

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting: Howard Thurman

There is a quiet courage that comes from an inward spring of confidence in the meaning and significance of life. Such courage is an underground river, flowing far beneath the shifting events of one's experience, keeping alive a thousand little springs of action. In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.

Pastoral Prayer Rev. Christina Sillari ¹

Oh, Spirit of Life

We lift up our fear and grief, confusion and suffering to be transformed, dissolved, healed.

We lift up our loved ones who are sick in body, mind or spirit,
and those who are dying, who have died.

We honor our own struggle to love and be loved.

For some of us, those we love the most, are out of our reach,
as we are not able to see and touch, hug and hold them.

Some of us are struggling to be kind to the loved ones right next to us.

Some of us are overworking, caring for others, with not much time for ourselves.

Some of us have too much time on our hands and may feel isolated and alone.

We are worried for our elders and our children.

We are heartsick for those without housing, food, and healthcare.

We are sad and angry on behalf of our great mother earth.

But we are people of faith.

We strive to honor all beings and to understand everything is connected.

So, we lean towards love, through the shadows of fear.

We wrap courage around our broken hearts.

We remember we are part of a resilient community of faith
with high aspirations and a clear moral compass walking together in love.

We remember we have the power to breath into our hearts, to feel the discomfort, to express the anger, the grief, the frustration, and eventually to make space for faith, hope and love.

So, we pray. We use the powerful connection of our hearts and minds within us and among us to set clear intentions. We pray for the healing of past and present wounds and to stop using those wounds to judge ourselves and others. We pray for open hearts and open minds to imagine what is possible. We pray for the courage not only to speak up, but also to listen, even when the words

¹ Part of this prayer was taken from The Rev. Connie Simmon called The Promise and the Practice: Pastoral Prayer #1 from the UUA Worship Web.

are hard to hear. We pray for compassion and understanding when we feel separate and confused. We pray for resilience and for the fearlessness to take risks, to make mistakes and to keep trying.

And we say thank you, thank you, thank you, for all that we do have, the opportunities we are given, and the promise of what we can achieve together. So we join together for a few minutes of silent contemplation, reflecting, remembering, reconnecting with the spirit of life

Sermon: From Courage to Resilience Rev. Christina Sillari

Every year, millions of salmon make their way upstream from ocean through river. Before their journey they prepare for years physiologically adapting, reproductively transforming, and learning how to swim. And then, just like that, they collectively embark on one of the longest treacherous migration journeys in the animal kingdom. If they manage to complete their full life cycle, they spawn thousands of eggs in the safety of gravel to start the process all over again. Even the ones that do not make it play a vital role in the health of the ecosystem.

As they swim upstream they move constantly and deliberately bumping into obstacles until they find a current to move with, an unimpeded flow of water. Then they need to work even harder to make it up through the mighty waterfalls. It seems impossible. But they do it by turning their underside squarely towards the powerful current. The current hits their underside which launches them up the waterfall. They respond by turning their underside again squarely towards the forceful current which keeps moving them further on their journey.

Everything in nature embodies an inherent form of resilience which helps it find its way forward, including us. The grave uncertainty about our own lives and the world can make it challenging to feel resilient. Our resilience can easily be hijacked. Because we have dualist minds which categorize everything into good or bad we sometimes respond to uncertainty with optimism or pessimism, yet, both prevent us from experiencing life's paradoxes and complexities.

Margaret Wheatley wrote: "certainty is a very effective way of defending ourselves from the irresolvable nature of life."² The cosmos is not providing us with very much certainty these days. What does it take to foster resilience, to keep flowing in the irresolvable river of our lives, even when we don't know where we are going?

One answer is courage.

How do I muster up this courage to do as the Taoist Chuang-Tzu teaches?

To act without needing a reason, To sit without knowing how,
To ride the current of what is, This is the primal virtue.

² Wheatley, M. J., & Wheatley, M. J. (2010). Perseverance. Provo, UT: Berkana, p. 15.

This sitting without knowing is not easy for me. Currently, I am living in liminal space. I left an eleven year ministry five months ago to take a giant leap into the unknown. I am unsure what the future holds. Even in this uncertainty, I am making my way upstream which led me here today to be with you.

But, I want to know what is going on and when things will happen and why. So, I can, as Marge Piercy writes, “be of use.” Yet, more and more, I am aware that it is precisely my need to know and my desire to control that creates anxiety, fosters my fear, and shrinks my courage. So I am sitting without knowing what is next and it is challenging. Ideas and opportunities come, I am tempted, but I am not willing to give up my authenticity, my values, my hunger for the mystery.

I want to find a way, as Rumi says: “to sell my cleverness and buy bewilderment.”

It is easy for me to be clever, but bewilderment takes practice.

How do I find the courage to be bewildered, to live in liminal space, embrace the paradoxes, dwell calmly in uncertainty?

Sutra 89 from *The Radiance Sutras*³ by Lorin Roche, offers me wisdom:

You are stunned, powerless.

You thought you knew

What was going on.

Now you realize

You don't have a clue.

You are stopped in your tracks.

Everything within your skin is shaking. Enter this shaking.

Right here, in the midst of commotion –

Get curious, look around inside with wonder. Unmind your mind.

