

The Colors of Change
Rev. Kathleen Ellis
Easter Sunday, 23 March 2008

Toni Morrison delivered the eulogy for James Baldwin with these words:

"Yours was the courage to live life, in and from its belly, as well as beyond its edges, to see and say what it was to recognize and identify evil, but never fear or stand in awe of it."

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In every age and time, courage is needed to stand tall against injustice or to overcome personal challenges. Minority status, illness, accident, natural disaster, aging, and death demand a certain kind of courage from those who experience them and everyone who cares for them.

Diane Schultz wrote me about two women of courage: "Helen Keller overcame great obstacles to become a person of substance who worked for peace and justice. And, on a more personal note, she overcame great shyness. Also, she was accused of plagiarism I think in her early adulthood or adolescence -- someone had read a book to her as a child that she had forgotten, but when she was writing a children's book years later, it was almost word for word the same book. She was horribly embarrassed and scared ever after that anything she wrote might not be her own work -- but she had causes she cared about and kept writing, anyway."

I had not heard about the accusation of plagiarism before Diane told me. On the web I found that it was a story that Keller wrote as an eleven year old, "The Frost King," that later turned out to be a retelling of a story by Margaret Canby called "The Frost Fairies." Mark Twain's words were used in her defense. He argued that all human ideas and writings are at least in part a repetition of someone else's thoughts.

Diane also praised her maternal grandmother as a woman of courage who enrolled at UT when there were only one or two women's dorms where all the female students were required to live. One of the few degrees they were

allowed to study for was in Home Ec. So she did that, got a Bachelor's in Home Ec (and was a wonderful cook and seamstress in great demand), then got a graduate degree in Library Science. At some point in there she met Diane's grandfather and saw something in him that no one else did. They married and had three children in quick succession.

After the third baby (Diane's Aunt Mary) she was told that another pregnancy would kill her. So she had her tubes tied in the early 1930s, when it was far from a common occurrence. And after her children were grown she went back to work and taught English to junior high kids, a job that is not for the faint-hearted. She was an amazing woman, evidently beloved by everyone who knew her. Late in life she started knitting, excelled at it, and that's where Diane got her interest in knitting.

Jon Montgomery's Aunt May Steinmesch was the first licensed woman architect in the United States, and a founding member of the first women's architectural organization. In 1915 four young women in the School of Architecture at Washington University, St. Louis, organized "La Confrerie Alongiv" ("Alongiv" is Vignola backwards, the birthplace in Italy of Renaissance architect Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola).

When Steinmesch graduated, the only job available to her as a woman was draftsman. However, during the war, all the male architects were drafted and Steinmesch moved to California to work for the government as an architect. At war's end, the men came back and she was demoted to draftsman. She quit that job and started her own architectural firm in San Francisco. It takes a lot of courage to be the first in your field.

The political world almost demands the courage to make change. Let's take the three presidential candidates:

Barack Obama has said, "I have asserted a firm conviction -- a conviction routed in my faith in God and my faith in the American people -- that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds and that, in fact, we have no choice. We have no choice, if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union." Obama has courageously opened a conversation about race, even though hatemongers denounce him as a Muslim traitor to America.

Hillary Clinton persevered in her campaign for U.S. President in spite of having lost 11 primaries in a row. She was even recognized by Newt Gingrich for her courage, integrity, and openness. Critics have hoped he would endorse her so as to double the factor of hatred against her. She has not given up her dream. For years she has worked for human rights, children's rights, health care, and women's rights in the face of vicious attacks against her.

In his book *Why Courage Matters*, John McCain says courage comes about when "our fear is overcome by our conscience and our beliefs and forces us to act." He and Democratic Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin were honored in 1999 with a Profiles in Courage award for their work on radical campaign finance reform, especially a ban on "soft money." McCain, in particular, was at odds with his party leadership and barely won reelection by just 51 percent. The McCain-Feingold reforms were enacted in 2002, though challenges to the law have continued. There's something in it for everyone to hate.

Presidential nominees face a lot of mud-slinging and hateful rhetoric, unfortunately. I hope that we can encourage a more mature discussion of the issues, no matter whether we are green or libertarian, republican or democrat.

