

Rev. Gretchen Haley

Gretchen Haley is relentlessly curious about most things, especially the big stuff of theology, the beauty of creation, the magic of collaboration, and the great joy of pop culture. She has an audacious ambition for the liberal church, believing in its capacity to transform lives and our world by way of hyper-local relationships and partnerships that inspire the unleashing of courageous love. She serves with Rev. Sean Neil-Barron as one of the ministers of the Foothills Unitarian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, and parents her two children with her partner Carri.

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In my life, the earliest example I remember of what I would call courageous love was from Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen. Archbishop Hunthausen was the Archbishop of Seattle from when I was born until I was 15. Since I grew up, Catholic, in a small town about 2 hours outside of Seattle, he was my Archbishop for the first 15 years of my life. I am told he was a constant advocate for the poor and for peace, which didn't always make him the most popular.

But it's a memory from when I was about seven that has stuck with me. My mom – a lifelong catholic was wearing this button one day, it said "I support the Archbishop."

What's that? I asked her.

She responded simply, "He held mass for the homosexuals, and people were very upset." It was 1983. "Very upset" was surely an understatement.

But in that moment, I didn't hear the "upset" part. I only heard my mom saying the word "homosexuals," and that my Archbishop had held mass for them. And she was good with that.

Fifteen years later when I was terrified to come out to my parents, that button flashed in my mind, and gave me hope, and courage; and surely that button had something to do with their eventual love and acceptance.

I am so grateful for that man, still, and for his sense of call, and duty.

He must have been so brave, received so much hateful criticism, it's astounding he held his ground. The Cardinal even came in to investigate. How was he able to keep that clear about the call – the requirements of courageous love – it's inspiring.

"Courageous Love" as an idea has been integral to my formation as a Unitarian Universalist, and as a minister.

Still, when we picked up this phrase in our mission statement last year, it was with a certain leap of faith – as in, we generally think we know what "courageous love" means, and we even believe it's what we are meant for in these times.

But also, in some ways, we knew we didn't know, and it's the unknowing that is the leap of faith— because you can't really know – what courageous love is, until it's asked of you, and by then, well, we've already printed it on the t-shirts.

This leap of faith reminds me of that in the first book in the Lord of the Rings when our hero, Frodo, confesses that he isn't feeling all that heroic. So much has already happened, and yet there's still so much ahead, pain, and loss he knows will come – he'd really just rather not. Why couldn't he forget this grand adventure, this hero's quest, and go back to the shire where he could enjoy a good second breakfast.

As he tells his teacher, Gandalf, 'I wish it need not have happened in my time.'

Gandalf responds simply – “So do I. And so do all who live to see such times.”

I used to read the stories about Martin Luther King Jr, and Rosa Parks – or Galileo and Charles Darwin – or hear about Archbishop Hunthausen – all these heroes who worked to call forth the truth in a world invested in its opposite – and feel *inspired*, and eager to do what needed to be done to bring about the necessary change on behalf of justice, and righteousness, and compassion.

In the last few weeks, however, I've started to feel a little less eager – as I have come to understand that answering the call of courageous love requires a capacity to live with a lot of pain, a commitment that persists through great sacrifice, and a willingness not to turn away, but to move towards what in regular times we might call, danger.

Whatever romantic notions I've had about the call of courageous love have, in recent days, fallen away.

This past week, I started an online class on strategic non-violent resistance led by Unitarian Universalist theologian and ethicist Sharon Welch – you may recognize her name as the leading thinker on what she calls, a feminist ethic of risk. She thought she'd have 40 or so clergy sign up, but over 60 were there. “I guess you're all ready to take in a little theory to go along with your practice,” she observed as we started.

This is what I'll try to offer today – a little theory around this idea of Courageous Love that we've been practicing, and that we've said we will unleash.

Let me start by dispelling any worries you may have that I'm about to get too heady by asking you to repeat after me:

Going on a bear hunt
I'm not afraid
Oh look! It's some wavy grass
Can't go over it
Can't go under it
Can't go around it
Gotta go through it

OK. This campfire chant is a great summary of courageous love. Seriously.

We say what we're going to do (going on a bear hunt.)

This is like I said last week – we take a stand. And then, we give ourselves a pep talk to deal with our fear – I'm not afraid – like, “keep cool.” Then, we pay attention to what is right in front of us – stay connected – and go through it.

As Gandalf also says to Frodo, We do not get to decide which times we are born into. “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

To make such a decision, we must begin with the *love* in courageous love.

This love is not squishy, romantic love, not even a love that’s about “liking” the other.

