

**Uncommon Courage**  
Womaen's Caucus Speech, July 4, 2014  
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I am grateful for Womaen's Caucus. I spent eight of my most formative young adult years working with Caucus, received an invaluable education in systems of power and privilege, and most importantly, I was surrounded by people who acted on behalf of justice, creatively, courageously, and with humor and love. It is always an honor to be with you.

Twenty years ago Womaen's Caucus invited me to speak at this very luncheon to talk about my controversial ordination process. As some of you may remember, at issue was my understanding of Jesus as a justice-loving human being that inspired me through his example. Significantly, I did not speak of Jesus as Lord and Savior who died for my sins, and this was troubling for some. The difference in theology translated into accusations that I was a feminist, a witch, a pagan, a lesbian, followed by threats of pulling money or whole churches out of the denomination if I was ordained.<sup>1</sup> Leadership responded with their private support but left me publically vulnerable. The protest against my ordination, and its rash of letters, articles, and actions, is a story of bad behavior and fearful leadership, and while the details are specific, it's not a unique story. Many in this room have experienced similar stories in this denomination and it does leave a trail of tears, loss, anger, and sadness. But woven into the fabric are also stories of resilience, resistance, and courage, and today I want to honor this side of our story today. I am ordained today because of the courage and action of specific people, like Carol Wise and Chuck Boyer, who 20 years ago were willing to risk and call into question mean-spirited behavior and weak leadership. I am ordained today because specific people helped me navigate a system I did not yet fully understand and helped me act courageously even though I did not yet have that skill.

And it is a skill. I want to talk today about the bricks and mortar of courage, what builds this skill in us, as well as what its fullest expression might look like. Dr. Maya Angelou, one of our nation's great poets and writers, had two significant things to say about courage: First, she foregrounds the central importance of courage: "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage," says Dr. Angelou, "you can't practice any other virtue consistently."<sup>2</sup> Second, Dr. Angelou points out that "one isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with [its] potential."<sup>3</sup> It is something we can develop over time, beginning with small acts of courage. Importantly, she explains: "You develop courage by doing courageous things, small things, but things that cost you some exertion – mental and... spiritual exertion."<sup>4</sup>

I am not an expert on courage, but I've certainly had experiences that inform me. And while I don't want to discount whatever courage I've had, I am still learning and practicing, and new situations throw me off course until I can find my bearings again. Echoing Dr. Angelou, courage is not something that just magically appeared in my life. It has been earned and sometimes I fail.

At the University of La Verne where I work, we have become known for providing accessible education to low income and first generation students, and as a point of pride, our students match the demographics of Southern California, where nearly 50%

of our students are Latino. Right now, La Verne is intentionally exploring our evolving identity. For years, the federal government has designated La Verne as a Hispanic Serving Institution based on our student population, and we are now in the process of living into this designation with integrity, exploring how this identity changes our culture and practices. Our campus is learning, but it not yet skilled at talking directly about race, power, and privilege. For years this conversation has come up at the edges of the campus community. There have been tough and emotional conversations where people have felt as if La Verne would never embrace this identity fully, and some have certainly felt harmed by careless or uninformed comments or actions. And while I've been part of these discussions and unquestionably supportive of this cultural shift, I have often found myself anxious and silent. My anxiety and discomfort with addressing race and privilege has meant that I have often remained stuck in my own guilt and fear, and truly, I have been useless in many meetings over the years because I haven't been able to feel connected to a voice that is my own, even though the conversations and decisions have demanded my courage.

As Dr. Angelou explains, courage does involve exertion. It requires us to make decisions of consequence that have a personal cost, however small or large, that come with the possible risk of losing relationship, privilege, security, or belonging. At the center of courage is the willingness to make decisions that are fateful, that matter, and have consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Process Philosopher Brianne Donaldson explains it this way: Think of a deciduous tree. Perhaps a sycamore, oak, or maple tree: those that lose their leaves each year. The word "deciduous" is closely related to the word "decision." Both decision and deciduous come from the Latin word *decidere*, which means to "fall off" as in a leaf falling from a great height, and it also means to "cut away" as in a decision that requires us to make a choice for this and not for that. To be a deciduous tree or to make a decision requires cutting something away, and if the stakes are high enough, the choice might give us the feeling of falling from a great height. Important decisions can make us feel out on a limb, at the edge of falling, especially if a choice is in contrast to one's community, family, or friends. Making decisions always means that something is lost, cut away, even as something else is made possible. And courage is that willingness to make hard decisions, despite the fear of falling.<sup>6</sup>

