



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Here Be Dragons”

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Centering Thoughts

A ship in harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for. John A. Shedd

Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers but to be fearless when facing them.
Rabindranath Tagore

*Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day
that says I'll try again tomorrow.* Mary Anne Radmacher

Sermon

Perseus plays the role of a hero who rescues a damsel in distress, but he really can't be a model of courage. After all, he had a magic sword and he was half-divine. For the rest of us mere mortals, saving damsels or anyone else presents a much riskier business. Those who helped rescue Oregon college students and take down a gunman this past week exhibited great courage. When they entered harm's way they carried no magic swords and had no guarantee they would come out safe. They deserve to be called heroes; our hearts go out to the families of all victims of violence.

Despite numerous fictional heroes slaying sea monsters and dragons, on maps sea monsters and sailor-explorers share a real history. But it remains a myth that the familiar expression, “here be dragons” appears on many maps. In fact, it appears on only one, the Hunt-Lenox Globe dated to about 1506. Although many ancient maps *picture* sea dragons, serpents and monsters, historians scratch their heads over how this *expression* became so closely associated with maps.

In addition to possibly fictitious sea monsters, real exotic animals such as elephants, scorpions, and lions appeared on maps in the actual lands where they could be found. Some historians infer that mapmakers thought the sea dragons equally real. Perhaps they were artistic renderings of sailors' actual descriptions of giant squid, octopus, whales, and other amazing creatures never encountered before.

Historians also know many maps were not meant to be accurate representations of real geographical features. Instead, they were to show cosmological and religious ideas. Jeremy Harwood, in his book *To the Ends of the Earth: 100 Maps that Changed the World* (page 16-17), describes an example – a surviving Babylonian world map carved on a clay tablet from the 6th century BCE with an accompanying ancient text to explain it. Harwood writes:

The Babylonian world map reflects the spiritual beliefs of the people who created it, most notably in the way the world is depicted as circular and surrounded by water. Fitting in

with what we know of Babylonian cosmology, the eight islands [pictured] are the links between Earth's seas, the heavenly ocean, and the animal constellations that inhabit it. Yet the Babylonians were by no means the first or the only society to link the notions of cosmology and mapping. Cosmological maps were devised by ancient cultures all over the world—from Egypt and India to North and South America—and they also feature significantly in medieval Christianity and in Islam.

Cosmological maps were intended to be statements of belief. They are symbolic of the worldview of the cultures of their creators, and are reflections of the religious beliefs of the societies of their times.

If we look at early maps through a cosmological lens, the sea monsters in waters west of Europe might represent something more symbolic, though no less real to their makers. These creatures might warn of uncivilized pagan territory where evil awaited. Monsters and dragons have long been associated in the western world with evil. The folktale of St. George and the Dragon tells of a symbolic slaying of the devil by a Christian warrior. This folktale builds upon an earlier pre-Christian Persian folktale.

For literate monks who made many early maps, the geography of the world had to fit with their religious ideas. These maps reflected their faith in a divine order and plan for humanity. Not surprisingly, Jerusalem lies at the center of their world maps and they are oriented east, towards the Garden of Eden and the Holy Land, not north.

Dragon-filled or not, ancient religious maps and modern travel maps warn us of dangers and guide us through safe passages. We need maps and modern GPS devices to accurately reflect reality and get us from here to there. We need illustrated maps to show us places we might only explore from our armchairs. We also might need or want maps to indicate where our life journeys should take us, which sea channels to choose, and where the safe harbors lie. But unless we believe in oracles and fortune tellers, we must navigate the world without them. Except for the shared wisdom of our parents, teachers, other similar guides, and our own learned insights, the deep, dark waters we travel through each day remain filled with unfathomable mystery and maybe a sea monster or two.

Without maps or crystal balls, we must live courageously. We must be like early explorers plying unknown seas, facing unknown dangers.

It's clear that heroes show physical vulnerability when they get in harm's way. I hope none of us will ever need that kind of courage. But I do hope we all have enough courage to be spiritually vulnerable.

