



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Fire of Commitment

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, March 7, 2021

For hundreds of years, our forebears, the Unitarians and Universalists who have been part of this country since its founding, devoted their lives to the creation of a religion dedicated to building a better world. Above all, they wanted to build a world where justice took precedence over self-interest. They wanted to help the disadvantaged and the poor. They wanted to build strong social institutions based on equality. They wanted to put an end to discrimination. They believed that liberal religion was about creating a better society on earth, not worrying about an eternal life beyond death. More interested in getting heaven into people than people into heaven. They, like our ancestors who built this church, had a fire of commitment like none other.

The fire of commitment that we are seeing around us as we come out of this pandemic is connected to a deeper spiritual life. I believe that in order to live a fuller spiritual life – and let me say that by spiritual life, I mean any practice that leads us to peace and greater understanding – we must act in a way that goes beyond our fears. Fear is the great Satan here. Fear drives people to kill, fear drives them to abandon their families, their principles, their communities, even this one. Fear keeps us from imagining our congregation as something much different from what it is today. Not in the way that matters of course; we will continue to inspire with our music and words, care for one another and act in the service of humanity. But instead of waxing nostalgic about what once was, a church packed to the gills for concerts and children in Faith Formation, we might reimagine that we have as much of a presence outside of our walls as within, like a tree rooted in the ground of our physical space but growing out into our communities through deeper community partnership and other small worship setting in people's homes or in nature. Imagine every worship service including families, and a continuation with our virtual presence. Imagine this community with a fire of spirit burning brightly at our center and reaching out far beyond the walls we have here.

When I first visited your building as a candidate six years ago. I saw the soaring roof line, the expansive grounds, and most of all the possibilities. And yes, I saw the toll age had taken but I didn't call it shabby (although another candidate did say that). Now just about one year since the pandemic began we are presented with an opportunity to re-light the fire of our commitment like never before. Who would have thought that who we can become has as much to do with the virtual world as it does with our physical building?

The fire of commitment requires courage. Courage rests in moving beyond fear and feelings towards the guiding principles of our free religion; compassion, trust and hope.

Courage is not the absence of fear, courage is reason over fear. That is what was happening as we embrace our new reality. That is what is happening as we come to grips with the discomfort of anti-racism and transgender work. That is what this new world we are being born into offers us.

By calming our fears of what will happen to us, and trusting a little more in the good will of people, we are able to open ourselves up to the Spirit of Life and Love. In fact, there is some outstanding evidence that suggests that if we act courageously or virtuously or kindly we will actually train our brains to look at the world in a different way. Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz, (see [The Mind and The Brain](#)) UCLA Professor of Psychiatry recently finished research that shows by intentionally choosing to view your environment in new ways, rewrite your personal narrative, and step into action in the presence of your fears, you become more competent in whatever those actions may be, but also build your “courage muscles” so you can respond more effectively in other areas of your life. In AA they call this “fake it to make it”, I am sure the UUs in that church were not feeling love but they acted as if they were, and I believe their depth of compassion towards others and themselves grew that day. (Also see Deepak Chopra’s [MetaHuman](#))

We here could do the same. We here could move beyond our fear of change, and trust in the love that is the spiritual center of this church and enlarge its civic circumference. Lighting that spark is believing in one another and the principles that our faith stand by on the front of that order of service. These are not just words, these are what we believe.

In his book [A People So Bold](#) my good friend and colleague John Millspaugh reminds us that it is not just the principles we live by but how we act on them that really deepens us. Finding the courage to light that flame has several dimensions. There is interior courage, the swallowing of our fear and the going on when you would rather just go away. Then there is the exterior courage that takes a stand when we know others would rather not. Our BLM Sign was an example of that.

Tomorrow is the International Day of Women. If I think of courage as the fuel to our fire, I think of women. Famous foremothers of ours such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Marian Edelman, Harriet Tubman, and today, Greta Thornburg, Michelle Obama, Hilary Clinton and Kamala Harris. Women know what courage is because they have had to step into roles that required far more of them than men, roles that required a tolerance for pain and fear far beyond most of us mortal men. One of our foremothers who burned with this courage was our own Denny Davidoff (a founder of the Women’s Federation, Past Moderator of the UUA and Head of Development of MLTS until the day she died). Denny once told me a great joke. She and I were sitting together at General Assembly in New Orleans as we were about to elect our first woman president of the UUA. One man after another kept delaying the vote with

some speech. Denny leaned in and said to me, “How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb?” I shrugged, she raised her eyebrows and finished “None. It’s not the lightbulb that needs changing.”

Yes, of course men have courage as well. But I don’t want us to forget that it was women who largely got us here. Powerful women, many like Pat Francek, doing the work that needs to be done. It is no accident that our Black Lives Matter work is led by TUCWomen.

The poet Louise Gluck who won the 2020 Nobel Prize for poetry wrote of women and courage: ‘When the train stops, the woman said, you must get on it. But how will I know, the child asked, it is the right train? It will be the right train, said the woman, because it is the right time. A train approached the station; clouds of grayish smoke streamed from the chimney. How terrified I am, the child thinks, clutching the yellow tulips she will give to her grandmother. Her hair has been tightly braided to withstand the journey. Then, without a word, she gets on the train, from which a strange sound comes, not in a language like the one she speaks, something more like a moan or a cry.’