I had an opportunity to attend a lecture at the University of Texas by James Yee, a West Point graduate who had been based in Ft. Lewis as an Army chaplain. After 9/11 he was sent to be the chaplain to the prisoners at Guantánamo and to educate the military and civilian staff. His knowledge was sometimes used to harass the prisoners through religious abuse. Meanwhile, he improved conditions for the prisoners and received praise and recognition for his work. As a further reward, he was given two weeks of R&R after 10 months at Guantánamo.

To his astonishment, he was detained in Florida on some vague charges of carrying classified documents out of Guantánamo. These turned out to be papers on Syria that he was studying for a course in international relations. He had hoped to use his leave to complete the one assignment left for the course. He was transported to a prison in Virginia, blindfolded and with

headphones that blocked his hearing, a tactic he had witnessed at Guantánamo. Without notifying his family or allowing him a phone call, he was held in solitary confinement for 76 days.

Later, he received commendations for exemplary service, as though nothing had happened to him. He resigned his commission and was honorably discharged. Now as a civilian, Yee has set out to let people know what happened to him and to raise concerns about the erosion of habeus corpus.

Opportunities for courage are sometimes thrust upon us. In Houston and Austin, Mayor Bill White and Mayor Will Wynn have been praised for their response to thousands of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita evacuees who were forced from their homes and into cities completely foreign to them. They both risked substantial public criticism for canceling convention center business in order to provide temporary shelter for our unexpected guests. I understand that Will Wynn trundled large laundry carts across the street to the Hilton. When management said they couldn't help, Mayor Wynn demanded to know where the laundry facilities were so he could wash them himself. Suddenly the hotel staff found the means to help.

Meanwhile, Doris Voitier had been a math teacher for more than 30 years when she became Superintendent of Schools in 2004 for St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. One year later, every building in the parish was damaged or destroyed by the storms. Voitier, without support from the state or the federal government, worked around the clock to reopen schools for any students who might return. She borrowed a computer, took out loans to hire disaster clean-up teams, acquired portable classrooms and rented trailers to house a minimal teaching staff that agreed to work for reduced pay. Within a few weeks, 300 students had returned out of more than 8,000. By the fall of 2007, she had opened five schools to serve nearly 4,000 students. Sometimes you just can't wait for the bureaucracy to come to the rescue.

Three Cups of Tea is the remarkable story of Greg Mortenson, once a mountain climber who tried unsuccessfully to scale K2, a formidable challenge high in the Himalayas. Exhausted and ill, Mortenson became separated from everyone else, spent the night on a glacier, and accidentally followed the wrong trail down and stumbled into the village of Korphe, Pakistan. The people took him in and nursed him to health.

As he grew a little stronger, especially when he was with the children, he would think of his little sister Christa who had died just months before. He asked to see their school. But there was no school. A teacher came three days a week from a neighboring village, but not on that day. Without a teacher, the children sang the national anthem then sat in a circle with only sticks for pencils, copying their multiplication tables in the dirt. So in memory of Christa, and in gratitude to the people of Korphe, Mortenson promised to come back and build a school.

It took at least two years and enormous effort to raise the money, buy supplies, build a bridge to carry them across, and help the villagers do the construction brick by brick. He didn't stop there, but has since 1993 built nearly 60 schools in northern Pakistan and in Afghanistan, in the most remote villages in the world. It takes about \$50,000 spread over five years to build a school, maintain it, and pay teacher salaries. Through sheer poverty, remote access, tribal warfare, U.S. warfare, and a devastating earthquake, the people have struggled to survive. Mortenson wants us to understand that if we want to fight terrorism, we have to educate the children, particularly the girls.

In *Three Cups of Tea*, Mortenson says, "Unfortunately education is very ambiguous. It's not tangible, and so it's very hard to sell versus the guy who says, 'I can design a daisy cutter bomb that can kill 20 terrorists,' or 'I have this laptop gizmo for a hundred dollars that I can send to a million kids in Pakistan.' Literacy is difficult to sell to people because it takes one or two generations to see results. But it definitely has the biggest impact to really help societies, not only economically, but to empower people, which is integral to the democratic process."

On this Easter, millions in the world honor the courage shown by Jesus, and celebrate rebirth and new life. Courageous people in every walk of life may help us work toward a resurrection of the human spirit and honor and cherish the divine spark of life in all of God's creatures.

Amen