

**“A Place at the Table”
3 October 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leaders: Janne Eller-Isaacs, Rob Eller-Isaacs
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READING: Sweet Darkness – David Whyte

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

SERMON: “A Place at the Table” – Janne Eller-Isaacs

When a tuning fork sounds, the note provides a starting place to singers and musicians. The note resonates until all can find the proper pitch. Just as a tuning fork renders a place to begin, an inaudible sound reverberates when conversations become deep and authentic. One can feel it.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate my point. Last spring Rob and I gathered some of the members and friends of the church that we knew were involved in shaping public policy. We did so cognizant of the fact that the people we were inviting would come close to spanning the entire political spectrum. We imagined a friendly barbeque in our back yard where casual and spirited conversation might occur.

But then it rained. You all remember last May. It rained for days leading up to the dinner party. Finally we reluctantly admitted that we would crowd the guests into our small dining room. I began to get nervous. I fantasized political disagreements turning into shouting matches all around our dinner table – all there to be fed and celebrated by us, all in some way connected to this religious community. I wanted it to go well. I wanted the guests to feel supported in their efforts in the public realm. And I certainly didn't want people to go home more distant from one another and the church. What was I to do?

People began to arrive and we nervously ushered them into the living room. After brief and polite conversation, we announced that dinner was ready. The meal began with a toast to all of our guests for their efforts. After the toast, in an effort to find common ground, I asked if we could go around the table and respond to the question: "When have you stood up for something that you really believed in that took courage to do?"

People began to answer when one guest suggested that to this we also add a time when we didn't stand up, when we turned away in fear. He remarked that too often he thought people didn't stand up for what they believed. He also talked about how difficult it can be to take a stand to which many around you do not agree. The conversation continued as each of us spoke of the courage and fears we grapple with in our public lives. One person talked about the loneliness of being a public figure, especially one that cannot be easily pegged in one camp or another. As was requested, the conversation centered on acts of courage and times in our lives when we have turned away from risk and challenge.

People shared deeply and profoundly. Our political differences receded in importance. The room became luminous as our authentic humanity and the struggles and challenges we face as leaders connected us all to one another and to the values we struggle to act upon. We talked long into the night. The stories were powerful and stirring – each related to deeply held values. Eventually the conversation drew to a close. Then some of the political and social differences between us emerged. Things got a little testy, but that which united us as public figures and leaders was stronger than the disagreements.

A group of leaders gather around the table able to respect one another in our differences, clear that certain underlying values make us one. These values are larger than our disagreements. They shape our very humanity. This dinner party serves as a moral tuning fork in my life as I navigate through this election season. There are moral and ethical values, which connect religious liberals one to another and make us different from the fundamentalists of every stripe.

Vaclav Havel, poet and architect of the "Velvet Revolution" in former Czechoslovakia and later its president, believes that a line is drawn through each person who is invited into countless decisions every day – the conflict he called "living in the lie" or "living in the truth." He defined living in the truth as saying what you think is true and needs saying and acting the way you think people should act. In a totalitarian government this, in itself, can be an act of protest. Havel inspired people to act on the freedom that was always there – the freedom of their own actions and small daily decisions that no

government can ultimately control. By showing the citizens of Eastern Europe that they could take back their lives every day, Havel and other leaders like him sowed the early seeds that led to the peaceful and nonviolent downfall of communism. In living the truth, he encouraged people to ground their lives in courage, creativity and conviction.

A choice confronts leaders at every moment: when to move forward, when to hold back, when to question and challenge, when to watch things emerge, and when to encourage others. These same choices confront us every day of our lives. We can choose to be and act or we can withdraw from the challenge. The challenge goes beyond the question of leadership; it goes to the very core of our willingness to be our authentic selves and to act upon our core beliefs.

This entails self-awareness and courage. We are not perfect. But even in our own imperfection, we can risk courageously. As Lee Carey reminds us when she does the offering, the crack in our lives is where the light pours in. As Roger Housden writes in the introduction of Risking Everything:

“We do not spring into life perfectly formed. We each have our fault lines and it is not by turning away from them that life suddenly takes on its full glory. We come into our fullness not in spite of our darkness, but in the embrace of it.”

Or as existential philosopher and novelist Albert Camus wrote, “Courage is the capacity to move ahead in spite of despair.”

