“What Have We Got to Lose?”

Message by Rev. Sarah Richards, AUU 10/4/26

An excerpt from the blessing “All That We Have Been, All That We Will Become” by Rev. Leslie Ahuvah Fails.

All that we have been separately
and all that we will become together
is stretched out before and behind us
like stars scattered across a canvas of sky.
We stand at the precipice, arms locked
together like tandem skydivers
working up the courage to jump.

Tell me, friends:
What have we got to lose?[i]

I imagine that this question – phrased differently and in different languages has been shared by every democratically – organized congregation for centuries. We are all in the rollercoaster ride together – in the UU tradition, we’ve promised each other/made covenants to “stand at the precipice, arms locked together…working up the courage to jump.” And when you think of it, each of us had to make our own leap in becoming a part of that congregation, each one of us had to ask ourselves to take a risk.

And risk, according to an analysis of scientific sources,[ii] is the first of three components defining courage. The other two are intention, and a goal “that may benefit others.” So courage = risk + intention + goal to help. Before we explore the communal courage of this congregation, let’s consider how personal courage shows up from several AUU individuals. For Chuck Manning, courage relates to “overcoming my basic introverted nature and desire to avoid conflict.” He cites participation in anti-racism vigils and distributing “Racism Hurts Everyone” buttons; support from

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other UUs and his wife Barb helps. Also, since 2016, Chuck has gone door knocking for political candidates. He says, “I always have to be ready for a negative response although the positives have always outweighed the negatives. That makes it easier each time I do it.”

From Debbie Brown: “In my education career, putting the needs of a child with disabilities ahead of a teacher’s idea of what was the right approach called for courage on my part. It would be easy not to step in, but finding a mutually developed solution made me realize that negotiation with and compassion for both parties took having the courage to stand up for what I believed. Most of the time it worked!!!”

Liza McKinley recounted that as a college freshman in 1975, she joined the four other out lesbians in challenging anti-lesbian school housing policy. They did this by holding unsanctioned “meet a lesbian” Q & A sessions in dorms. She says, “It took every ounce of whatever to remain open to the questioners as getting angry would defeat our purpose. We were trying to make connections and build relationships even when it seemed so impossible. We left those sessions shaking and close to, if not in tears. But we always showed up for the next one, hearts open and hopeful.”

In all of these stories, we see courage not only in taking the initial risk, but to keep taking it over and over. And we see that taking those risks with the support and encouragement of at least one other person makes it less daunting.

These examples, and Jeff’s too, are taking risks in a public setting, but there are the same themes in private courageous acts. A relative with clinical depression has described the courage demanded by doing the impossible tasks of showering, toothbrushing and other self-care routines, and that the support of others, especially from those who have been through it themselves, can be helpful.

As educator Amy Eva, writes,
"courage doesn't have to look dramatic or fearless. We express it in both bold and quiet ways. In fact, "general courage," the confident or seemingly brazen actions perceived by others, differs from "personal courage," those actions that are courageous in the minds of the actors themselves. It all depends on how you view the challenge in front of you and the fears associated with performing a particular behavior. In other words, these days, some of us may need significant "personal courage" to get out of bed and face the day on behalf of those… we value and care about.[iii]"

We all have times in our lives when we're not feeling general OR personal courage – Amy Eva gleaned from her research six ways to develop it. The first one might be the most challenging: **See yourself as courageous**. This can be in the form of daily affirmations, psyching yourself up for a challenge, or by spending time to note down when you've done courageous things any time in your life. Jeff, Chuck, Debbie and Liza sharing their stories are great examples of self-reinforcement – thank you!

The second courage-growing method is also tough, especially in terms of taking risks to our social status, and ego: **Get comfortable with 'mistakes.'** Fear of failure is one of the main obstacles to courage – Eva cites a study which found that more resilient individuals had lower levels of perfectionism and a more positive way of explaining past events, such as "I haven't achieved this goal yet, but I'll try something else next." It takes a lot of practice to get comfortable with mistakes. One exercise is again, write it down – this time you write down a recent *mistake*. Crumple up the paper and then write about what you learned or how you've grown from the mistake. This helps you put mistakes in the context of the learning process – emphasis on process – that is your life.

