demonstrate the talents they possess, and claim the autonomy that is rightly theirs. Most girls learn early that the best way to stay safe in our culture is to be pretty and to be quiet.

Fortunately for Huffington, she learned another way to respond when fear strikes. Her first step on the road to fearlessness came one night at the dinner table when she was a young girl. Her mother told a story about her own actions during the Greek civil war in the 1940s. As part of the Greek Red Cross, Huffington's mother fled to the mountains with two Jewish girls. Her responsibility was to take care of wounded soldiers and hide the girls from the Germans. One night, German soldiers arrived at their cabin and started shooting, threatening to kill everyone if the group did not surrender the Jews that the Germans (rightly) suspected they were hiding. Her mother, who spoke fluent German, spoke up and insisted that the Germans put down their guns, because there were no Jews

in their midst. And then she watched as the German troops lowered their guns and walked away.

Hearing this story as a young girl, Arianna Huffington wondered how she would ever live up to this standard. Her book is the story of how she eventually learned to embody fearlessness, as her mother had done. In a world with much to fear, this is a lesson we all need to learn.

Fortunately for most of us, our daily lives are not dominated by the constant fear of terrorism, or genocide, or even rape. But there are other fears that lurk: the fear of being spurned by a lover or a friend, the fear of failing in a new venture or a new vocation, the fear of expressing what's in our heart to the people around us. These fears are no less debilitating for having less-deadly sources. Whether the issue is stopping genocide, changing jobs, or speaking the truth, the temptation to stay put and keep quiet is hard to resist.

This temptation must be overcome, however. As the title of her book suggests, Arianna Huffington calls for women, and presumably men as well, to develop a sense of fearlessness. She says fearlessness is not the absence of fear, but rather the mastery of it. Because my own preference is always to describe positive virtues in positive terms, I favor the word used twenty-five hundred years ago by another Greek writer. Plato's term for the quality Huffington calls fearlessness is courage.

One of Plato's many dialogues records a conversation between Socrates and two eminent Greek generals, Laches and Nicias. The generals have just watched an exhibition by soldiers who are fighting in armor, a new form of combat. In the future, Laches and Nicias wonder, will the best education for their sons include learning this new skill? Not surprisingly, Socrates uses the occasion to explore a much larger question, the meaning of courage.

When asked by Socrates to say what courage is, Laches replies, that's easy enough. Anyone who stays at his post, faces the enemy, and doesn't run away, you may be sure is courageous.

Surely courage is more than staying put in battle, Socrates replies. Sometimes great victories are won by falling back and regrouping. Besides, people can be courageous in other areas of life: against the perils of the sea, for example, or against disease or poverty. People can also be courageous in public affairs, or in facing their own desires and pleasures.

This is quite true, Laches agrees.

So, Socrates continues, what is this thing, courage, which is the same in all of these cases?

Perhaps courage is a certain endurance of the soul, Laches ventures.

But what if someone endures in doing something that is foolish, or hurtful, or mischievous, Socrates replies. Is that courage?

Obviously not, Laches admits.

At this point Socrates mercifully turns to Nicias, who tries a different approach. He ventures that courage is somehow related to the goal being sought or the danger being avoided. Nicias eventually concludes that courage requires wisdom—the knowledge of what is good and worthy of being pursued, as well as what is evil and must therefore be avoided. As Socrates puts it, summarizing Nicias' argument, "Courage is not only

knowledge of what is to be dreaded and what is to be dared, but knowledge of all goods and evils at every stage.”

The essence of courage, in other words, is not the ability to do something that is physically risky. Rather, it is to know what must be dreaded and must be dared—despite the danger. It is to pursue a goal that is morally worthy or stand up against a force that is morally repugnant—despite the risks involved.

This is why Darfur looms large as a place where courage is needed. Nicholas Kristof, an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*, was recently asked why he always harps on Darfur. “It’s a fair question,” he responds. “The number of people killed in Darfur so far is modest in global terms: estimates range from 200,000 to more than 500,000. In contrast, four million people have died since 1998 as a result of the fighting in Congo, the most lethal conflict since World War II. And malaria annually kills one million to three million people.... So, yes, you can make an argument that Darfur is simply one of many tragedies and that it would be more cost-effective to save lives by tackling diarrhea, measles and malaria.”