Courage is not a virtue but rather a starting place – a moral tuning fork that gives reality to all other virtues and personal values. Without courage, without our capacity to act or to risk the fullness of who we are and can be, love pales and is anemic; fidelity to ideas and movements become mere conforming. Theologian Paul Tillich in Courage to Be speaks of courage as ontological, that is, essential to our being.

We become fully human by the choices we make and by our commitments to them. We attain our sense of dignity and worth by the many decisions we make each day. Each of these small decisions requires some level of courage. I know from my own life there are times when I turn away from the challenge of living fully. I shut down. I stop being my true self. It's not that we have to always share exactly what we are feeling or thinking at any given time; rather we need to take stock regularly of how willing we are to be and act in accordance with our authentic selves, values and beliefs.

Courage can take many forms. Rollo May, in The Courage to Create, delineates three different kinds of courage: moral courage, social courage and creative courage. Moral courage is the determined response to our values and beliefs. It is the courage to see the worth and dignity of every human being and risk much for a larger truth.

A powerful example of moral courage can be seen in the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a prominent German Lutheran theologian and scholar who worked and studied in the U.S. throughout the 1930s, who decided to return to war-torn Germany in 1939 against the advice of all who knew and loved him. In a time when many of his colleagues kept silent in fear, he challenged the powers of the Nazi regime. He dared to speak out. He dared to return to Germany, convinced he had to be involved in speaking righteous truth in order to resist the horrors of Nazism.

By 1940, he had become a part of the Resistance movement in Germany; by 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned; by 1945, in the waning days of the war, he was hanged at the Flossenbug death camp. Bonhoeffer was a moral hero. He acted out of deep belief and commitment to his faith. His life and death were a transforming testimony to the power of moral courage. His work in some ways redeemed the role

of the Lutheran Church in post-war Germany, for they could point to a righteous religious leader who had dared to question the Nazi ideology.

We may never be called upon to make great heroic gestures. It may not be our destiny to change the world, but we can nonetheless be courageous in our lives.

Social courage comes into play when we relate to other human beings. It is the capacity we find to move beyond our fears in hope of achieving meaningful intimacy. It is the courage we utilize when we invest ourselves over a period of time in a relationship that demands increasing openness.

Creative courage is the impulse to act upon our creative inspiration. Creative courage can be found in all parts of our lives and does not exclusively refer to artistic expression. We all have moments of creative insight, and creative courage inspires the sharing of those inspiring ideas and insights.

An Argentinean dissident was imprisoned for his beliefs. Drawings from his family were allowed in, but not if they had any pictures of things related to freedom such as birds or flight. Drawings of birds that his five-year-old daughter had lovingly made were not acceptable. The next drawing she sent was of trees. But these trees had eyes throughout them. He loved the drawing and thought of the eyes as the eyes of the world. He would return to his cell after being tortured and look at the picture, which gave him hope. After he was released he told his daughter about how much he loved those eye-filled trees. "Daddy, didn't you understand? Those trees were hiding the birds that I wasn't allowed to draw." That, my friends, is creative courage.

There is a difference between true courage and the caricature of courage. It is here that courage presents us with a paradox. It is the paradox that we need to be committed to our values and at the same time recognize that we might just be wrong. The paradox finds its expression in the relationship we hold between our convictions and our questioning doubt. The challenge of this paradox is to stay honest and humble in the living out of our courageous convictions. This paradox keeps us from becoming dogmatic – keeps us checking our beliefs against our powerful doubts.

The dangerous people are the ones who leave no room for the power of doubt, no room for others to be at the table with their different perspectives and truths. It is dangerous for everyone when we stop listening for new truth to emerge. Liebnitz once wrote, "I would walk 20 miles to listen to my worst enemy if I could learn something." It is this attitude that will save us from uncritical certainty and keep us honest and humble.

Think about Abraham Lincoln. He was deeply committed to his convictions, but he also expressed his doubts openly. These doubts did not make him a less effective politician – rather a more honest one and one that could ultimately move powerfully to act upon his convictions and commitments.

We need to look at our own tendency to demand certainty of our leaders. I don't think many politicians in today's world have the luxury to openly express their doubts and their questions. The body politic also doesn't seem to allow for minds to be changed, or hearts to turn toward newer truths.

Our commitments are healthiest when they lie in balance between our doubts and certainty. We need to act in spite of our doubt. To believe fully and at the same time to have doubts is not at all a contradiction; it presupposes a greater respect for truth. For that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment. Truth is thus a never-dying process. And we are called upon to speak our humble and unfolding truth.

May it be so.