

Heroes¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Tonight will be the first night of Hanukkah, a Jewish festival which celebrates the heroes of long ago who freed the Jewish people from danger and violence. They rededicated their sacred place with the lighting of a holy lamp. Today, we will reflect on what it means to be a hero in our time.

Lesson For All Ages *The Sea Star*
Pass out drawing of sea stars to children and adults.

Can anyone tell me what these are?

I always learned to call them starfish, but they are not really fish, they are invertebrates—and their real name is Sea Stars. There's a story I would like to share with you. It was first part of a longer story told by a scientist and poet named Loren Eiseley.²

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the shore before he began his work. One day, as he was walking, he looked down the beach, and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. Sort of like this. (*Do the movements*)

The man smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to begin the day. So he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young person, perhaps a boy or perhaps a girl, it was hard to tell. The young person wasn't dancing, but instead was reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean.

As he got closer, the man called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?"

The young person paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing sea stars into the ocean."

The man said, "I guess I should have asked, Why are you throwing sea stars into the ocean?"

The young person answered, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. These sea stars are stranded. If I don't throw them in they'll die."

"But," protested the man, "don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and sea stars all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!"

The young person listened politely. Then bent down, picked up another sea star and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. "It made a difference for that one!"

What do you think is the lesson in the story for all of us?

This young person was a hero because they made a difference for sea stars. How do you make a difference for someone or something in your world?

A hero is someone who makes a positive difference for their world, who makes things a little better. A hero lives our belief in "helping others," and our commitment to service. Each one of us can be a hero. I invite everyone to take this sea star with you when you leave, and sometime today, write a few words, or draw a picture on the back of your sea star, about how you make a difference to someone in your world. Or if you can't think of anything today, save your sea star, and it can remind you to notice if a chance comes up later to help someone or to be of service.

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² Adapted.

Jane Goodall is a scientist who studies and protects chimpanzees in Africa. She said, “You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”

*Readings: Thoughts*³

From Edward Everett Hale

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do the something
that I can do.

From Adrienne Rich

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who, age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary
power, reconstitute the world.

From Dorothy Day

People say, what is the sense of our small effort.
They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time,
take one step at a time.
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread out in all directions.
Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.
No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.
There's too much work to do.

From Margaret Mead

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

From W.E.B. DuBois

The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or a single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.

Sermon

The festival of Hanukkah celebrates heroes of old who fought for the right of the Jewish people to live their culture and religion in the face of persecution by foreign conquerors. What might it mean to be a hero in our time and place?

3 Readings from *Singing the Living Tradition*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) #457, 463, 560, 561, 494.

Cable News Network, CNN, defines heroes as “Everyday people changing the world.” Everyday people changing the world. As it happens, CNN has a program in which people are nominated by others for a “hero of the year” award. I looked to see what type of person made their top ten list.

One of their heroes is Maggie Doyne. After high school, in 2006, she took time to travel the world and ended up visiting Nepal, where she witnessed the suffering of orphaned children in the aftermath of ten years of war. She used \$5000 she had saved from babysitting, and bought land in Surkhet, a district in western Nepal. “She worked for two years with the local community to build the Kopila Valley Children's Home. Today, Kopila -- which means "flower bud" in Nepali -- is home to about 50 children, from infants to teenagers.”⁴

Everyday people changing the world. When I look closely at her story, it helps me to identify some of the qualities of heroes in our time. The first thing I notice is that she witnessed suffering in Nepal, and opened her heart to it. She might have been tempted to turn away, to ignore what was going on. All of us face that temptation. There are so many ways we can turn aside or shut down. Even when the suffering is our own. We can distract ourselves by shopping, or working too hard, or eating too much food. We might be tempted to draw a line between ourselves and certain people, reserving our concern for those who seem like us. We are exposed to so much suffering via the media that we can grow numb to it all, immune to a compassionate response.

