The Courage to Keep Becoming

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Norwich
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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Mohegan people as the traditional caretakers of the land and the rivers where we now live and worship. We honor and pay respect to the Mohegan ancestors and their lineage, who, to this day, uphold traditional practices, artistic expression, religion, and education.

Sermon: The Courage to Keep Becoming

Over the past few weeks, we have been talking about beginnings and becoming.

At Ingathering, we stood at the edge of a new congregational year and asked what our lives had been teaching us.

We remembered that a path is not made by declaring that a path should exist. A path appears because a direction is traveled repeatedly.

Then we asked how our Unitarian Universalist Values become visible. We named a Value, imagined how it might take form, chose one next step, and gave that step a place in our real lives.

We said that a plan is not a guarantee. It is a form of consent: our willingness to show up for what matters.

And now we arrive at the place every meaningful plan eventually reaches.

The step is on the calendar. The conversation needs to happen. The application is open. The meeting is approaching. The new practice sounded beautiful when we imagined it. The opportunity we asked for has appeared.

And suddenly, alongside the inspiration and intention, fear arrives.

What if I fail? What if I succeed and my life changes? What if I speak and people misunderstand me? What if I stay quiet and regret it? What if I take the next step and discover I am not ready?

Deleted: Prelude→→→→ Don't Stop Believing - Journey¶
Opening Words→ → All That We Have Been, All That We Will Become by Leslie Ahuvah Falls¶
→ We stand at the precipice, arms locked together like tandem skydivers working up the courage to jump.¶

This is where courage enters our season of becoming—not as the absence of fear, and not as a demand that we become fearless, but as the spiritual capacity to remain in relationship with our deepest Values when fear is present.

Courage is what helps us keep becoming when becoming asks something of us.

What

We often picture courage as something dramatic.

Courage runs into the burning building.

Courage stands at the microphone.

Courage crosses the finish line while the music swells.

These acts may indeed be courageous, but if dramatic bravery is our only image, most of us will overlook the courage our **ordinary** lives require.

Sometimes courage is making the phone call we have postponed.

Sometimes it is asking for help before everything falls apart.

Sometimes it is setting a boundary and allowing another person to be disappointed.

Sometimes it is admitting that we were wrong.

Sometimes it is trying again after an attempt did not work.

Sometimes it is letting ourselves be seen in a new way after years of staying small enough to feel safe.

Courage and fear often travel together. One does not always cancel the other. We may hope courage will arrive like a great wave and wash fear away. More often, courage sits beside fear and says, 'We are still going.'

That matters because fear is not automatically a sign that we are on the wrong path. Fear is a human response to danger, uncertainty, vulnerability, change, and the possibility of loss. Sometimes, fear is wise. It tells us to step away from genuine danger, attend to a boundary, make a safer plan, or ask for support.

Courage is not ignoring that wisdom.

Courage is not proving our faith by exposing ourselves to preventable harm.

But fear also has a habit of speaking with more authority than it deserves.

It can take one possible outcome and announce it as certainty. It can take an old wound and present it as a prophecy. It can say, 'You failed before, so you will fail again.' Or, 'People like you do not do things like this.' Or, 'If you change, you may no longer belong.'

Thich Nhat Hanh taught that suppressing fear does not free us from it. What remains unacknowledged keeps working beneath the surface. His invitation was to bring fear into mindful awareness—to meet it with attention rather than run from it.

Pema Chödrön similarly describes fear as something to examine and relate to, rather than something we must always vanquish before we can live.

In other words, fear deserves a hearing, but it does **not** always deserve the deciding vote.

Fear of failure can keep us from taking any chance at all. We may imagine that successful people moved confidently from beginning to achievement, when their real lives included false starts, disappointment, revision, and learning. An attempt that does not produce the result we hoped for can still show us what needs to change. Failure can be information without becoming identity.

But there is another, less familiar fear: the fear of success. Success can be unsettling because it brings its own changes. If the opportunity works, we may be expected to do more. We may become more visible. We may need new skills, different support, or a revised understanding of who we are. Even a longed-for change can disturb the familiar arrangement of a life.

So fear of failure and fear of success can leave us standing in the same place. One says, 'Do not begin, because it may not work.' The other says, 'Do not begin, because it might.'

Courage does not promise either outcome. Courage asks a different question: What is the next step that keeps me aligned with what I value?

So What

This is a spiritual question because our fears do more than shape our feelings. They can quietly shape our calendars, relationships, institutions, and communities.

If we are afraid of conflict, we may call silence peace. If we are afraid of making a mistake, we may call inaction prudence. If we are afraid of losing comfort, we may call the familiar way tradition. If we are afraid of one another's differences, we may call distance safety. Fear is especially powerful when it can borrow the language of our Values while keeping us from embodying them.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition does not ask us to feel brave at all times. It asks us to place Love at the center and to let that Love take form through Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, and Justice.

Transformation needs courage because becoming means releasing some version of what has been. Pluralism needs courage because listening across difference may unsettle our certainty. Equity needs courage because making room at the table may require changing the table, sharing power, or noticing whose comfort has been treated as the norm. Justice needs courage because conscience sometimes asks us to speak, organize, witness, or act without knowing whether the result will come quickly—or at all.