The third technique for growing your courage is deceptively simple: keep trying. Think of the Hummingbird's perseverance in our Story[iv] – she overcame her fear of physical danger, of the judgment of her friends, and most importantly, she kept doing the best that she could. Perseverance is inspiring to others, and it can be taught. In another study cited by Eva, "when adults model persistence in working toward a goal, infants as young as 15 months tend to mimic that behavior." So it's important to share your own experiences of perseverance with others– overcoming failures, mistakes, fears, keeping with it.

Here's a personal example: this band and drama nerd went out for HS track, came in last every race but the coach used me as an example because I improved my time by more than a minute over the course of the season. The fact that I didn't become a runner from that experience is beside the point ☺

Which brings us to courage development method four: **Look for the heroes**. One example: Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement – leading activist and scholar of ecology, development and gender. Maathai is a hero to many, including the musician Lea Morris – who heard Maathai's story of The Hummingbird and wrote a song about it. The ripple effects of courage… an article in a psych journal says:
"the individuals we admire may represent some aspect of our ideal selves as they demonstrate moral courage through difficult times and a desire to do good in the world. They can also inspire us to live more meaningful lives.[v]"
Who are the heroes who have inspired you to be courageous? Going deeper to consider the risks they took, values they acted on – maybe ones you share, is a good exercise for this. Of course, your heroes may be people you know well – you might share their stories, maybe even write a

song. That way you're not only growing your own courage from their model, you're helping others to do it too.

That thing about values we share with our heroes – that's crucial because it's sometimes easier to recognize them in others than ourselves. We can start there as we try out method five: **Clarify your values**. Here are the key questions that Eva suggests:

- What do I value in myself?
- What do I "stand for"?
- What is important to me?
- What are some of my successes and accomplishments?

Eva puts it this way: "During those dark, winter mornings when you really don't want to crawl out of bed and face the day, remember that courage can also be a very private, personal act. There will always be risks and challenges to face, but what really matters most—in your gut? Is it love, learning, curiosity, compassion, hope? How do these values inform who you are and how you show up in the world?[vi]"

This congregation is one place that we can delve deep on these questions, be affirmed and challenged; where we all can try the sixth and last method to find and grow our personal courage: **Become part of a social force for courage.** Eva mentions "social and emotional communities of practice" specifically for teachers and students which "nurture a sense of belonging, find emotional support, and engage in collective action.[vii]" That is what Albany Unitarian Universalist strives to be – it's right in the **Vision statement**: "Albany UU will be an inclusive, welcoming congregation. Our sacred work is to lift hearts, broaden minds and do justice in the world, in service of building beloved community."

What I hear as I read these words is plenty of potential risk, intention, and goals to benefit the whole congregation, as well as the individuals

involved. Every one of the committees and groups in this congregation contribute to being a social force for courage.

At every moment, we have opportunities to find and grow courage, whether it takes the form of leading a revolution or getting out of bed. In this congregation, at every moment, we have the opportunity to act boldly *and* quietly, fulfilling the commitments we've made to each other.

May we see ourselves as courageous, get comfortable making mistakes, keep trying, look for heroes, clarify our values, and continue to take part in this social force for courage.

May we, like the hummingbird, know that we're doing the best we can.

Friends, I began this message with the first lines of the blessing "All That We Have Been, All That We Will Become.[viii]" I want to leave you with it in its entirety.

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We stand at the precipice, arms locked
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Tell me, friends:
What have we got to lose?
Our fear of failure?
Our mistrust of our own talents?

What have we got to lose?
A poverty of the spirit?
The lie that we are alone?

What wonders await us in the space
between the first leap
and the moment our feet, our wheels
however we move our bodies
across this precious earth
touch down softly on unknown soil?
What have we got to lose
that we can't replace with some
previously unimaginable joy?

Blessed are you, Spirit of Life
who has sustained us, enlivened us
and enabled us to reach this moment.
Give us courage in our leaping,
and gratitude in our landing.
And share with us in the joy of a long
and fruitful ministry together.

Amen. Blessed be.

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[i] https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/all-we-have-been-all-we-will-become

[ii] https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_ways_to_find_your_courage_during_challenging_times

[iii] Ibid.
[iv] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_ZAD44myCo&list=PLwBHPKLxxcdXzuEiAFfBly2_EID2GdxzY&index=8

[v] https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_ways_to_find_your_courage_during_challenging_times
[vi] Ibid.
[vii] Ibid.
[viii] https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/all-we-have-been-all-we-will-become