

“Profiles in Courage,” a sermon delivered by Bill Parke at the UU Church of Buffalo, 6/25/2017.

When my kids Robert and Maggie were little, I thought about what advice I could give them that meshed with what I saw as our family values, some words of wisdom that might put them on the right path in life. Finally, I found a simple phrase, which I repeated to them often: “Be a force for good in the world.”

It is quite possible these words came to mind thanks to a Unison Affirmation we’ve used here in church. You probably know it by heart:

*May you always remember to use your powers,
To heal and not to harm,
To help and not to hinder,
To bless and not to curse,
To serve in the spirit of freedom.*

I must confess; usually when I read the affirmation I use it as a checklist, and try to remember it for the coming week. Do you do that too? “Ok, heal, don’t harm. Help -- no hindering. Bless, don’t curse. Promote freedom. Check, check, check, check, check. Now, don’t forget – remember ‘til next Sunday! Ok.”

But focusing on the checklist leaves out one concept that is perhaps one of the most important, most meaningful for our lives, of all: to “use your powers.”

Because each of us is powerful, in different ways. Once in a while something happens to remind us just *how powerful we are in the lives of others*. When Liz and I were bringing up Robert and Maggie, we loomed large in the kids’ lives. I remember asking the kids not to wear their boots or shoes when walking on the wall-to-wall carpet in our house. Our first floor bathroom is separated from the kitchen by our carpet-covered hallway, with the respective doorways about 18 inches from each other. I remember seeing Robert, at the age of about four, stretching with all his might, keeping one foot on the linoleum floor of the kitchen while reaching,

to his physical limits, the other foot onto the tile of the bathroom, never touching the carpet with his shoe. Even now, the memory makes me smile.

When we come to understand the power within, the next question is usually, "What do I do with it?" I have always found it instructive to look at the lives of others that I admire, learn their stories, and *see how they wielded their power, most pointedly in moments that required great courage.* Which brings us to today's topic: Profiles in Courage. As the church historian, I am familiar with such stories within our church history. To address today's topic, I thought I would highlight several as a public service, so that when the time comes for us individually to wield our power, we can stand on the shoulders of giants, as the saying goes. Hold on to your pew seats, as some time travel will be necessary.

Let's start with one of the giants of our Unitarian faith in Buffalo: Rev. George Washington Hosmer. Minister of our church from 1836 to 1866, he arrived a few years after our building was erected on Franklin & Eagle Sts. downtown. Millard Fillmore was a founding member. As Rev. Hosmer's ministry matured and grew in stature, so did Mr. Fillmore's political fortunes. Finally, as the issue of slavery was dividing the nation and Mr. Fillmore made the fateful decision to sign into law the Fugitive Slave Act, the question presented itself to Rev. Hosmer: Where do you stand?

Rev. Hosmer was no stranger to slavery, even though New York had outlawed it. For we are a border city, and the underground railroad ran right through our city to Canada. In July, 1847, the railroad stopped at Rev. Hosmer's front door: A fugitive slave family was brought to his house by a fellow minister. Imagine, opening your door, to find such need. With help from one of his congregation, a lawyer, vocal abolitionist, and diarist named G.W. Jonson, he found assistance for the travelers within the black community here.

So when Mr. Fillmore, a prominent member of his congregation, considered and ultimately signed the Fugitive Slave Bill into law, Rev. Hosmer "dissented utterly." Put yourself in his shoes, as he protests against the position of one of the most powerful men in the city, in the country. That's

courage. But it came naturally. You see, Rev. Hosmer was strong in his faith and his beliefs and therefore “perfectly unflinching and outspoken in his anti-slavery views... (He was not) at all reticent before the President. He not only spoke his disapproval, but emphasized it in deed, voting squarely against Mr. Fillmore, when at length he came up as a candidate for another term.” Years later, Rev. Hosmer remarked, “It was terrible for Mr. Fillmore to come to the head of government at that time. (The Fugitive Slave Law) was only postponing the horror. **First there must be righteousness and then peace. Some things are worse than war. Slavery is worse...**”

Let’s fast forward to the late 1800s. Imagine city life before all of the social services we are able to rely on today: Tenement living. Child labor. Lack of sanitation. Hunger. Sickness. Infirmary. Shady dealings. In 1894, a Unitarian woman, Elizabeth Williams, saw these troubles first hand, and acted in a courageous, righteous fashion. Thanks to a history shared with us by Fran Manly, we know that she called upon a poor German family living in a little shanty in downtown Buffalo:

She found the family **almost destitute; the father was dead, and the mother was struggling to support herself and her daughters. Imagine the sense of desperation.** After providing immediate aid, Williams asked the little girls what they were hoping Santa Claus would bring. Two younger girls asked for dolls but the eldest, who was ten, announced bravely that “she didn’t want nuthin’ but books.” Surprised and pleased by this answer, Williams asked the girls if they thought other children would like books, too. “Oh, yes,” they replied, “there’s a lot of them as would like to have ‘em, but they hain’t got no money to buy ‘em.” Rather than simply providing Christmas presents for these children, Williams decided to open a reading room for all the children in the neighborhood and offered the mother a small sum of money in exchange for allowing Williams to use a room of her cottage for the purpose. Within a week a little library was in place and neighborhood children organized into a club, with Williams as the director.