All the walls have fallen down.

Go ahead and dissolve.

The One Who Has Always Been,

Who has seen much worse than this, Is still here.

I am not sure who the one has always been here is...perhaps the spirit of life, universal intelligence, God, my soul. But I am sure, there has been much worse than this, so I move forward with courage which at its Latin root means to live from the heart, to live from my core, to feel all my feelings, to turn up my underside, and to reveal my soul even when I am feeling afraid or defeated.

³ Roche, L. (2008). *The radiance sutras: 112 tantra yoga teachings for opening to the divine in everyday life: A new version of the Vijnana bhairava tantra*. Marina del Rey, CA: Syzygy Creations.

I love what Maya Angelou says about defeat:

“You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it. I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.”

Like this extraordinary poet, we all have the capacity for resilience. Without it, humans would have perished long ago.

Sometimes difficult life experiences help us find courage, we lose our job, our house burns down, a loved one dies, we discover we have a serious illness. As I witness people in my life, I am struck how one’s courage to face challenges and obstacles, makes one resilient. Sometimes it is those who face the most painful challenges who are the most resilient.

Resiliency does not always mean bouncing back to the way things were or the way we used to be. We do not bounce back from the death of a child or from being in a war zone. We don’t bounce back from betrayal or violence, we move through it.

What happens to us becomes part of us.

My dad died a year and a half ago. He and my mom were together since they were teenagers. My mom misses my dad terribly. He was part of her, and in some way, her reason for living. She will never bounce back from losing him, but she is resilient and finding ways to enjoy her life and be of use. It takes courage for her to be vulnerable, to ask for support. We need courage to face all the uncomfortable feelings and then resilience to find healthy ways to integrate them. Just like the salmon we need to expose our underside, our inner feeling self, to the current in order to keep flowing up the river.

Resilience is not something we have, but it is something we do. It is a returning to a beginning, a starting point. It occurs in the face of adversity and uncertainty by continuously learning the best way to be ourselves in our circumstances. I love what Buddhist teacher Tara Brach says about resilience: “May whatever arises in my life; may this serve the awakening of my heart.”⁴ True resilience unravels our heart, so it becomes a portal into awakening.

Courage is not pretending we are not afraid, but courage is acknowledging our fears and rising up again and again despite them. For fear is resilience’s greatest thief. Fear can shut us down, send us back down the river.

What fears do you need to expose or release, to keep moving upstream?

What is your courageous next step?

⁴ <https://www.tarabrach.com/>

Many of us learn how to move from courage to resilience from people or groups or cultures who have been oppressed and marginalized. Witnessing and participating in the struggle for rights for queer people, brown and black people, disabled people, unhoused people, poor people, undocumented people teaches me about courage and resilience.

Listening and learning about their stories gives me hope.

Sometimes a simple poem does the trick. Listen to “won’t you celebrate with me” by Lucille Clifton: ⁵

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model. born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself? i made it up
here on this bridge between starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

So how do we move from courage to resilience?

On a personal level, maybe we need some counseling to heal our old wounds. Maybe we just need to love and accept ourselves more, grieve a loss, forgive or be forgiven. Perhaps we need to change a habit or create a new one. We can make mistakes, for mistakes are also portals that move us into awakening. We can get comfortable with uncertainty, ride the current of what is, and practice being bewildered. And most importantly we can understand that our spirits can never be shattered, these physical structures that keep our spirits on this earth, they can be injured and damaged, but our spirits will always rise through our brokenness, especially when we are together.

Studies show that resilience fluctuates over time, suggesting that it is subject to developmental or environmental changes, not personal attributes alone. Our culture, our social milieu, our communities, our institutions impact our capacity for resilience. Positive social relationships and supportive environments are just as important as our personal ability to move from courage to resilience. This is why belonging to a religious community is so important. Together we have more courage and resilience to face the threat of climate change, to decolonize our minds and hearts, to change racist policies, to feed and house the poor.

⁵ Clifton, L., Young, K., & Glaser, M. S. (2012). The collected poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, p. 427.

Generally, salmon tend to stay in schools as they push upstream, they have more power together than alone. Sometimes they are so tight they rub and bump up against each other on their journey.

All they want to do is swim as quickly as they can to the little stream where they were born. They are driven by instinct — a strong sense that tells them what to do.

We can use our courage and resilience to join with others, even if its uncomfortable and bumpy, to create more social safety nets, like affordable healthcare and housing for all, living wages and sustainable agriculture, and an end to racist policies all of which will increase the resiliency of citizens.

Research has shown that resilience is stronger when the well-being of one's group is valued more than the individual's well-being. I like to believe that we are moving towards collectivist values. We must, if we are to survive as a nation, as a species.

So, let us be courageous together and move towards our collective liberation, like a faithful school of salmon swimming up the river, turning our hearts towards the immense current of uncertainty, to lean into the forces that hit us so squarely. And right when we want to turn away, right here, in the midst of commotion...let us get curious, look around inside with wonder, so we can experience the resilience of our spirits by awakening our hearts, so we may guide one another out of the darkness with the illumination of remembered radiance.

Benediction: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

If you can't fly, then run, if you can't walk run, then walk, if you can't walk, then crawl, but by all means keep moving.