To let ourselves bear witness to suffering is part of the process of changing the world. But how can we keep from shutting down? A few weeks ago, I shared with you a breathing meditation⁵ created by Joanna Macy, for facing suffering:

We imagine our breathing as a ribbon of air.
We see it flowing up through our nose, down through our windpipe and into our lungs.
From our lungs, we imagine it going through our heart,
flowing through our heart and out to reconnect with the larger web of life.

Then, we let ourselves imagine the hardships and suffering we witness or experience
as if they were small granules of sand on the ribbon of air,
flowing up through our nose, down through our trachea and lungs
and out again through our heart, into the world's interconnected net.
We are asked to do nothing but let them pass through our heart.
In this breathing meditation, we take care to let the stream flow through and out again;
not hanging on to the pain.

This meditation is one way to be able to open our hearts to the suffering of the world, without becoming overwhelmed by it, or shutting down. If we open our hearts to the suffering in the world, we can also awaken to the deep interconnection between all of life, we can discover a strength and beauty that we otherwise wouldn't experience.

Reflecting on heroes in our time, I think it starts with this willingness to face suffering. It starts with compassion—which at root means “to suffer with.” But I want to clarify. Compassion does not mean taking on all the pain of the world, or feeling responsible for making all of it better.

4 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/09/living/cnnheroes-doyne/index.html>

5 Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, p. 276-8.

When I was young, I thought that compassion meant taking it all on—that if someone was suffering, a compassionate person would try to ease the pain, try to fix it or make it better. Or failing that, it meant to feel the grief or the fear or the anger that the other person was feeling, as if it was my own. It took a long time for me to understand that this response could just as well be co-dependence, rather than true compassion.

Co-dependence is a concept from the Twelve Step program of recovery for addiction. Co-dependence is defined first of all as what happens when someone who loves an addict gets too wrapped up in fixing the addict or, conversely, hiding the addiction, and loses track of their own life and health. In co-dependence, a person loses the boundaries between them and the other. The reality is, no one can fix another person. But co-dependence does not just happen in relationship to addiction. It can happen in any relationship. If I love someone who is in pain, and feel it is somehow my responsibility to make it all better, to make them happy, in order for me to feel happy, then I might be falling into co-dependence.

But then, what does compassion really mean? How do we open to the suffering of the world, but not be co-dependent. I have wrestled with this question. How can we honor our interconnection, and still honor boundaries as well?

The story of the sea stars helps me with this quandary. The young person on the beach is offering help in the face of suffering. They are picking up stranded sea stars and throwing them out into the deeper water. But when challenged that they can't possibly make a difference, there are too many sea stars to save them all, they simply say, "it makes a difference to this one."

What this says to me is that, in the face of the overwhelming suffering of the world, each of us has something we can give to someone. Of course we can't help everyone, we can't individually solve the big problems all around us. But the second part of being a hero—of being an everyday person who changes the world—is to give what we can give, even if it isn't everything that is needed.

Maggie Doyne chose to give what she could give—her babysitting money—to help one small area in Nepal take care of its orphaned children. It grew from there. Maggie now lives in Nepal, and the community has built a school, a health clinic, a community garden and a women's center. Maggie said, "I learned very early on, from the beginning, that I couldn't come in and just be like, "Here, I have a vision. This is what we're going to do." That doesn't work. It has to be slow; it has to be organic. And it has to come from the community and be a "we" thing. It's really important to me that this is a Nepali project, working for Nepal, for the community. So the faces that you see are strong Nepali women and amazing Nepali role-model men."⁶

The third part of being a hero is to be connected to a community of response, to let it be a "we" thing. This idea contradicts the messages we often learn about heroes in the media and movies—those messages try to convince us that a hero is someone who does it all by themselves—the James Bond agent who catches the international criminals, or a solitary superman who saves the day.

6 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/09/living/cnnheroes-doyne/index.html>

Another CNN hero is Rev. Richard Joiner. He is a minister in a small African American town in North Carolina. Even though it was surrounded by farmland, there were no grocery stores within ten miles, and fresh and healthy food was not readily available. People were dying of diabetes and high blood pressure. Rev. Joiner started a community garden, and invited local children to help him. Now they have more than twenty plots of land, including one over 25 acres. Rev. Joiner saw suffering among his people, and did what he could, and involved the whole community in the project.