As the club expanded so did a need for larger facilities, and Miss Williams asked our Unitarian Church to help. “Soon (a) flat was comfortably

furnished and kitchen-garden, sewing, reading, and other classes were meeting regularly.” By 1913, “46 volunteers were involved at (what had become) Neighborhood House” and its President reported, “The people of the church, I think, have never so generally and thoroughly appreciated the spirit and importance of the work and its close and vital relation to the real purpose and life of the church as in the past year.” It is a credit to Miss Williams that she not only saw the need of this family, but empowered it when it had none, by making it part of the solution to its own poverty and that of others. ***She befriended the friendless, in their moment of ultimate need.***

Let’s visit with a contemporary of Miss Williams, but in the Universalist Church in Buffalo. Her name is Alice Moore. She is a Sunday School teacher. She and her class see around them the desperation of the poor, especially children. They have empathy for those less fortunate than themselves. They know that, in the factories, the tenements, the wharves and docks, such children might never know the beauty of nature, the beaches, the forests, and the rolling hills that lie just beyond the city limits. So her Sunday School class, in partnership with what was then called the Christian Endeavor Society of the Universalist Church, “raised \$133.91” and “sent 106 children into the country in the summer of 1888.” In the phrasing of the time, “The poor children of the tired and often wretched mothers living in the crowded tenements or on the unhealthy flats of Buffalo...” (would experience fresh air that summer) and “the salvation of the children will be the salvation of this class in the community.” Miss Williams became a leader of this movement, this “Fresh Air Mission,” and thousands of children experienced recreational activities during the warmer months. The mission became over time Cradle Beach Camp. Many of you know it; it is one of WNY’s most popular charities – started by a handful of Universalist adults in partnership with children in their RE class.

I am reminded of a famous quote by Unitarian clergyman and author Edward Everett Hale: “I am only one, but I am one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. The something I ought to do, I can do. And by the grace of God, I will.”

Thanks to these pioneering efforts, slowly society put in place programs to physically help the neediest. Welfare. Public education. Social security. But that does not mean that true opportunity is shared. Let's fast forward to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. When Rev. Martin Luther King issued a call to ministers to join him in the march on Selma, we know this: Our minister at the time, Rev. Paul Carnes, answered the call, and went. In addition to marching for civil rights at Selma, Alabama, he advanced civil rights locally: With other members of the Interracial and Interdenominational Ministers' Association, a group he had helped to form, he rode school buses in Buffalo to calm racial tension after a student had been stabbed on a bus.

He was vice president of the Niagara Frontier Branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In 1964 the ACLU presented him with their fourth annual Civil Liberties Award for "his outspoken defense of the right of dissent—however unpopular—in the community." In 1972 the National Council of Christians and Jews named him "Man of the Year" for "promoting the cause of good will and understanding among people." Carnes worked for the Urban League, the Mental Health Association, and was active in abortion counseling.

In an age that has become known as "the tumultuous 60's," Rev. Carnes taught us the value of ***showing up, when it matters most***, to his credit and the credit of our faith. He answered the call. He rode the bus.

A contemporary of Rev. Carnes in our church was Barbara Wagner, Minister of Music. Barbara passed earlier this year. A few years ago, in honor of her 50 years of service to our church, I had an opportunity to do a profile of her work. First, I corresponded with her. Then, she welcomed me into her home and study. To my amazement, I realized that she was as much an accomplished civil rights advocate as music professional. As I mentioned earlier, "each of us is powerful, in different ways." Many of us remember Barbara's musical gifts, but did you know that she:

- Was founding artistic director of the Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus, which she led for 10 years?

- For 25 years, she taught vocal music at Nichols School, and later taught at Buffalo Seminary.
- Open up your grey hymnal. In the very front, after the Contents, you'll see the Preface. Turn to the end of it. You'll see that she served on the hymnbook commission that put it together.
- She once told the Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus, as they were rehearsing a sacred work in Latin by Cam-ee Saen-son-sa (Camille Saint-Saens): "I don't care if you're Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian or atheist, ***I want you all to believe this when you sing it. You have to believe it, and you have to tell people.***"

The fight continues. Can any of us say that the world envisioned in our Seven Principles has arrived yet?

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

No, there is much work ***to do***. But we can find examples of the work ***being done!*** Even at the level of inspiration that we find from these stories of our forebears. The more engaged you are in the life of this church, the more likely you are to find the examples. Perhaps because I take a historian's view, I am acutely aware that we are in the fight, right now. And courage is being demonstrated. I will share a final example with you. Let me give you some context first.

- Did you know that when marriage equality was proposed for NYS, not all local clergy supported it?

- Did you know that as recently as two years ago, a candidate for the Buffalo Common Council voiced opposition to gay marriage? (He was not elected.)
- Did you know that last year, a local clergyman helped lead his national denomination's opposition to President Obama's directive that transgender students be allowed to use the restrooms assigned to the gender they choose?

So I was very proud when Rev. Joan published an opinion piece in *The Buffalo News* with the title, "Society must adjust its understanding of gender." In a moment of uncertainty and flaring political passions, Rev. Joan courageously asked us as a community to take a stand: "We could choose love over fear. Women got the vote. The civil rights movement changed how we see America. Stonewall began the long fight for LGBTQ rights. The arc of history is indeed long, but it bends toward justice."

"Offering your neighbors a little dignity can cost you nothing. To be sure, change is scary. Society will have to adjust its previous notions about gender. I promise you, though, as frightening as this change will be, the truly frightened are transgender people who not only are unsure which bathroom to choose, but also fear for their very lives."

She closed with the words, "Let's join the 21st century and cease to discriminate."

What a fine, clear example of showing courage in support of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

But instead of leaving you with an example -- an answer -- I would like to ask you a question, to pose a challenge. Can you see where in our community our faith is needed today? Can you find it within your power to advance the positive change that is needed in our community? Can you create for yourself -- your Unitarian Universalist self -- your own Profile in Courage?