King reminds us that the English language limits our understanding of love – we have just one word to describe what took the Greeks three. They spoke about *eros* – that is the squishy, romantic sort of love; and also *philia*, which is like the way you love your friends – and does have to do with liking them (at least most of the time).

But courageous love is neither of these – it is instead the sort of love captured by the word *agape*. As King wrote, “Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all. It is the love of God working in the [human mind]. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. And when you come to love on this level you begin to love people not because they are likeable, not because they do things that attract us, but because God loves them.”

Agape is the sort of love that formed our Universalist tradition – that grace that is holding us all, and transforming us, but in courageous love this receptivity to grace meets our activity, as it calls us to become its active agents in the world.

Courageous love pursues – to use another Greek word – *Eudaimonia* – which is, the highest human good – that flourishing of all of life, in wholeness and health – that Sean spoke about a few weeks ago, what in the Jewish tradition we would call Shalom. Courageous love lives in the place where love of self, love of other, and love of the whole world come together into a love for all.

Sharon Welch calls this overlapping place, *generative interdependence*. Meaning, the creative, dynamic, energy born of all of us being in this together. Courageous love doesn’t get stuck on just one way for us to “get through this,” but keeps discovering new ways – like dressing up as clowns to disarm white supremacists, or resurrecting Frederick Douglass on social media to protest Presidential ignorance. Courageous love uses all the tools of art, and dance, spiritual practices, that we might keep finding that new way where there seems to be no way.

This is one of the repeated phrases in the Hebrew Bible, and one that is central to the theology of the black church – that *God will make a way out of no way*.

Or as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “Behold, I am doing a new thing! Do you not perceive it?”

So often the answer to this question when it comes to courageous love is – *sort of*.

Remember my Archbishop, he surely felt a sense that he was making a way where there was no way – but also, he couldn’t have known all the many ways that was true, the ripple effects, how a second grader in a little logging town would’ve carried his ministry in her heart for the next few decades until she herself would be telling the story of his courageous love to the congregation she serves.

All of that, he could not have perceived, but could only trust, and have faith.

Which brings us to the *courage* in courageous love.

There is a misunderstanding about courage. That it is a matter of fearlessness – that in order to act with courage you must have no fear.

But in these days, I'm pretty sure that would mean not acting at all.

Anxiety is a normal response to living in abnormal times, that is, to times such as these. Studies have shown that we act courageously – not when we have squelched all fear – but when we are able to remain connected to some deeper sense of purpose, values, or vision – when we feel a sense of duty, in our core.

As poet-activist Audre Lorde said, “When I dare to use my strength in the service of my vision, it becomes less and less and important whether I am afraid.”

Courage looks fear in the eyes and says, *so what*. Courage says, something matters to me more than this fear, something motivates me to see beyond flight or fight, to persist with creativity, and humor, and life-giving generativity – to claim a life of joy, even in the midst of heartache.

At our workshop on Courageous Love last weekend, when we asked for definitions, the first word that came up was risk. Courageous love embraces risk. Which is not something people go around advertising when they want you to join their group...like, join us, we'll make your life *less safe*.....

But...Courageous love confesses there is no moral life that guarantees safety. Courageous love knows that the only way to make everyone “safe” is through an ethic of domination and control, where one or more controls and dominates one or more others...and ultimately, if you want total safety, you'll have to cut off life entirely.

It reminds me of the story of the Buddha – before he became the Buddha – his parents kept him all locked up in the palace when he was younger so he wouldn't know suffering. But eventually he wanted to actually live –so he left the palace – and guess what – suffering, everywhere. Which became the main teaching of Buddhism – life is suffering. OK, it's a little more nuanced than that, but you get the idea. There is no way to allow – let alone unleash – human flourishing and ensure total safety. To imagine total safety is privilege, and likely indicates that our safety is predicated on another's risk.

Coming to understand this – our privilege, and another's risk – takes stepping out of our bubbles – and stepping in to the grace of an intentionally diverse community – like this one, in all of its messy imperfections.

When courageous love and following the call of courageous love feels impossible – too much to bear – community reminds us, we don't have to do it alone.

When the weight of courageous love feels like too much to carry, Sunday comes around once again, and we remember, it's not just on us – it's a shared task, this repairing the world. And there's all these partners, walking together – so much so we had to add a third service!

We hold the babies in the social hall, and we hear about the new hearing aids, or the new job, we meet each other at the latest protest line and hug, and we watch each other picking up a piece, our own parts, and then we realize, we can keep going. Together, we can do hard things – with love. Courageous love.