

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Moral Courage

Rev. Sandra Fees

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When it comes to courage, I think of extraordinary people and extraordinary circumstances. This week, I could not help but reflect on the courage displayed on September 11th six years ago, the days and weeks that followed.

Examples of valor can be found in the military, among firefighters, and police officers – all of whom risk their lives in the line of duty. Saints and martyrs are recognized for their courageous deeds and for giving their lives for a noble cause.

The story of Martha and Waitstill Sharp is a story of extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. In 1939, the Sharps who were in their thirties volunteered for a relief effort in Czechoslovakia. Martha Sharp was a social worker trained at Chicago's Hull House. Her husband was minister of the Unitarian Church of Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts.

The relief work was sponsored by the American Unitarian Association. This was before the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961.

Only weeks after Martha and Waitstill arrived in Czechoslovakia, the Nazi army occupied the city of Prague. What they expected to be a humanitarian effort quickly shifted to something far more dangerous. The couple began to help Jews and non-Jews flee from the Nazis and find safety.

One snowy night, for example, Martha went in search of a known anti-Nazi leader. She called him Mr. X. On her way to his apartment, she was pursued by a Gestapo agent and ducked into a doorway. The agent walked past. She entered Mr. X's building and rang the bell. A woman answered the door and denied any knowledge of Mr. X.

In her description of this encounter, Martha says she begged the woman. She says, "I told her there was little time. I produced my American passport. When she saw it, she said in Czech, 'A moment,' and then snatched my passport from me and shut the door in my face."

When the door re-opened, Mr. X stood before Martha. Martha explained to him that she had been assigned to transport him to the British Embassy. From there, he would be smuggled out of the country to safety.

Mr. X got his coat and her passport and the two of them quickly left the building en route for the embassy. They were stopped three times. First they were stopped by a Nazi soldier who waved them on when Martha produced her passport and confidently announced, "Americans!" They were soon stopped again and she once again produced her passport. Just outside the embassy, they were stopped for the third time.

At that point, Martha complained loudly about being late for a meeting with the embassy secretary. She flashed her passport and demanded the guard tell the secretary that, "Mr. and Mrs. Sharp are here." The guard waved them ahead, and they walked safely into the embassy. When

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Martha returned to her apartment, her husband Waitstill was also returning from a similar mission.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which organizes humanitarian relief work to this day, now traces its origins to the Sharps. Remarkably, their story didn't become known until the summer of 2006. They were not recognized widely in their lifetime for their work. Only posthumously were they honored as "Righteous Among the Nations," a designation by the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel.

The award has recognized more than 20,000 non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The Sharps are the second and third Americans to receive the honor, and Martha is the only American woman to be so honored (story adapted from UUWorld magazine).

The Sharps make me proud to be a Unitarian Universalist and to be an American. What they did is noble and admirable. When called upon to stand up for what they believed, they mustered the courage despite any fears. They surely had to have been afraid. But they didn't wait for someone else to step up. They didn't stand idly by. The Sharps trusted that some powerful benefit would result from adhering to their principles in the face of such danger. And it did. They rescued hundreds of people.

There are five key attributes of morally courageous leaders like the Sharps. They display more confidence in principles than in personalities. They have a high tolerance for ambiguity, exposure, and personal loss. They are willing to defer gratification and accept simple rewards. They are independent thinkers. And they have formidable persistence and determination. (Rushworth Kidder, Moral Courage)

Perhaps not all of us will rise to quite this level of courage. That doesn't mean we can't each embrace small acts of courage. Small acts of courage can have tremendous consequences in our day-to-day lives.

For some people, getting up each morning is an act of courage. Facing a terminal illness with strength and resolve is an act of courage. Withstanding peer pressure to do morally questionable acts, blowing the whistle on unethical business practices, and standing up to sexist and racist remarks are all ways we see courage in action every day. These are all ways of acting on our beliefs despite the fear we may feel. Courage always requires some risk. Because of the risk, courage is always difficult.

Displays of everyday moral courage have come to matter more and more to us. Rushworth Kidder says moral courage matters so much to us today "because we see so many examples of its lack." The way we can change this and build a more ethical world is by our willingness to act courageously.

It helps to remember that we don't have to die for a cause or risk our lives to be courageous. We also do not need to take up every situation that comes our way. In fact, if we are wise we will weigh the actual risks and benefits of exercising moral courage in a given circumstance.

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As Rushworth Kidder says,

Part of every decision about moral courage, then involves some form of that starkly famous military question: is this the hill you want to die on? Is this issue in fact the big one? If you must hazard all – house family, children, job, career, financial future – is this the mast on which to nail your colors? Perhaps, instead this issue is simply an overture to something bigger, for which you must husband your resources. (Moral Courage)

My own life is filled with small acts of courage, rather than the large extravagant ones of the Sharps. They are typically well-considered actions. I am not always inclined to even think of them as acts of courage. They seem to me to be more about what I call integrity, the aligning of my inner principles with outer actions.

When I did a chaplain residency, for example, I had no idea it would be one of the scariest things I'd ever done. This was part of my training to be an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Part of the responsibility was to be on call overnight once a week for the hospital's trauma center. It was Hershey Medical Center – a level one trauma center – where some of the most severe injuries are sent.

The sound of the pager at 3 or 4 in the morning was terrifying to me in and of itself. When it went off, only the barest of information would get shared. The age, gender, and type of injury sustained. There was mostly no way of knowing until I stepped foot in the trauma bay what I was about to actually see or experience.

Sometimes the injuries were thankfully far less serious than expected, and other times things were far worse. Patients suffered gunshot wounds, falls, were involved in motorcycle accidents, and machinery-related injuries, among others.

The chaplain, me, was the person who was expected to be there to provide a non-anxious presence. I felt about as far from non-anxious as I could imagine. The support of a supervisor and peer group helped. From them, I learned to display as calm an exterior as I could muster the first few times, until I slowly began to become more comfortable as trauma chaplain.

One of the things ministers, especially chaplains, are trained for is to deal with the unexpected. Theoretically we are supposed to be able to walk into an unknown situation and respond calmly and pastorally. It seemed to me to be an impossible expectation.

What I learned was that it is not impossible. Just showing up mattered. Saying the right words was less important, though I learned a little about not saying the wrong words. I learned how to be with people in times of crisis. I learned what it means to be there for someone else when I sometimes wanted more than anything to flee the room.

I found the courage to stay the course and to work through my fear. I learned not only to hold a value of compassion, but also to live it. Had I left on any of those nights there would have been no one to fill my place. The families and staff might not have had someone to support them emotionally and spiritually during a crisis.

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I felt I had a responsibility to the patients and to the families, as well as to the nurses and doctors. Out of compassion for their struggle, fear, and suffering, I found the strength to remain rather than retreat.

Over the course of 12 weeks, I became confident as on call chaplain. It was never one of my favorite duties, but it was, I learned, an absolutely essential part of the ministry of the hospital. And as it turns out, it was also an important part of my development as a minister and person.

Each of us can perform small acts of courage. That's where it all begins. Day by day. One action at a time. Each of us committed to taking an ethical stand.

That is how our society can increasingly become a place of moral and ethical courage. That is how we can build a world that we are proud for our children and grandchildren to inhabit and inherit.

It is how we become people who others can look to for encouragement and inspiration in their own lives. We can exercise moral courage for each other. It is how we live our lives with integrity.

Amen.