Here is the good news: We are here to help turn the moan and cry into a voice for change. We are here with the fire of commitment to save lives and I mean that literally.

To save those lives requires us to engage with the circumference of fire that is everywhere. Maybe most importantly with our migrant and refugee communities. Do you know what conquerors do first to the conquered? They establish debt. If you owe money, then you are enslaved at a moral level much more powerfully than if we put you in chains. Think about it; why are so many people still holding on to property that is worth less than what they owe. How many young people are in servitude to student loans? Because there is moral stigma to not paying your debts, even if the debt is only a contract secured by property. I contend that our struggle with immigration reform is just such a debt. Our struggle with racism is such a debt. There ought to be a revolution. And there is!

This fire is a part of the ancient tradition that Unitarians and Universalists have upheld. We are not interested in a world of dominance, where the chosen are blessed and included, where the wealthy and powerful inherit more privilege and opportunity, and where the rest are left to find their own way. Our founders, for the past two centuries, have called us to be prophets, to work for justice, to protect the poor and disadvantaged, to speak out against those who seek wealth and power for themselves.

That is our Unitarian Universalist birthright. That is our Unitarian Universalist challenge, our calling, our imperative, our revolution. It is a standard by which to measure our lives. Martin Luther King, Jr., said it so powerfully, over and over again: “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Many do not know that those words were spoken first not by Dr. King, but by Theodore Parker, the great Unitarian minister, in Boston, more than a hundred years before King led the civil rights movement. “The arc of the moral

universe” is our phrase. It is our call to revolution. It is our vision of the future. It is a foundation of our liberal faith. We believe in pursuing justice. “Faith is the sister of justice” wrote the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams. We are called by virtue of being human, as the Unitarian Mary Wollstonecraft declared to be the “Jeremiahs of a Just Community”. We are being called to the revolutionary fire of commitment. No, it’s not a revolution of violence, it’s a revolution of facing our own wounds as people of privilege and imagining how we might help those who are so hurt by the forces of power and privilege, especially, our gay, lesbian, transgender siblings and those who are facing even deeper hardship as immigrants whether they are here with or without documentation. Today’s good news is that we already burning with the fire of commitment and we have been for a very long time. Two hundred years ago our religious movement was stirred by the Great Awakening of revivalism in this country mostly on the side of caution and reason. We are in the midst of another great awakening, a great re-awakening, where the ordinary stand with the oppressed and call on the rich to stop this madness we call capitalism. It is a revolution, make no mistake about that and this time we are in it. This time we are joining.

Here is the thing though: Community is not something that we can truly take lightly. Not this one that is for sure. Community requires our presence, as much as we can give. Our community requires, time as much as you can spare. This community requires your treasure. Your money. Money follows the commitment so some of you will be giving more to our annual pledge drive than others. That’s fine. But please make a financial commitment when the steward calls you. Or join a zoom party. Or pledge on line. 100% of our 500 souls giving their commitment to this community. Now. Here. In this pandemic.

Ours is not a creedal faith. You do not have to profess your faith in the one god, to one truth, but you we are a covenantal faith, you do have to profess your individual faith in the context of a community of love and action. It means something to be a UU. It means we are in action, as our faith grows. It’s the reason we kindle a flame as our call to worship, and we don’t bow before an altar.

This too is what it means to burn with the fire of commitment. We all are wounded, some more outwardly such as the marginalized in our society and some more inwardly, even the relatively prosperous like ourselves. I can’t tell you the number of times I have received a note from the head of some group that I came out to support as a white man. Not that I had any super power or even changed the minds of the oppressors but because my standing there gave those struggling the hope that they are not alone. There are people of good will, part of the system who stands with them.

Some years ago, a middle-aged man started coming as an aide to one of our elders in the church I was serving. His name was Roland. He was Haitian and was always impeccably dressed. When I would speak to him his diction was perfect, even though English was clearly his second language. He would listen to the sermons and sing. After some time, he asked for an appointment. He came to tell me that he would be leaving his work as an aide and going

to law school. I realized I knew almost nothing about him. Where had he gone to college? Boston University, then MIT. He was actually an electrical engineer. I am asked him how this came to be. He became very quiet. "I need you to know Reverend, that this church saved my life. I grew up in Haiti. My father was a colonel in Papa Docs army. One night, a band of armed men came to our house. They dragged my father out and shot him. Then they killed my older brother. My mother and I managed to escape. We travelled day and night to get to the Dominican Republic and from there to the United States. I worked hard, supported my mother and went to school. I did well. I moved to Southern California to work in aerospace. I married but then my wife died of cancer. I decided to leave electrical engineering and take care of elders. The man I have been caring for would have been my father's age. But for many years I have had nightmares. Terrifying nightmares about my father and brother's murders. I went to see doctors, I took drugs, and I changed careers. I came close to suicide. But since coming here and learning that we have the power of God within us, the nightmares have stopped. Stopped. So, I decided that this is a sign that I should move on. I want to become a lawyer to defend the rights of the politically persecuted. I need to go on. But I want you to know that you Unitarians saved my life. Don't stop."

My friends, you don't get to see how this faith in the power of each other change lives very often. What do we burn for to change? We are tender for the world. Anybody have a match? Amen.