Theologian Walter Kaufman coins the term "decidophobia" to refer to the fear of making difficult, but weighty decisions.<sup>7</sup> Decidophobes, explains Kaufman, often use various strategies to avoid making courageous decisions, including finding refuge in group contexts, where an individual does not need to exert and risk their own voice. So, for example, my participation in our diversity groups on campus can make me feel like I'm doing something courageous, even though I have really risked nothing, nor actively participated in the tough decisions that need to be made. We know of this in the Church of the Brethren. We've seen individuals who allow church polity, tradition or well-worn ideas of community and harmony to do the heavy lifting, to stand in for the tough work of discerning their own voice and engaging with their own critical thought: going out on a limb. Community contexts, for all their goodness, are always at risk of producing decidophobia, where one gives up his or her autonomy under the weight of conformity, unity, fear of alienation, or just pure laziness.

In order to act courageously in matters of justice, autonomy is essential, otherwise we simply repeat what has been and help maintain the status quo. Again, Philosopher Brianne Donaldson is helpful here: Autonomy is about connecting with one's authentic and genuine voice, perspective, and thoughts in the context of our relationships. Autonomy is not about rogue individualism nor does it mean being separate from our relations, where we have no responsibility to the other. I'm influenced by Process Philosophy, an understanding of reality that is deeply attuned to relations. Within the framework of process thought, we gain our autonomy not from being separate, but from recognizing all the relations that make us up.<sup>8</sup> Each of us emerges from within a socially entangled web of relations: relations that include family, culture, biology, history, and networks of thought and practices. My autonomy, my uniqueness, comes precisely from all the relations that make me who I am. I am inherently autonomous, with my own perspective, wisdom and worldview because of all my relations, and also vitally connected to all my relations who literally make me up. When we honor our autonomy in relation, we speak with the authenticity of our own voice and advocate for the dignity of all our relations, who demand our sensitivity and our justice.<sup>9</sup>

We know something about this in the Church of the Brethren. Our Pietist roots recognize the importance of cultivating one's autonomy in the context of community. Pietism invites us to create space for autonomy by discerning the still small voice, the divine light, the presence of God's spirit inside of us. While corporate wisdom has its place, its impulse toward conformity and unity will always run up against autonomous, courageous decisions that challenge current arrangements. Pietism provides a much needed corrective, where the individual has to do the heavy lifting, to look deep within, dig deep, and make decisions in light of his or her own autonomous and unique experience, with eyes wide open. Pietism does not need to be a navel-gazing, narcissistic practice. The mystical side of pietism asks us to place ourselves in the presence of something larger than ourselves, to pay attention to all our relations, so that we are attuned to the life-giving, justice-seeking calls of the spirit. Today, our culture uses terms like meditation, mindfulness, reflection, and prayer to name this kind of practice. But clarity of voice can also take root in more mundane things like taking a walk, reading, listening to music, or sharing a beer with a trusted friend. Whatever your strategy, I believe it is the cultivation of our individual conscience with eyes wide open to all our relations that is the source of courage. This is hard work, takes a great deal of exertion, and because of this, it is uncommon.

This year I found myself having one of the more difficult conversations in my life, not at La Verne, but with our denominational leadership. I had an experience of exclusion that needed to be addressed. The stakes weren't even that high, but it was a conversation that required me to have a voice, stand my ground, challenge stereotypes, hold people accountable, address questionable behavior, argue for my inclusion, and make decisions that risked my sense of belonging. It took a great deal of mental, emotional and spiritual exertion. I didn't enjoy it and struggled with my fears but it was an opportunity to do my own heavy lifting. And it was liberating, probably because I had finally done what I hadn't quite been able to do for myself 20 years ago with my ordination. And the most important outcome, unexpected and surprising, was its cumulative effect. In the next discussion about our Hispanic identity at La Verne I didn't feel anxious. Courage builds on courage. Strangely and beautifully, practicing courage in one place, gave me courage in another. I'm not worried about the fear of falling anymore with this conversation on

race and identity. My colleagues at La Verne don't need my discomfort or my anxiety. They need my strength, my voice, my openness, and my kindness. They need to know I'm willing to make a decision on the side of life and justice, regardless of whether we agree or if my security is compromised. Facing the fear, practicing courage, builds resilience, and with it, the ability to be an ally of much greater worth and merit.

