

“Everyday Courage”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading

“Courage” by Anne Sexton¹

It is in the small things we see it.
The child’s first step,
as awesome as an earthquake.
The first time you rode a bike,
wallowing up the sidewalk...

Later,
when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you’ll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you’ll bargain with the calendar
and at the last moment
when death opens the back door
you’ll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.

Sermon

Every day holds a pocketful of courage.
Sometimes, you have to dig deep to find it, but it’s there in between the lint of despair and the crumpled candy wrapper of avoidance.

¹ Full poem available at <https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2000%252F11%252F09.html>

Courage is present in any moment when you face the unknown.

The shaky first steps out onto a path you have never been down, or onto a fork in the road that is unfamiliar.

Each life, each day entails courage.

In the book, *Trusting Change: Finding Our Way through Personal and Global Transformation*, Karen Hering talks about courage in this way: “When I think of courage, I don’t often begin with heroic acts responding to tragedy or war. I first call up a quote from jazz musician Benny Golson, who once said, ‘The creative person always walks two steps into the darkness. Everybody can see what’s in the light. They can imitate it, they can underscore it, they can modify it, they can reshape it. The real heroes delve in darkness of the unknown. It’s where you discover ‘other things.’”

It is in this unknown that our courage shines through and that we become the heroes of our own lives.

When you lose someone you love, and your whole world tilts or even turns upside down, there is courage.

When memory begins to fade, and the past contains more blurry outlines than solid figures, there is courage.

When you set out to begin in a new field or a new trade years past what seems like the appropriate hour for a fresh start, and the voice of doubt rings in your ears, there is courage.

From the first awesome step to the last slippered stride out the back door, life entails courage.

Courage, Scene 1

He wakes in the morning feeling torn between the will to live and the desire to allow death to bring an end to the pain. He rises from the bed, and nonetheless, he makes one more plate of eggs and washes one more pan. He reads one more newspaper. He makes one more phone call to his daughter whose laughter always resonates all the way to his heart. He sits for one more long afternoon staring out the window at the gray sky and bare trees. He notices the clouds shift and the warm light of one more golden sunset appears. He boils one more pot of water

and eats one more plate of pasta with pesto made from the garden's abundance of basil. He turns out one more light and then another. He lies down in darkness to drift off to sleep for one more night before dawn comes again.

(Sung by one voice)

Though days be dark with storms

And burdens weigh my heart;

Though troubles wait at ev'ry turn,

I know I can go on.

Courage, Scene 2

She sits quietly in the cafeteria with her lunch open before her. Her classmates talk noisily around her, but she cannot hear what they are saying so lost she is in her own thoughts. She thinks of her parents who were arguing again last night. She wants the fighting to stop. She picks at her food with little interest. A friend sitting at the table finally notices her. "Are you okay?" She shakes her head tears welling up in her eyes. She lets them fall down her cheeks. Her friend is quiet and still, and then takes her hand. After a few moments, they put away their lunches and rush outside to join the others in the bright sunshine.

(Sung by one voice)

When sorrow heals my soul

And burdens make me strong,

Though troubles wait at ev'ry turn,

I know I can go on.

Courage, Scene 3

He goes to the refrigerator and pulls the door open. He half expects the shelves to miraculously be full this morning, but he knows what he will find instead - what he has found for over 100 days prior - an emptiness that matches the gaping hole of hunger in his stomach. There has been no food since he lost his job. He shuts the door instead of reaching for a can of beer on the bottom shelf. A voice calls from the bedroom down the hall, "Daddy?" He goes to the child. "Time for school," he says. In minutes, the child is out the door and on the bus. He goes back inside and picks up a piece of paper on the table. It tells him where he can go to

collect a box of free groceries. Though it hurts his pride, he grabs the keys to his truck, and heads out the door.

(Sung by one voice)

My sister in my heart,

My brother in my song,

Though troubles wait at every turn,

I know I can go on.

Courage, Scene 4

They stand before their open closet carefully considering their options. Over the last few years, they have been more frequently trading in the usual plain cotton trousers for something more comfortingly feminine. Loose linen pants. The occasional flowing skirt. They consider the soft, velvet jumpsuit they recently discovered at the vintage shop - a gem of a find that seemed to sparkle on the rack. A few friends and co-workers have noticed the subtle change in wardrobe but most had not. They have said aloud to only a few close friends and their therapist that the boy and man they were raised as doesn't fit how they really feel inside. Their fingers caress the velvet sleeve with a longing so deep it brings tears to their eyes. In moments, the jumpsuit is on their body, and they let out a deep sigh as they look in the mirror and think, "Damn. I'm beautiful."

(Sung by one voice)

And though the journey is long,

The destination is near,

Though troubles wait at every turn,

I know I can go on.

Courage, Scene 5

She has curled herself around his frail body. This body that was once strong but whose muscles are now slack and whose bones are hard and prominent. Months of treatment have now ended. Now the inevitable can no longer be delayed. He will go. She will stay. They lay like this for hours. The years shared and the life they built nestled between them. He whispers, "I love you." She squeezes him a little harder. "I know. I love you." Hunger drives her to rise

from the bed. In her absence, he lets the last breath slip away. When she returns she sees that the end has quietly arrived. She hugs his breathless body with no thought of what will come next only the rush of grief that comes with immense love.

(Sung by one voice)

So brothers take my hand,

And sisters sing my song,

When hope awaits at every turn,

I know we will go on.

Life is full of uncertainty, and we will go on.

The changing path is dimly lit, and we will go on.

We don't know what will come next, and we will go on.

Life calls us on.

And, we call to one another.

We take one another's hand and sing to one another our songs.

Let us meet life with brave hearts accompanied by loving companions at every step.

Let us move with the strength of our ordinary courage into the days ahead.

So may it be.