

Soul Matters

A Kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, and ideas to engage hearts and minds



Be an UPstander (Not a Bystander)

February often gets labeled the month of love, but a closer look makes it clear that courage may have an even greater claim to the month's heart. For instance, Valentine's is surely about love, but isn't it also about the courage to be vulnerable? Groundhog Day celebrates the courage to stick your neck out even when the forecast is not clear. Susan B. Anthony's birthday is in February and she is nothing if not about having the courage of our convictions! For our Christian friends, Lent starts in February, with its profound challenge to have the courage to look honestly at yourself and what needs to change. And of course there's our church's annual budget campaign which challenge for us to have the courage to dream big and talk openly about the importance of money.

And you know what strikes me most when I look over this list? The *ordinariness* of it all! That's right. Being vulnerable. Sticking your neck out a little. Living your convictions daily. Being honest about your flaws. Pushing yourself to talk about uncomfortable topics like money. It's all very ordinary stuff. That's not to minimize it. It actually elevates it. It reminds us that courage isn't a once-in-a-lifetime thing done in uniquely daring moments, but is also a *way of life* that must be lived out each and every day.

Yes, there are those stories of pulling the stranger from the burning car or standing up to the abusive spouse and going through with the divorce. We all sit in awe of the civil rights workers who put their lives on the line for justice or the soldiers who are willing to give their lives for their brothers or sisters in arms. But in addition to such dramatic acts that alter history, there are daily choices that prevent history from altering us—ordinary actions by which we maintain our integrity and sense of self. There's the courage of kindness when it'd just be easier to snap back at that rude co-worker who bullies, demeans and belittles. There's the bravery of sticking up for yourself over and over as a vegan or vegetarian whose family or friends subtly suggest that *you* are the rude one because you won't eat the chicken or fish "just this one time." And it certainly takes courage to be religiously different in our culture; When praying in the name of Jesus or believing in a traditional God are equated with being a "good person," it just isn't easy to be honest about your non-theism or openness to multiple paths to truth.

The list is long, friends: Turning down that drink one day at a time. Making yourself get out of bed when the depression tells you to stay there. Keeping that rainbow sticker on your car and holding your partner's hand in public. Make no mistake: there are dozens of acts of ordinary heroism we rise up to everyday!

We *need* to rise up to everyday! That's why this month's focus **Being An UPstander** matters so much: We could use a little bit of support, a little bit of acknowledgement, a little bit of knowing we're not alone. It's not easy **To Be An UPstander** to continue on with our daily acts of courage. There are days when we are tired, even scared. And days, too, when we just lose sight of how important our ordinary courage is. When the "big stories" about history-changing **UPstander** get spotlighted, a paralysis can sit in. We know we're not Martin Luther King or Susan B Anthony, so why even try! We can lose sight of how **Being An UPstander** matters deeply. Which is why we need each other to ensure that doesn't happen. We need each other to remember that, while Martin and Susan may have changed the world, it is the daily bravery of the rest of us that keeps the world going in the right direction.

So, as odd as it sounds, celebrate yourself this month! And look around for other **UPstander** to lift up! Ordinary courage--it needs to be noticed! Your bravery (big and *small*)—matters! This month, let's make sure each other remembers--and knows--that this is so!

QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Below is a reflection and a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our everyday ordinary lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won't let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone meet along the way.



To Be An UPstander is to adopt a lifestyle of courageous living!

- 1. Are you as “courageously vulnerable” as you’d like to be?** Bravery is often talked about as being hard, tough, strong, determined. But sometimes the scarier thing is to be tender, open-hearted or honest about your weakness. For instance, strength for guys is easy; try letting others know what scares you if you want to prove how tough you really are. Or how about real love? That takes a softer version of bravery. If you aren't brave enough to be vulnerable, you can forget the adventure of love or friendship. No real relationship was gained without those involved being willing to take the risk of allowing themselves to be really and truly seen.
- 2. Have you ever turned your back on *Being an UPstander*? And is there any way to make up for it now?** We all have moments of cowardice that we regret. Take some time to revisit one of those moments this month. Why did your courage fail you? Or maybe better: why did you fail it? What happened in the days—or years—leading up to that moment that made the lack of courage predictable? What do you wish you'd done? Recreate a movie in your head of how you wish it had played out. What would have been “the courageous thing” to do? *And maybe most importantly, what can be done about it now?* What might it mean to “return and try again?” If you can't directly go back and do it over or make up for it, how might you return to it in some other way? What might it mean for you to “honor what you wish you would have done?”
- 3. Who is the most courageous UPstnader you know? And has their courage been contagious?** Or maybe, most importantly, does their courage *need* to be contagious? Have you been honoring them in word only and not in deed? It's one thing to celebrate someone's courage by telling others about them; it's another to celebrate them by letting them change you.
- 5. Can you fail and still *Be an UPstander*?** Sometimes all our best efforts don't create the results we hoped for. Can you still be a hero if you fail to accomplish what you set out to do?
- 6. Is it time to re-engage?** Have you recently felt a bit lost, or found you can't remember the last time you were passionate about someone or something? What relationships or activities do you depend on to give you back that feeling of “really living?” Of being “really alive?” Where might you take one step toward deeper engagement?
- 7. When have you chosen to persevere in the face of challenge?** Some say heroism is not a single act but a series of constant engagements. In what situations have you found yourself addressing a challenge? How does it feel and do you see it as heroic?
- 8. How is “loving others” *Being an UPstander*?** Love is not for cowards, right? Then is it an act of heroism? At best, we are all imperfect and our flaws can be challenging. What are the trials of loving others that can make it heroic?
- 9. What cause, situation, or person have you stood up for against adversity or criticism? What was that like and how did it affect you and the outcome?** Some causes, situations, or injustices affect people close to us or those in our community. They cause us to speak up or act. Do you see this as an obligation or a burden? Does it sometimes feel overwhelming considering all that needs to be addressed?
- 10. Does fear ever stop you from speaking up or taking a stand for what you believe?** It's not easy to buck the trend and speak out. Personal concerns for safety or wellbeing may get in the way. How do you reconcile your personal fears with the issues that need to be addressed?

Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences

OPTION A: TAKE A DAY OR TWO AND LIVE OUT OF YOUR BEST “COUNTER-CULTURAL SELF.”

Each of us have counter-cultural “leanings” that we don’t lean into as fully as we’d often wish. Often this has to do with a lack of courage. We downplay our pacifism. We don’t make a big deal out of veganism. We hate all the technology and TV in our family’s life, but we just go along with it because we don’t want the kids to think we’re “the weird parents.” Our closest friends don’t really understand what UUism is because we’re afraid of them judging us or of creating an odd distance between us.

This month, set aside a day or a weekend or even a week and find a way to fix this. Pick a discrete period of time or a single act which will allow you to lean more heavily and more proudly (and more courageously) into your counter-cultural self. Maybe it’s having a “No TV weekend” with your family. Maybe it’s wearing your Pride Parade t-shirt to the gym. Maybe it’s inviting your friends over for an all-vegetarian dinner, or even an all-vegetarian dinner with UU prayers at which you discuss the merits of drastically reducing the military budget (Ok, that’s a bit overboard, but you get the point.) Or how about asking a friend to come to church--not to recruit them, but just so they get a better sense of this piece of your life that is so important to who you are.

You will know what it is. Again we all have some counter-cultural leaning. For once, try leaning all the way in.

OPTION B: HAVE THE COURAGE TO “STOP & LISTEN” RATHER THAN “STAND UP & SHOUT.”

In our recommended resources, there’s a quote by Winston Churchill that says: “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” It’s a great reminder about the “quieter” acts of courage. We so often associate courage with very assertive actions: doing, challenging, pushing through, fighting, demanding. But there are times when it’s just the opposite. Instead of speaking up or speaking out, sometimes the most courageous thing to do is to be quiet and listen deeply to the other side. Instead of changing *them*, sometimes what’s needed is for us to bravely be open to them changing *us*. Or, how about all those times we are urged to “bravely keep going” or to “courageously take control?” Sometimes the bravest thing is exactly the opposite. Sometimes what’s needed is to let go of control and just sit with unknowing. There’s also the common story about the bravery of “leaving”--whether that involves the courage to leave a marriage or job or the comfort of the familiar. That’s important, but at times “staying” is also important, and takes as much courage.

So consider the exercise of engaging the lesser celebrated acts of heroism. Take time this month to find a way to:

- * open yourself to being changed, rather than trying to change others, or
- * sit with unknowing, rather than rushing to fix things or re-gain control, or
- * stick with it, rather than cut bait or run away.

The Invitation

by uriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it, or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself. If you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul. If you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty even when it is not pretty every day. And if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand at the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, 'Yes.'

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the centre of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

By Oriah Mountain Dreamer House from her book, THE INVITATION © 1999. Published by HarperONE, San Francisco. All rights reserved. Presented with permission of the author. www.oriah.org

Opening Words

Abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part is sustained by the whole. Community doesn't just create abundance — community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.

— Parker Palmer

Closing Words

If everything is connected to everything else, then everyone is ultimately responsible for everything. The more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous organism of sacred responsibility.

~ Rabbi Laurence Kushner



This Soul Matters packet was created by Rev. Carie Johnsen at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UUCC Resource Circle, and other sources. If you would like to share your experience and wisdom for future packets, please email minister@augustauu.org. To receive an electronic copy please email info@augustauu.org. To learn more about Unitarian Universalist Community Church, please visit our website www.augustauu.org.