

Courage in the Face of the Unknown

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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“Caution, the moving walkway is ending.” Milt and I heard that a lot last weekend as we ran from one plane to try and catch another at the Cincinnati Airport. I think it’s actually a very good thing that they give this warning, because at the speed you come off the walkway it feels like you are being thrown off the moving floor to catch your footing on the non-moving corridor floor. As soon as we found our gate I sat down and rummaged for a scrap of paper in my purse, telling Milt “That’s a perfect line for next Sunday’s sermon about courage in the face of the unknown.”

Caution, the moving walkway is ending. Sometimes we find ourselves nearing the end of a comfortable and safe moving walkway, knowing we will soon be moving on. What do we do with our fear, how do we move forward and leave what’s good now behind, how big a risk should we take with our money/our relationships when we don’t know what the future holds? How do we leave the safety of the present and find the courage to venture into unknown territory.

I have been hurled off the end of a moving walkway a number of times in the last fifteen years or so. Sometimes I didn’t find my footing again as well as other times. Making the decision to go into Unitarian Universalist ministry was certainly a big move, for me and for Milt. I left for Andover Newton Theological School exactly twenty-nine years after I first moved to western Pennsylvania to begin my studies in biology at Allegheny College. I built up a lot of reasons to stay in those twenty-nine years – lots of friends and places I loved, a business I built up by myself that was admired and respected all around the area. There was a running joke with Meadville folks about getting caught in the Meadville vortex. It was a difficult place to leave. Some people tried to move away and ended up getting sucked back into the vortex. It took me six years after my first husband died, but I am so glad I found the momentum, and yes, courage, to reach escape velocity and end up in this wonderful place! It was risky – ministry is not exactly the easiest of careers and I will be a while yet paying off my school loans– but it has always seemed true in my life that avoiding risk also means avoiding change, which severely diminishes the possible rewards.

There are many different kinds of unknowns we could be talking about in this context this morning. Falling in love, for example, means accepting the risk that your heart could someday be broken. Those of us who have lost spouses or children or parents, or have been divorced from a once happy marriage, know the feeling of being thrown into a kind of free-fall into an unknown identity. Who will we be now without that other person? It takes courage to touch bottom and swim back up to the surface again. How many of us have felt the emotional and physical pain of grief, of depression, of embarrassment, of guilt, of self-disgust or hatred. These are moving walkways of a negative kind, off of which we sometimes need to force ourselves, because they can tend to go on forever if you let them.

I know I told you (but it was in a sermon over two years ago now) about the little quote I carried around in my wallet for years that said “And the day came when the risk of remaining tight in a bud became greater than the courage it would take to bloom.” Blooms never know if they will find sunny or rainy days during their life, but finding the courage to move toward fulfillment somehow makes it all OK. I lost the little piece of paper that had the bud and blossom quote, but I recently found another one, again by the famous anonymous, that says something similar: *When you come to the edge of all that you know, you must believe in one of two things: there will be earth upon which to stand, or you will be given wings.* I find that having these little affirmations up on the wall or in my wallet reminds me, when I am feeling unsure of myself, that there are many things I have done well in my life. Having found the courage once can make it easier the next time to face the unknowns.

There are also the unknowns of our health and physical abilities that take courage to move beyond or accept with as much grace as possible. There is the unknown of where our country is going under its current leadership and what will happen with the upcoming election. What about the unknowns of global warming and other environmental poisonings that have gone unchecked till now, although I’m not even sure “till now” has arrived yet. Have we made *The Great Turning*, as David Korten calls it, *from Empire to Earth Community*? Korten makes the case in his book, *The Great Turning*, that the kind of society this country was meant to be is still possible. He defines Earth Community as a “life-centered, egalitarian, sustainable way of ordering human society based on democratic principles of partnership.”

We have talked about this kind of transformational turning before, many times. Everything we need to make the great turning a reality is right there in our seven Unitarian Universalist principles, as well.

But the unknown part of these ideals, including our principles, remains “Can we ever do it?” “Will the frailties of our human nature make it impossible to turn the world around?” “Is it too late?” “I’m tired of fighting the system and I just want to rest for a change.” Are we satisfied to remain on the moving walkway we have created or are we ready to do what we can to jump off and make the really difficult changes a sustainable world is going to require. It will take courage to truly live our values and pursue our ideals. Sometimes courage comes in the form of hope and that little voice inside that keeps reminding us that every little thing helps to move us in the right direction. That’s all we can do.

You probably thought this sermon was going to be about my upcoming medical treatments. I really wasn’t even thinking of that when I chose the topic for today, but I suppose it does apply. There is an element of the unknown to both experiencing the treatments themselves and then whether they will do what they are intended to do. I could have remained in the watch-and-see pattern that my doctors and I had been trying, but the unknowns at the end of that decision are much greater than going ahead with the treatments. So, yes, there is some courage involved with my choice, but it seems relatively insignificant compared to what I know some of you are facing, even as we

speaking. Courage in the face of the unknown is happening all around us, in our church family, every day, and I am honored that you share these journeys with me. What a privileged job! I get to walk with you on your paths, and you are walking with me on mine.

What I was really thinking about when I chose this topic and sermon title was the long-range planning discussions we are facing together as a congregation, with our first decision in the process happening in just a few minutes after the service. We are in the process of deciding whether we should remain on this lovely moving walkway that is safe and comforting and loving and relatively unchanging. As long as we're on the walkway everything will remain as it has been, although the walkway itself may become in need of some repair in order to keep on moving. With all the other unknowns in our lives, it's very important to have the stability of this UU Society to count on. In this place we provide some essential ingredients for what might be called a balanced life.

But there is more that we could do, even for ourselves, and other people who could be served by our liberating Unitarian Universalist tradition. To do this means that we will need to get off our moving walkway and enter into an unknown future. I think we should at least take a look at the possibilities.

Mark Twain said that "courage is not the absence of fear, but the management of fear." Your long-range planning committee and your Board of Trustees have done some very good thinking around how to manage the fear that comes with even the thought of change. That is why they have designed a process that takes its time. The unknowns we are facing are of such significance that we must not rush through our decision making process. I have been so pleased with our conversational gatherings these last three weeks – we were talking, we were honest about our thoughts and feelings, we were each heard with respect and appreciation, and we sincerely heard what others had to say too. I believe it's all about building trust, and that's so important. Trust in each other, and a trust in unknown outcomes.

*A freedom that reveres the past,
But trusts the dawning future more;
And bids the soul, in search of truth,
Adventure boldly and explore.*

That little verse was by Marion Franklin Ham, in the hymn *As Tranquil Streams* from our hymnbook.

It takes courage even to begin talking about change. Caution, the moving walkway is ending, and we must prepare ourselves for what could lie ahead. Caution is the correct word, I believe, because we're not talking about jumping without looking into the future. Caution implies thinking things through, doing whatever we do wisely. We really don't know at this point what our future holds, but it is becoming exciting to imagine the possibilities.

I think our courage can come from knowing, and believing, that we have a very good thing going here at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. Just think what it would mean to be able to share this good thing with the many others who are starving for exactly what we have to offer.

May we prepare ourselves well for the end of the moving walkway, and may we all have courage in the face of the unknown possibilities in our future.