And Love needs courage because Love is more than warmth toward the people who make us comfortable. Love asks us to remain present to truth. Love may call us toward repair, toward a boundary, toward solidarity, or toward the humility of beginning again.

Yet none of this means each of us must do everything.

A congregation is not strengthened when a few people believe courage means carrying every need until they collapse. Shared ministry means that one person may speak while another listens; one may organize while another prepares food; one may offer a ride while another makes a call; one may lead while another notices who has been left out. There are many roles in faithful action. Courage becomes sustainable when we discern our portion and trust others to carry theirs.

Interdependence changes the question from ‘Am I brave enough to do all of this?’ to ‘What is mine to do, what is ours to do, and how will we support one another?’

Imagine a smoke alarm sounding in a house. Its noise is meant to get our attention. We would be unwise to remove the battery without checking for fire. But we would also be unwise to stand beneath it forever, studying the sound while smoke fills the room. We notice. We investigate. We determine what is real. Then we respond.

Fear can function in a similar way. It says, ‘Pay attention.’ Courage helps us discern what kind of attention is needed. Is there actual danger? Is there an old experience asking for care? Is there a skill I need to learn? Is there support I need to request? Or is this simply the trembling that comes when a life begins to move beyond its familiar edges?

This is where the season of becoming becomes more than a lovely theme. Becoming is not only discovering who we hope to be. It is learning how to meet the resistance that appears when we begin living differently.

We chose a direction. We made a plan. Courage is the practice of staying in relationship with that direction when fear would rather decide for us.

Not recklessness. Not denial. Not perfection. Practice.

Now What

So what do we practice when fear arrives? Not seven things. Not a complete reinvention of our lives or our congregation. One focused practice.

I want to offer four movements: Notice, Listen, Clarify, and Act.

First, notice.

Name what is present without shaming yourself for it. ‘I am afraid this conversation will change the relationship.’ ‘I am afraid I will disappoint someone.’ ‘I am afraid I will fail.’ ‘I am afraid I will succeed and be asked to become more visible.’

Naming fear does not make it larger. Often, it makes fear more particular—and what is particular can be met more wisely than a vague sense that everything is wrong.

Second, listen.

Ask what the fear is trying to protect. Your safety? Your belonging? Your sense of competence? Your familiar identity?

Listen for the truth it may carry, but also listen for exaggeration, old stories, and inherited messages. Fear may be a teacher, but it is not always the truth.

Third, clarify.

Which Value belongs in this moment? Perhaps Love asks for an honest conversation. Perhaps Equity asks whose needs have been overlooked. Perhaps Transformation asks you to release a habit that once protected you but now keeps your life too small. Perhaps Interdependence asks you to stop trying to manage alone and invite someone to accompany you.

Then, act.

Choose one step small enough to take and real enough to matter. Send the email. Ask the question. Attend the meeting. Schedule the appointment. Offer the apology. Set the boundary. Request help. Try again with what the last attempt taught you. Or decide, with clarity rather than avoidance, that this is not your step to take.

Courage does not always look like moving forward. Sometimes courage is stopping. Sometimes it is leaving. Sometimes it is resting long enough to recover our capacity. Sometimes it is saying no so that our yes can remain honest. The question is not whether the action looks impressive. The question is whether it is aligned with Love and with the life we are trying to practice.

And when the step is larger than one person can carry, bring it into community. Shared ministry begins with honest communication. Tell someone what you are trying to do. Ask for encouragement or accompaniment. Name the role you can offer and the limit you need to honor. Make room for another person's gifts rather than assuming responsibility must always return to the same hands.

This week, I invite you to choose one place where fear has been making too many decisions. Not every fear. One.

Write down four words: Notice. Listen. Clarify. Act.

Notice what you feel. Listen for what the fear is protecting or revealing. Clarify the Value you want to embody. Act through one faithful step—or ask someone to take that step with you.

At Ingathering, we said that paths are made by walking. The following week, we gave our next step a place. Today, we acknowledge that the path may still be frightening. We may walk with uncertainty. We may walk with memories of earlier failure. We may even walk with anxiety about what will be required if our hopes begin to take form.

But we do not walk alone.

We carry the wisdom of our own experience. We carry the Values that help us recognize our direction. We carry the memory of ancestors and communities who acted without guarantees. And we carry one another—not by asking any one person to bear everything, but by contributing our faithful portions to a shared path.

Courage is not a possession we either have or lack. It is a relationship we practice: a relationship with fear, with truth, with our Values, and with the people whose presence helps us remember what matters.

So when fear arrives, we do not have to banish it before we begin. We can make room for its questions without handing it our whole life. We can listen, discern, and choose.

Choose one Value.
Choose one practice.
Choose one next step.

Then let courage be the breath that carries you into it—not because you are certain, not because you are unafraid, but because Love is still at the center and becoming is still possible.

May we have the courage to meet ourselves honestly, the wisdom to distinguish fear from truth, and the humility to ask for company along the way.

May our courage make Transformation possible, Interdependence visible, Equity and Justice more real, and Love recognizable in the life we create together.

Let us continue becoming.

Amen. Ase. Blessed Be. Have a courageous, wise, and productive week ahead. Thank you for your time and attention.