“Average Heroes”
Message by Rev. Sarah Richards, AUU 10/25/26

Richard Gilbert’s prayer-poem begins,

> “When we are overwhelmed with the world
> And cannot see our way clear,
> When life seems a struggle between tedium and apathy
> Or frenzy and exhaustion[i]…”

As the midterm elections draw closer, it seems to me that the frenzy and exhaustion mostly comes from constant messages about threats to personal safety, comfort, status, and livelihood—threats from *those* people in *those* places portrayed as most different from ourselves and our social location: the very wealthy or the very poor, alt right or antifa, old or young, people of whichever religion, whichever race, whichever sexuality or gender identification that is supposedly most different from our own. Resistance to these divisive messages takes a kind of patient courage, a willingness to go beyond what we are told about the other. It also takes compassion, as Rev. Ann elaborated on last week, and this morning, I’ll add another necessary attribute: imagination. I suggest that when models of moral courage and ethical behavior seem scarce in the real world, we can turn to fiction, and specifically heroic characters for inspiration and even guidance.

Working on her PhD thesis during the Covid epidemic, author Joy Clarkson theorized that readers can learn from, and even take on, the attributes of fictional characters like Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee from *The Lord of the Rings*. "You have to have a strong image of what is good, to be able to strive towards it, if that makes sense," Clarkson offered. "We can't just condemn all the sadness and evil in the world. We have to have an idea of what goodness would actually look like if we're going to fight for it and strain for it and bring that to other people.[ii]" Take a moment to bring to mind a favorite courageous character…

How about the Owl in our story this morning? He dreamed of being a knight: “He would be brave. He would be clever. And he would have many friends.” And when he was serving as a night shift knight and the giant, hungry dragon flew in, he was brave – he *talked* to the dragon; he was clever, he convinced the dragon that pizza was a better snack than himself. And the talking and the pizza led them to discover commonalities between a small, feathered bird and an enormous scaley dragon.

Owl made new friends; because of this – and the pizza, he saved many knights’ lives.

How about Charlotte A. Cavatica, the barn spider in the book, *Charlotte’s Web*? She manages to save her friend Wilbur from the slaughterhouse by spinning words like “Some

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Pig," "Terrific" and "Radiant" in her web above his pen, which make him more valuable as celebrity than sausage. Our director of PCY, Elizabeth Baldes cites Charlotte as favorite fictional hero because "she is clever and kind. She embodies the idea of "start where you are, use what you have, do what you can." What an affirming message for humans who may feel beleaguered and overwhelmed by the challenges before us. We might not have super powers, but we have some powers, and if we use them to do what we can, we can be average heroes.

My personal favorite is the cowardly lion from the movie The Wizard of Oz. The Cowardly Lion is a perfect example of mistaking fearlessness for courage—because he is afraid of nearly everything—he thinks he therefore lacks courage: "I could show my prowess, be a lion not a mowess if I only had the nerve." But then he joins Dorothy, Tin Man and Scarecrow on their trip to Oz, and helps to defeat the Wicked Witch. Did those of us who have seen the movie learn along with the lion that he showed bravery all along the way, even while he was expressing his fears? The one self-help book that I think I benefitted from during a time of great uncertainty in my life is entitled, "Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway." I think that would be a wonderful motto for average heroes like us.

Frodo, Owl, Charlotte, the Cowardly Lion, in very different ways, teach us the lesson that ordinary beings, human or otherwise, can transform their own and others' lives by using their imagination, ingenuity, and hard-earned skills. Another commonality is that these fictional heroes make connections across social and even species' boundaries. And their achievements are not made by them alone. Owl needed the dragon, Charlotte needed her barnyard friends. When he is invited to go with the others to see the Wizard, the Cowardly Lion asks, "wouldn't you feel degraded to be seen in the company of a cowardly lion? I would." His friends' simple act of accepting him into the group gave him confidence. Facing all the dangers involved in getting to Oz, and then vanquishing the Wicked Witch together, as a team, were transformative for the lion and the others. So another lesson we can take away from our favorite fictional characters is the reminder that having faith in each other catalyzes courage.