“But,” he continues, “I don’t buy that argument at all. We have a moral compass within us, and its needle is moved not only by human suffering but also by human evil. That’s what makes genocide special — not just the number of deaths but the government policy behind them... Even the Holocaust amounted to only 10 percent of World War II casualties and cost far fewer lives than the AIDS epidemic. But the Holocaust evokes special revulsion because it wasn’t just tragic but also monstrous.”

Courage is the knowledge of what is monstrous and must therefore be confronted, no matter if the risk is great and the outcome uncertain. Courage is the knowledge of what is worthy and therefore must be pursued, no matter if the road is long and the path unclear. But there is one more dimension to our understanding of courage. How do we know that terrorism, genocide, and rape are always monstrous evils? How do we know that human dignity is always a worthy goal? In a world of diverse religious beliefs and varied understandings of natural law, where does our collective knowledge of good and evil come from?

I recently attended an address by Bill Schultz, former President of the UUA and former Executive Director of Amnesty USA. He spoke about what torture has taught him. One of the things he learned from a decade of dealing with torture and its perpetrators is that, for him at least, the belief in the *inherent* worth and dignity of every person is a myth. He acknowledges that this is hard to admit, especially for Unitarian Universalists. We have long championed the individual as the final source of authority when it comes to deciding right and wrong, and when it comes to assigning worth and dignity. But, Schultz says, torture has taught him that worth and dignity are not inherent. There are too many malevolent human hearts, and too many god-forsaken places, where worth and dignity have no presence.

Worth must be assigned, Schultz insists, and dignity must be taught. We cannot stand idly by and assume that these supposedly-inherent qualities will magically spring forth in the world, like flowers in springtime. They will not. For worth and dignity to exist, we must speak and act in a way that creates a place for them. As Schultz puts it, “Human rights are whatever the international community—through its various declarations, covenants, treaties, and conventions—say that they are.” I would add the following corollary: human rights are worth precisely what someone is willing to give in

their defense. In places like Darfur, the need for action is especially critical. When human dignity is at stake, as Schultz concludes, “We cannot escape confrontation with the forces of idolatry who would reserve worth to only a few.”

Simply put, courage is not plunging down a black diamond ski trail at breakneck speed, although courage sometimes requires facing significant risks. Nor is courage leaping out of a plane with a parachute, although courage always requires grappling with fear. Rather, courage is the ability to see good afar off and take a step toward it—despite the obvious risks. It is to see evil close at hand and take steps to confront it—despite present danger. To know courage is to know a calling that is greater than fear.

The English word courage derives from a French word, *coeur*, which means heart. This is a useful etymology. The work of the heart is not to pump a vast amount of blood in an instant, and then rest for a season. Rather, the heart works best when its rhythm is steady and its beat is unrelenting.

Courage is like that too. There is a cadence to courage: an inexorable march toward achieving what is good and confronting what is not. Courage does not eliminate fear; it sees a path through the fear to the calling that lies beyond.

Matthew Arnold, the acclaimed 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British poet and critic, wrote a poem titled “Rugby Chapel” in honor of his father. It’s about making a difference in the world. Arnold paints a gloomy picture of humanity as a feeble, wavering line, wandering the earth “in an eddy of purposeless dust.” These forlorn souls “bluster or cringe, and make life / hideous, and arid, and vile.” In the end, they “stagger for ever in vain, / Die one by one in the waste.”

But once in a while, Arnold goes on to say, people appear on the scene who march to a different cadence.

Then, in such hour of need  
Of your fainting, dispirited race,  
Ye, like angels, appear,  
Radiant with ardour divine!  
Beacons of hope, ye appear!  
Languor is not in your heart,  
Weakness is not in your word,  
Weariness not on your brow.  
Ye alight in our van! at your voice,  
Panic, despair, flee away.  
Ye move through the ranks, recall

The stragglers, refresh the outworn,  
Praise, re-inspire the brave!  
Order, courage, return.  
Eyes rekindling, and prayers,  
Follow your steps as ye go.  
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,  
Strengthen the wavering line,  
‘Stablish, continue our march,  
On, to the bound of the waste,  
On, to the City of God.

Courage is not the feeling that good is invincible, nor is it the conviction that evil can never prosper. Rather, courage is a march through the fear to confront what is evil and pursue what is good. Courage has a cadence. It’s the wisdom to know which direction to go and the willingness to take a step in that direction. Whatever your fear, have courage. Face the direction you must go. Then take the first step. And then keep marching.