When I was pulling together ideas for this speech today, my partner Linda asked how I would summarize my main point. What rolled off my tongue without hesitation was "get your shit together, and then be a good ally." She told me I shouldn't swear. I agreed. Let me rephrase: There is internal work that we must do in order to cultivate courage. It does not come naturally unless it is developed. Decisions that matter are hard because there is so much at stake, but our relations demand our sensitivity and our justice. And so for the sake of these relations, we have to get our stuff together so that we can become people with uncommon courage, those who can make a decision for life, justice, and inclusion even before the cultural embrace, before it is inevitable. This is the kind of courage and compassion that makes someone an ally of greatest merit.

At the heart of courage is the ability to be an ally, where one's deepest commitment is to be responsive to the widest possible number of relations, especially before the cultural embrace. For me, this is the fullest expression of courage. Just a few weeks ago, I visited Kern County, Ca, and was surrounded by a daily routine of uncommon courage. Kern County is the heart of California's fruit and vegetable production, as well as the historical farm worker movement led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, a movement that changed labor laws and improved the quality of life especially for migrant and immigrant communities. For many in California, including La Verne students, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and their optimistic movement of "Si, Se Puede," ("Yes, We Can") is just as moving and profound as Martin Luther King's civil rights movement. I was in Kern County visiting two students from La Verne who are volunteering at the Dolores Huerta Foundation for the summer as part of a program I coordinate. Although Chavez died many years ago, Dolores Huerta, at age 85 is still carrying on their legacy of worker justice. In two short days, I witnessed a mature movement of uncommon courage and well-tuned allies. We spent time with siblings, daughters and granddaughters of Chavez and Huerta, as well as Dolores herself. Clearly, they had learned the skills of courage long ago. It was in the air they breathed, many of them organizing and campaigning since young children. What was most striking was the way in which their courage translated into being an ally. While Dolores' daughter took me and two other La Verne staff members around to various historical sites of the farm worker movement, 85 year old Dolores whisked away our students to protest and speak at a media event in support of immigration reform. A few days earlier they had organized around LGBT rights, and the week before one of the students had gone door to door to educate a small poor, rural town about a potential town decision that would de-regulate their taxes and minimum wages. We, on the other hand, visited La Paz, the historical memorial of Cesar Chavez and the place where much of the farm worker organizing happened in the 1960 and 70's. Dolores' daughter took us straight to a statue of St. Francis of Assisi, the Catholic patron Saint of Animals. A little known fact about Cesar was that he was a vegetarian and vegan in solidarity with the suffering of other living beings.<sup>10</sup> The next day, we joined Dolores for a 40th anniversary celebration in honor of the Filipino farm workers, affirming the solidarity between Latino and Filipino interests, and then she once again rushed off with our two student to

Sacramento to support a group of young adults walking across CA representing the 99%. It was a show case of being a good ally.<sup>11</sup>

Some of you will remember Benton Rhoades, a dearly beloved, salt-of-the-earth, justice-seeking Brethren legacy from of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In light of La Verne's evolving identity as a Hispanic serving institution, I have been doing research on Brethren who were involved in the farm worker movement as a way to connect our Brethren heritage and our University's connection to the Latino community. I recently came across a significant letter written by Benton Rhoades sometime in the 1960's. Very early in the farm worker movement, Benton became an ally precisely because he saw a resonance between the farm worker struggle and the struggles of the early Brethren. Given the abundance of farmers in the Church of the Brethren, his position of supporting farm workers was unpopular and disliked by many. But he was someone of uncommon courage. As the letter describes, Benton was drawn in by Cesar Chavez's commitment to non-violence and solidarity with the poor. Benton's pietist autonomy allowed him to make a decision on the side of inclusion and justice long before its cultural embrace. This letter is sitting in the archives of the United Farm Workers Association as an example of solidarity.<sup>12</sup> I made copies of the letter to share with everyone today because it is an instructive example of expansive, uncommon courage within our own tradition, and someone who has certainly helped shape the on-going legacy of the uncommon courage represented in this room.

I want to return to Maya Angelou, an ally of deepest merit. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Angelou speak at a women's leadership conference for lesbians.<sup>13</sup> At the last moment, Dr. Angelou was not able to attend because she was not well enough to travel. However, because solidarity is in her bones, she did not want to miss addressing this group of queer women. In response, the conference planners arranged to have her speak to us live from her own living room. She was not well. She spoke to us with an oxygen tube in her nose, taking short gasps of breath in between sentences. But she had things she wanted to say: She spoke to us about courage, recited poetry about hope and justice, and affirmed the deepest relational connection one might give to another: "Because I am a human being, there is no human that is alien to me." Her most important message, the one that she wove throughout her talk, was the call to be an ally of consequence to one another. To explain herself she turned to a 19<sup>th</sup> Century African American song and sang its key lines:

When it look like the sun  
Wasn't gonna shine any more  
God put a rainbow  
In the cloud.