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Did you know that there is a living example of that lesson right here at Albany UU? I just learned about it myself recently. Talking with staff members about this service, I got a tip that "Brian Frank always wears a Captain America t-shirt." Here's what I learned from talking to Brian, who is one of the Our Whole Lives (OWL) instructors and a longtime PCY guide. The whole thing started as a joke between Brian and a youth in his first OWL class – the teen asking "where's Captain Brian?" As he was still getting to know the students and vice versa, he realized that by wearing the t-shirt every week, it would help them pick him out from other adults. It grew from there LORE, with his family buying him more shirts to keep it going. Brian told me that he's noticed several meanings from the Captain America t-shirt. The first is to be recognizable to the kids – although there are different shirts, they all carry the same shield symbol. Unlike a nametag, the shirt has no words, so non-readers like the youngest kids he works with can easily identify him. Brian says by this practice, he is able to communicate consistency, reliability, and dependability – qualities especially important for children and youth.

Secondly, Captain America is from the youths' culture, not adults, and he wears it for them, not for himself. The character has a child's morality – he doesn't lie simply because one should tell the truth. Brian told me, "Maybe I'm learning from it, maybe I'm more truthful." [A side note here: while Captain America is considered a superhero, he doesn't have superhuman abilities. He was injected with experimental "super-soldier serum" that made him as strong as humanly possible. It's his shield, made of made-up materials vibranium and adamantium that has both defensive and offensive powers that is the "super" part.]

Brian notes that important distinction, telling me that Captain America is the person who picks up the shield, it gets passed from one person to the next. Anyone can pick up the shield and do something to help their community.

Another meaning Brian has gained from this experience relates to the connections he's made with people of all ages here. He's preached about his experiences in PCY, and specific curricula while wearing the t-shirt, and will be in the pulpit in 2 weeks, in fact. His example encourages people to find their way to being in community here. "People have said 'hey, you should be on the board, or on this committee' but being with the kids is the best place for me to contribute." Brian encourages us to reach out to the people farthest from you. "I just turned 65, I'm thinking about Medicare and all that, but I learned so much from working with those Pre-K kids." He came to Albany UU as a new atheist, but says he has learned about faith in his experiences here.

And here I see a secret power of the fictional characters who inhabit times and places vastly different from our own—their invitation to imagination that makes it possible for us to be

affected by and even inspired by their courage—we recognize qualities we wish we had, and live into them. If we can take heart from Frodo Baggins and Charlotte, and Cowardly Lion, and Captain America, might we be able to make connections with our real life neighbors whose realities differ greatly from ours?

Another thing we can take away from these varied characters is the reminder that courage is not one thing in one moment, but can take different forms and change over time. Therefore, let us look for characters of courage where we least expect, with whom we have the least in common, ask ourselves, what are the dragons they are dealing with. And sometimes it turns out the dragons have fears to face down, too.

One last point. At the beginning of my reflection, I said that our times call for courage—and right here in Albany Unitarian Universalist there is a more immediate demand for imagination that takes us beyond our fears of the unknown. The Ministerial Search Committee has collected the hopes and dreams for new ministerial leadership, and is fashioning the picture of the congregation and its vision of ministry to share with candidates. When the new minister is called, another communal adventure begins. The whole process might be seen as a version of going off to see the Wizard, or to slay -- or make friends with -- a dragon. In addition to gathering wisdom from our past, the best practices of other congregations, we will benefit from those fictional examples of courage who spark our imagination. Therefore, let us look around for stories that tell of communities of courage.

Friends, may we recognize courage in ourselves and our companions;
That is not dramatic, that elicits no fanfare;
That commands little notice by the world,
That is forgotten and taken for granted....
May we know such courage
And quietly celebrate its presence among us.
Feel the fear and do it anyway. Amen and Blessed be.

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[i] https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/courage-patience

[ii] https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/fictional-characters-inspire-real-world-virtues-bc-salon-owner-offers-music-for-the-soul-1.5619134/fictional-characters-can-inspire-real-world-courage-and-virtue-scholar-says-1.5619147 accessed 10/19/26.