To be spiritually courageous is to be vulnerable; it is to open our hearts and souls to possible pain. Spiritual courage means facing no clear answers to life's many questions. Spiritual courage means taking the time to listen to other people's answers, trying out new solutions for yourself, and even changing course when what you're doing isn't working.

At a minimum this includes taking the risk of accepting a new job or not, getting married or not, or moving from Athens or not. These decisions take courage because they risk unhappiness. Because these choices typically involve limited risk, they don't require overwhelming courage. These decisions can be reversed or might even generate new, better choices.

At most, spiritual courage includes taking larger, more difficult risks like facing our fears. I think the most difficult existential fear we avoid is the fact of our own mortality. Immortal gods we aren't.

No one wants to admit we'll die one day. Many terminally ill patients refuse to acknowledge to family or friends they're dying, or vice versa, leaving many important feelings left unsaid and tasks left undone. They pretend all will be well. Many elderly adults avoid discussing their inevitable death, avoid completing wills, avoid facing their own declines, and convince themselves they are as healthy and alert as they were years earlier. Many children of elderly parents avoid raising questions with Mom or Dad about what their final wishes are. I frequently hear the frustrations of adult children with parents who refuse to make necessary life changes. And many others who are neither ill nor old refuse to consider what death means or what they wish for their remains upon their death.

If any of these situations describe you, can you be more courageous? Can you risk being vulnerable to your fears about death? Facing death requires spiritual courage.

It takes spiritual courage for a gay or lesbian or transgender person to come out of the closet. They connect within to a strength that lets them say to the world, "This is who I am." They connect to their hearts which enables them to stop living someone else's idea of who they should be.

It takes spiritual courage for someone who has been directed all their life by family members to be a doctor or lawyer to finally say, "No. I want to be an artist or teacher or plumber." That person has faced their fears and also decided to stop living someone else's idea of who they should be. It takes spiritual courage to ask, "Who am I?" "Does my life have purpose or meaning?" For me, life is made meaningful by ministering to others, by listening to you, by walking with you through life and death, and by standing beside you as you open yourself to your own answers.

It takes spiritual courage to make a values inventory of our lives. To ask, "Am I living in accord with my values?" "What am I avoiding?" "What am I frightened of?"

If these existential fears don't faze you, perhaps others do. Try volunteering at a homeless shelter. Or becoming a mentor to an at-risk youth. Or giving away more of your income to worthwhile charities. Or asking someone to share why they believe, or don't believe, in God – without pre-judging their answers. What is it you don't feel brave enough to try? Can you become more vulnerable, more courageous?

Social worker and author Brené Brown agrees that courage means opening ourselves to vulnerability. She said in an interview with Krista Tippett for *On Being*, "To me, vulnerability is courage. It's about the willingness to show up and be seen in our lives. And in those moments when we show up, I think those are the most powerful meaning-making moments of our lives even if they don't go well. I think they define who we are."

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/bren%C3%A9-brown-on-deep-shame-and-the-courage-to-be-vulnerable/transcript/6065>

How then, do we build up our capacity for greater spiritual courage and vulnerability? I think taking small risks is a start. Tell someone you appreciate their presence in your life. Risk a little embarrassment. If the person responds poorly, it won't hurt for long. But think what you might gain if you take that risk. Little successes and little failures create resiliency, enabling us to bounce back when we experience something more challenging.

I know each and everyone here this morning has some level of spiritual courage. Unitarian Universalism doesn't provide the answers to the spiritual questions I've raised this morning, so you must have some level of fearlessness in you. But I trust that you can build up your level of courage.

This month as we focus on courage and exploration reflect on these questions as you take a walk in nature, openly discuss what you may be avoiding over coffee with a friend, or raise your level of vulnerability in a small group session. Become an explorer and plow through uncharted seas. What results will be worthwhile.

As the words of our unison reading say, you are not alone. Though we navigate our own ships, we have many companions, riding the waves alongside us.

May it always be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What type of risk-taker are you? Do you boldly go into uncharted waters or do you require maps that show safe passages around dangerous shoals?
2. What has been the biggest risk you've taken in life? How did it feel to take that risk and how did it turn out? What did you discover about yourself?
3. What gives you spiritual courage or strength to help you manage tough times and unknowns?