

Courage

It takes courage to speak up. It especially takes courage to speak up after you have adequately researched a topic, and you are totally committed to the opinion that you are about to express, because it's based on fact, on research, on *reason*, and, because of this, you know it your heart of hearts that you are *right*.

You see, it's easy to say something like "that guy is a jerk" right after someone has cut us off in traffic. It's much, much harder to say that once you know the story. Maybe he is distracted because his wife is dying of cancer. Or maybe he is losing his eyesight, and he was not quite ready to admit it yet, but seeing how close he came to hitting you was the thing that made him think "Wow... maybe I really should get my eyes checked again". Or maybe he works two jobs just to be able to pay his rent, and he is tired. Or maybe he has had trauma in his life, and he is dissociating because he was triggered.

There could be all kinds of reasons why people do things that irritate us, enrage us, startle us, frighten us, or even just inconvenience us in some way. It's easy to just express that emotion in the moment, but it is much harder... much *scarier*, to dig a little deeper and try to find out the reasons behind it, and *then* decide how we are going to react.

If you, as I did, grew up in the United States, our national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner* is probably well known to you. I remember my father, a combat veteran of WWII, tearing up at the last line: "The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave".

I remember being a kid and thinking of my dad as a hero. He was there in Germany when the horror of the concentration camps came to light. However, by the time I was a teenager, facing the realities of watching my friends getting drafted to go to war in Viet Nam, and watching on TV the anti-war protests of the Civil Rights movement, I became very cynical about this image of America as the "land of the free and the home of the brave". As I grew into adulthood, and found myself participating in various demonstrations, boots on the ground and protest sign in hand, I formed the opinion that America was neither free nor brave.

Now however, in my 60s, having achieved a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, and having done a *ton* of genealogical research, I find that I have come full circle.

Learning about my family tree, which has in it both people that were relatively recent immigrants and pre-U.S. colonists, inspired me to dig deeper into both the conditions that precipitated their leaving the country of their birth and ancestry, as well as the condition that they faced when they arrived here. While I am not for a moment ignoring or condoning the problematic relationship of European Colonialism in the so called "Age of Discovery" with the people and cultures which they colonized, I did make an effort to just focus on *my* ancestors as people... to try to see them as individuals in their own context.

What I came away with was a kind of a sense of awe, because some of my ancestors, many of them, in fact, were extraordinarily courageous people... or, at least, they did things that took a great deal of courage to do. For example, one of my ancestors traveled from England to the New World in Virginia after at least one entire group had been lost on such a perilous expedition. He returned, and his group is credited with introducing tobacco to England (which also proved problematic, for several reasons). For his courage, he was knighted, and then sent back with his entire family.

Another group of my ancestors were a family that colonized Massachusetts. Another group came to Pennsylvania from Germany. Although they were of different religions, they were both members of religious minorities in their home country, and at least a part of their motivation to come to America was to avoid further religious persecution. Another of my ancestors traveled from Scotland to Canada, after the Highland Clearances. The most recent member of my family to immigrate here came from German occupied Pomerania, which is in Poland. She was 14 and, according to the ship manifest, she was traveling alone and sharing a birth with another teenage girl. I can only imagine how terrified she must have been.

Courage does not mean that you are not scared. Courage means that you *are* scared, but you do it anyway.

One of my ancestors... a great great great... whatever... uncle, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and, once I realized that, I really gave some serious thought to how incredibly scary *that* experience must have been. You see, those people sat there and argued and disagreed and compromised and finally agreed to write and sign a document that begins with:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Can you imagine how much courage it must have taken to do that? And, not everyone agreed! There were many, many people who remained loyal to the Crown even while the war was being fought!

Thirteen years later, they followed this bold move by finally writing a Constitution... an incredibly courageous document that begins:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Then, as if *that* wasn't daring enough, they wrote the first ten amendments, called the Bill of Rights, the *very first* of which was:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

You mean... people could just... *choose* their *religion*? What is they wanted to be Catholic? They could just... you know... *be Catholic*? Or, *Jewish*? Or, what if they were Huguenot or Quaker? Or even *Unitarian*? or *Universalist*? Wouldn't that be chaos?

All these folks remembered the bloodshed that followed King Henry VIII starting his own official church in England and making himself the head of it. Everyone remembered the violent aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and the Radical Reformation. Nobody wanted *that* to happen in their new country, right? Couldn't we just have a new American religion that everyone belonged to?

No. They went the other way and said that the government had no business interfering with how people choose to worship. *That* was a bold choice!

And, what about freedom of speech? Can just anyone say anything, then? What if people lied when they spoke? What about if they spoke out against the government, or the president, or anything else they wanted? Should people just be allowed to do that?

And what about freedom to assemble? Can that really be allowed? What if they get out of control? Riot? And, what about all of that “petitioning of the government”? Isn’t that going to get out of hand? Where will this all lead?

The truth is, this is an incredibly brave and fearless document, because, for one thing, it puts an enormous amount of trust in... well... each other. I have talked to people from other countries... places like China, South Korea, and the Philippines, who have told me that they sometimes find being in America very scary, because, it is like “there are no rules” and “people can do anything!”

Of course, we all take our freedom for granted. This is our “normal”. And, even though it is sometimes very scary, even for us, to live in this country, most of us wouldn’t trade it for any other system. You see, we think of all our freedom as “our right”. Many places in the world do not believe this way.

And, where has it all led? Well, for one this, this being LGBTQ History month, I feel compelled to mention that these four basic freedoms... Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of the Press, and Freedom to Assemble and Protest... it is these freedoms that have allowed all LGBTQ people to make great progress towards equality and justice. The battle isn’t over yet, but these four freedoms are the basis for all LGBTQ people as well as the people who love us, to *expect* to be able to live and love in equality.

This, too, is a courageous and brave action.

One thing that is interesting... Unitarian Universalism is, in many ways, I think, the most “American” religion in... well... America. We celebrate the fact that the sources of our religion come from all the other great religions. We celebrate that, as well as Atheism and Agnosticism. We firmly believe in our Democratic Process, and we believe in the worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity, and compassion, the free and responsible search for spiritual growth and meaning, and a community of peace, liberty, and justice for all.

The reason that I brought up my family genealogy wasn’t because I wanted you to know how “special” I think I am. I brought it up because... I’m normal. I am a very average American... descended from, as most of us are, from colonists and immigrants. Some of us may also be descended from displaced Natives or people brought here by force, and those, too, are incredibly courageous stories.

The point is, we are all Courageous people descended from Courageous people. Remember that. You are brave.... and so is every single person that you meet.

So, Brave People, as you move about your world and interact with other Brave people... if someone disagrees with you... even if you KNOW in your heart of hearts that they are “wrong” ... it’s ok. Let them be wrong. Listen to what they have to say. And, when they are all done, ask them, quietly, “What is it about this situation that scares you?” And, let them answer you... because something always scares the courageous. Just let them talk. Don’t try to argue with them. Just listen. And, when they are all done... tell them what it is about this situation that scares you. Try it. You never know what might happen. Be courageous.