She explained, "I've had so many rainbows in my clouds. And I had a lot of clouds. But I have had so many rainbows." She was referring to all those who have ever been kind to her, supported and helped her along the way. And she knew that we, too, had experienced rainbows in our clouds. And she pressed us to turn this gratitude outward toward the future and make a commitment to be a rainbow in someone else's cloud, to be a blessing to someone. While these words might sound trite, coming from a woman of uncommon courage, they were nothing less than profound.

We must be rainbows in other people's cloud. Chavez with the animals, Benton with the farm workers, Dolores Huerta with the Filipinos, Caucus with BMC. Global Women's Project with Open Table. For the sake of all of our relations who demand our sensitivity and our justice, may we celebrate and cultivate the courage it takes to be rainbows, to be allies of deepest merit, in someone else's cloud.

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<sup>1</sup> A few individuals and churches did pull out of the denomination after my ordination was approved. Also, in response to the controversy, the denomination passed a statement that all ordained ministers must affirm Jesus as Lord and Savior who died for our sins. The Church of the Brethren for 300 years has prided itself on being a non-creedal church recognizing individual conscience and making space for the movement of the spirit to bring wisdom to new and shifting situations, yet in a moment of fear, the church passed its first creedal statement.

<sup>2</sup> "A conversation with Dr. Maya Angelou," *Beautifully Said Magazine*, July 2012. <http://beautifullysaidmagazine.com/201207feature-of-the-month-3/>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Maya Angelou, *USA today*, March 5, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> "Maya Angelou on Courage and Creativity," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2013. Transcript found at <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/05/maya-angelou-on-courage-and-cr/>.

<sup>5</sup> My use of "fateful decisions" is drawn from Brianne Donaldson's work, "Uncommon Groundlessness: Cultivating Entangled Autonomy," located at <http://cst.academia.edu/BrianneDonaldson>.

<sup>6</sup> The next paragraphs about decision, decidophobia, and autonomy are principally informed by Brianne Donaldson's essay, "Uncommon Groundlessness: Cultivating Entangled Autonomy," mentioned above. In addition, Process philosophers/theologians Catherine Keller and Isabelle Stengers have all informed my use of "decision" as an important term for living with integrity amidst great complexity. See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, London: Routledge, 2003; and Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal" in *Making Things Public*, Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel (eds.), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Kaufman, *Without Guilt and Justice: From Decidophobia to Autonomy*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Brianne Donaldson suggests that all entities are an expression of "autonomy-in-relation." She says, "Autonomy is never fully separate from relations, but emergent from and alongside them...In celebrating autonomy, you celebrate the specific recipe of every life, and you highlight the capacity of that life to creatively interpret and respond in its entangled contexts." Donaldson, 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Keller, 160. Catherine Keller and Isabelle Stengers both emphasize that decisions must be made with the widest possible awareness of all our relations. For Keller, decisions must be "concretely produced in the form of a relation with a face." Decisions lack innocence because something is always excluded, thus we must "decide for the most heterogeneous width of relations that I in my edgy finitude can embrace...They [my relations] demand my sensitivity and my justice." Similarly, Isabelle Stengers argues that "decisions must be made 'in the presence of' and 'fully exposed to' those who will bear the consequences." This means that all entities must be "present" in a way "that makes the decision as difficult as possible, that precludes any shortcut or simplification...to expose those who have to decide, to force them to feel the fright." According to Stengers, we need to slow down and make space for hesitation, "a passing fright that scares self-assurance," so that we can compose a world with greater awareness (Stengers, 995).

<sup>10</sup> Cesar Chavez, in his acceptance of a Lifetime Achievement Award from *in Defense of Animals*, says: "The basis for peace is respecting all creatures. . . . We cannot hope to have peace until we respect everyone – respect ourselves and respect animals and all living things. . . . We know we cannot defend and be kind to

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animals until we stop exploiting them – exploiting them in the name of science, exploiting animals in the name of sport, exploiting animals in the name of fashion, and yes, exploiting animals in the name of food. " As his family expresses: "He felt so strongly about it that sometimes I think he took as much personal satisfaction from converting people to vegetarianism as he did to trade unionism." His family recounts that Chavez was equally happy when someone became a vegetarian as when they won a labor contract. See Stephanie Ernst, "César Chávez: 'The Basis for Peace Is Respecting All Creatures,'" *Animal Rights and Animal Oppression*, March 31, 2013. The article can be found at: <http://challengeoppression.com/2011/03/31/cesar-chavez-the-basis-for-peace-is-respecting-all-creatures/>

