

Take Heart

A sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, MO

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I was a kid who worried a lot.

I asked my parents the other day what I was most afraid of as a kid, and they both sat silent for a minute, before my mom began, "Well, you had many, many fears..." and then stalled out. "Really?" I said, "Too many to name?"

"You were a kid with a powerful imagination," She remarked.

Aha.

In her TEDTalk "What Fear Can Teach Us," novelist Karen Thompson Walker tells us that fear can be understood as an amazing act of the imagination; as an unintentional storytelling that we are born knowing how to do.

Fears have the same elements as stories, she points out: characters, usually us and the ones we love, plots, usually catastrophic ones, and plenty of suspense. The task, she argues, is to read our fears like stories, for the glimpses of wisdom and insight they have to give us.¹

This makes sense to me, because stories themselves have always helped me manage my fears over the years.

As a child, Maurice Sendak's beloved book *Where the Wild Things Are*, controversial at the time for its scary monsters and gnashing of teeth, gave me a safe place to look at those terrifying beasts on the page in front of me and confront them there, at a safe distance.

As a teenager, the diary of Anne Frank and novels set during the Holocaust allowed me to dip my toe into acknowledging the evils of this world from the safety of my own soft bed – to encounter even the idea of such evil, to see the tenuousness of all our lives in such a world, and survive that knowledge.

"In his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim suggests that fairy tales help children externalize, and ultimately diffuse, their deepest anxieties. "The child must somehow distance himself from the content of his unconsciousness and see it as something external to him [if he is] to gain any sort of

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_thompson_walker_what_fear_can_teach_us

mastery over it," Bettelheim writes. This is why so many fairy tales take place in the deep and mysterious woods, he argues, it is the realm of the subconscious, where the wandering child-mind can encounter its fears and wants in reified form, then neutralize them."²

Alas, I must not have neutralized them all.

I still worry.

The other day, when James forgot to tell me that he was going to be home late, and then didn't answer his phone when I called, for just a moment my imagination ran away once more. What if the lights had gone out on his bike? What if he was in a ditch somewhere?

When he got home, I yelled. No, I declared forcefully, "I was worried about you. I pictured you in a ditch!"

He apologized, and when I had calmed down he said, "I love you too."

Aha.

If our fears are themselves compelling stories, then they most often have something to tell us about what we value, as all stories do.

Our fears, then, are not something to fear or shun or shut away, but rather, a powerful story about the true depths of our care.

In other words, it seems, our worries are drenched in love.

And honestly, sometimes I think it's a miracle we don't all walk around this world scared out of our wits all the time.

Our hearts are so tender, and the world around us is beautiful and awesome, but it is not tender. Life is fragile, contingent on so many things, and we love it so much.

From the storybook *Wild Things* to the wilds of life, eventually we grow up and realize that we don't get to control the story. The monsters don't stay on the page. Somehow we keep on loving anyway, keep on living.

And that is courage.

Not our capacity to fight or overcome or conquer fear, but rather the simple capacity to move through life, in the face of loss, in the fact of change.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/05/maurice-sendak-scared-children-because-he-loved-them/256928/>

Perhaps courage is simply the beating heart of our story, or better yet the story of our hearts.

The word courage comes from the latin root cor, meaning heart. In its use it often refers to heart as core strength. You gotta have heart, get to the heart of the matter.

But courage is about more than our core or center, the heart of courage has something profound to do with the paradox of love, which risks our hearts, even as it fills them up and pulls us through.

In this way, courage is a fact of our lives. Life stretches our hearts, and lo and behold, they grow and do not burst or shatter.

Writes the poet David White: "We are here essentially, to risk ourselves in the world, we are a form of invitation to others and to otherness; we seem meant to hazard ourselves for the right thing, for the right woman or the right man, for a son or a daughter, for the right work or for a gift given against all the odds. And in all this continual risking the most profound courage may be found in just the simple willingness to allow ourselves, amidst the hazard and vulnerability, to be happy along the way..."³

After all, when we're doing it right, we walk this earth giving away pieces of our hearts, and not always into safe-keeping. It is a huge risk. But gosh what joy it brings us.

It takes courage beyond belief to trust our hearts to love, and yet every person, perhaps every creature on this planet, does so every day. We are already brave. Listen, you are here this morning, with pieces of your heart downstairs in class, and back home in bed, and scattered across the state, the country, the world.

And you are already brave. Because some of those pieces have been shattered by betrayal, or loss, or tragedy, or simply change. But still you give them. And even more than that, you have found a calling in life to give more.

I know that because you are here, where we are learning to open our hearts wider, love more expansively, live more compassionately.

You are here where courage is the very heart of what we do. You are already brave. Already brave and ready for more.

For the miracle I have found, is that love has not left me (even me, the child with too many fears) quivering on the floor in fear. Love has made me braver.

³ http://www.davidwhyte.com/pdf%20files/Readers_Circle/Longing.pdf

I have climbed mountains with the love of my spouse, and dealt with worms for the love of my dog. I have pursued this wild and crazy calling with the love of my family and friends. I have pursued justice with your love and partnership.

If I did not love, I'm not sure I could leave my house each day.

So, yes, opening our hearts puts them at risk. But opening our hearts is also exactly what makes us brave.

Perhaps courage, like the heart, is just a muscle – in us already, pumping away without notice half the time as we move through our days, sometimes noticeable only when working hard or causing pain, but always, always made stronger with exercise.

So this month, let us recall that we are already brave, and let practice the courage that sustains us, not through acts of valor or physical prowess, but through the simple willingness to extend our hearts a little further, fill our stories a little fuller, keep our imaginations working away in the service of love.

In the words of the poet Dawna Markova:

Let us choose to inhabit our days,
to allow our living to open us,
to make us less afraid,
[... to] loosen our hearts
until each becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.⁴

And our story becomes an exercise in
Compassion, strength, and hope.

⁴ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=552>