Now more than 80 young people help plan, plant, and harvest over 50,000 pounds of fresh food a year. They've also started bee-keeping, and learning how to cook nutritious meals. Joyner speaks of the intangible benefits he's witnessed: "Growing food calls us to work together," he said. "By nourishing plants, you're nourishing community. It's one and the same."⁷

What does it mean to be a hero in our time? How can we become everyday people who change the world? It means being willing to open our hearts to the suffering we witness, to offer what we have to give, and to become a part of a community of response. For these CNN heroes it was a community problem that called them to respond. But sometimes it is more personal suffering we witness.

A while back, I got a call from a friend who was going in for a serious surgery. They were frightened and anxious about it, and asked if I could come sit with them while they waited to go into surgery. I couldn't take away their diagnosis. But I could sit with them for forty minutes, and I could listen as they expressed their feelings. I couldn't even take away their anxiety. But I could acknowledge that it was scary. I could do this one thing, and later, they told me it meant a lot to them that I was there. There were other friends who helped with other needs—no one tried to do it all but as a circle of support, we were able to let our friend know that they were not alone.

Each of us has something we can offer to those who are suffering, but we can't let guilt or insecurity get in the way of giving our one thing. I think about this situation because it captures for me the essence of the challenge—to not run away from someone who is suffering, even when we can't fix the problem, but can only do one small thing. Even if the only small thing we can do is listen with compassion.

The past few weeks have brought to our attention so much suffering in our world. Thousands of Syrian refugees have fled in small boats across the Mediterranean crowding the borders of Europe, escaping death and destruction in their country. Extremists from the so-called Islamic State killed 130 people in the city of Paris. Then, politicians and ordinary people in the United States started saying that we shouldn't accept any Syrian refugees, for fear that a violent Islamist extremist might get into our country. Even though the Syrian refugees themselves are fleeing from the same terrorism. It has felt like the country is going mad with fear.

Can we breathe in the suffering of the Syrian people like grains of sand on a ribbon of air? Can we let their pain flow through our lungs and our hearts and back out into the great web of life? Can we breathe in the suffering of the people in Paris, let it flow through our hearts and out again? Can we keep breathing?

7 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/24/us/cnn-heroes-joyner/index.html>

There has been a mass shooting in this country over 355 times during the last 335 days. Our hearts are weary with so much violence. Can we breathe in the suffering of those attacked at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Colorado? Can we breathe in the suffering of those killed or wounded in San Bernardino, California? Can we be courageous enough to keep our hearts open, to let the suffering of the world pass through our hearts, and then to give the something we can give for help and healing?

What does it mean to be a hero in our time? Fred Rogers, the gentle Mister Rogers of the television show, used to say, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" He added, "To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."⁸

I like what Fred Rogers had to say about heroes. He said, "When I was very young, most of my childhood heroes wore capes, flew through the air, or picked up buildings with one arm. They were spectacular and got a lot of attention. But as I grew, my heroes changed, so that now I can honestly say that anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me." And this: "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."⁹

"All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors—in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver."

All we really need to do, to be a hero in our time, is to keep our hearts open and be willing to help—not to fix everything but to give what we have to give, and to join together with others who are willing to help.

Congregational Conversation

I invite you now to join in the practice of sharing thoughts with partners. How it works is that first you find a partner, and sit near each other. Then I will share some questions or statements, and in turn you will complete them while your partner is listening. I invite you now to find a partner and sit near each other.

Our questions:

1. Who is one of your heroes, and why?
2. Think about the story of the sea stars. How do you make a difference for someone in your life?

Closing Words

Let us go back to the words of Jane Goodall:

"You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you.

What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice, let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

8 <http://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php#sthash.bbc95IHF.dpuf>

9 Spoken in 1994, quoted in [his obituary](#) in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.