This legacy of intersectionality between Cesar's commitment to farm workers and to animals continues. Just two weeks ago (June 28, 2014), United Farm Workers began a campaign against one of the largest dairy corporations in the US for both worker injuries and for the cows who are suffering under the weight of our human demand for their milk. See campaign at: [http://www.ufw.org/board.php?mode=view&b\\_code=org\\_key&b\\_no=15476&page=1&field=&key=&n=5](http://www.ufw.org/board.php?mode=view&b_code=org_key&b_no=15476&page=1&field=&key=&n=5)

<sup>14</sup> I am also touched by the expansive courage exemplified by people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. For example, Martin Luther King Jr., deeply moved by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who urged Dr. King to care about the suffering of the Vietnamese people, eventually gave up his silence about the Vietnam War and came out powerfully against it, despite the strong opposition from the political and military establishment as well as those from within the civil rights movement who felt it would divert attention from the War of Poverty at home. Dr. King's willingness to pay attention, decide, and act in the presence of the widest number of relations is courage in its fullest expression.

Likewise, Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells the story of Mandela's uncommon courage. Soon after apartheid was over and the new government was being formed, Tutu, Mandela, and the White Afrikaners needed to hammer out the country's constitution. Mandela made the historic suggestion to include sexual orientation in the constitution. The Afrikaners resisted, arguing that the country was already in a deeply fragile situation; why add one of the most controversial issues? Mandela said, "But we've drawn the circle of inclusion so wide already. I will not move forward unless we include these individuals too." The Afrikaners looked to Desmond Tutu for some reason, but all Tutu said was "he means it," and that was that. Their unwavering insistence for the widest possible circle of inclusion, long before the cultural embrace, won the day and another disenfranchised group was added to the constitution.

Tutu is continuing this legacy, not only in his advocacy for the LGBT community, but has recently called for widening the scope of justice to include animals: "There are other issues of justice – not only for human beings but also for the world's other sentient creatures." See the following article: Yazmin Hafiz, "Desmond Tutu on Animal Welfare: We Must Fight Injustice to Animals," *Huffington Post*, Dec. 27, 2013. Online at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/27/desmond-tutu-animal-rights\\_n\\_4509188.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/27/desmond-tutu-animal-rights_n_4509188.html). I mention Tutu and Chavez's advocacy for animals because I do believe this is an area of justice and compassion that needs our special attention in the 21 century. The kind of injustice Tutu is speaking of is not centered on individual acts of animal cruelty but rather the regular, every-day, institutionalized practices that cause incalculable harm to sentient beings, whether for food, entertainment, scientific inquiry, or our desire to own and possess. This is a complex issue that is entangled in historical, economic, cultural and social webs of meaning, not to mention our philosophical and theological understandings of what it means to be human. Because the actual treatment of animals in various industries is terribly disturbing and hidden from the view of most, because we are a long distance from the cultural embrace of this issue, and because many people understand themselves to be compassionate to some animals, educating oneself and making decisions in the presence of these relations requires a healthy dose of mental, emotional, and spiritual exertion. The use of animals is deeply woven within important cultural meanings that cannot be easily dismissed or lightly criticized. Justice and dignity are at stake from many perspectives. At times, courage involves what Donna Haraway describes as "the kind of pain that simultaneously true and unharmonizable things cause" (Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pg. 300). The call to pay attention, decide, and act (making fateful decisions with consequences) in the presence of the widest number of relations is an example of courage in its fullest expression because the hardest decisions cannot always honor all our relations.

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<sup>12</sup> Benton Rhoades, "Power of a People's Movement." United Farm Workers Association Archives, University of San Diego. Date unknown (sometime in the 1960's). The letter can be found online at: <https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/ufwarchives/JuanitaBrownCollection/Articles%20About%20Farmworker%20Movement/Power%20of%20a%20Peoples%20Movement.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> The conference, hosted by the lesbian-owned company Olivia, was held in February 2014. The organizers brought together a number of distinguished lesbians and allies that have significantly contributed to the cultural and legal advances toward greater inclusion of the LGBT community, including politicians, activists, actors, musicians, artists, comedians, public figures, and regular citizens who have changed the course of history, such as Edie Windsor, the 85 year old lesbian who took her case to the Supreme Court that resulted in the overturning of DOMA, ending the federal governments institutionalized discrimination against same sex couples.