

Becoming A Beacon
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Ellsworth, ME

in my mind's eye the image is fuzzy, like failing TV screens and old newspaper photographs--the kind where every dot is black or white and your brain has to fill in the blanks. There's never any audio in my memory, never any ambient noise or even-handed newscaster commentary, or any explanation at all, which may be because there was nothing anyone could say. The picture is almost too small to be believed, always shot from behind the lone figure, always shot toward the advancing tank. There are things that we always remember; every generation has a few. That anonymous man in Tian'anman Square made indelible once again what is embedded in the history of the world: sometimes it is worth facing death for what we believe in.

Because Tian'anman Square is in China, because it was 1989, because the Chinese government has been less than forthcoming with details, no one has positively identified the person who faced down the column of tanks on the streets of Beijing. There have been no follow-up interviews, no analysis of prison terms, no celebration and no grief. In large measure it has ceased to matter. What matters is that he was there on that day, that he was photographed, that the world saw him. On that day he became both more and less than himself. On that day he became a leader.

He may have been a leader before—he may have organized students or run a newspaper; he may have set fashion trends among the jet set or told compelling stories to captive audiences. But his leadership was limited--to those times and places, to those people, to his narrow circle so like the narrow circles in which we all live. As long as one is leading in small and quiet places, one's leadership remains highly integrated with one's personhood. The people who love and follow and criticize and resist are all the same, and the affection and resistance are mutual. The followers know the leader, faults and foibles and all, and love anyway. The leader knows the people, their strengths and limitations—and loves anyway, and they change each other.

Large-scale leadership is totally different. People to whom we have always been leaders and have never been a pregnant woman who miscarried or a man who just got his pilot's license or a kid who grew up and just graduated from trade school or joined the union or got a job—people for whom we are just leaders want us to be leaders always. They want us to be above getting sick and making mistakes and changing our minds. They want someone dependable and reliable who is leaderly all the time. There should be the suggestion of a life in the background, but if it doesn't serve them in some way, they don't want to know. If the followers *did* know—about the flu or the death or the child's graduation—they wouldn't know what to do with it. It would sit limp and uncertain in their hands, because they know that the leader is part of them in a way that they are not part of the leader. It's not easy.

This is the difference between being a small church in the woods and being a beacon, and it scares us. Not just the prospect of a changed relationship between the membership and the leaders, although that is part of the story. Not just the prospect of different relationships within the congregation, although it makes an easy target. We also know that becoming a beacon—a church with a large presence in the community—means becoming an institution that leads; it means becoming a congregation of leaders. And we're not sure we want that. We're not sure we can do it. It makes us hesitant. It makes us uneasy. It makes us hyper-aware of all the things we claim to be that we wish we did perfectly but maybe we don't. It makes us look around our house with the eyes of a visitor and notice the peeling paint in the corner and the clutter from last

week's art project, and maybe we shouldn't have a big party after all, what with the leaky faucet and the ragged tablecloth, maybe we should just tuck ourselves into our cozy living room with the people we already know; maybe we can just have a little potluck and keep things the way they are. We have all seen what popular culture and the news media do to people who are big and successful and then turn out to be flawed. They are challenged, they are derided, they are tried and convicted before charges are even filed.

There are options for individuals: individuals can disappear; individuals can be martyred.

For institutions, there is no release, and no forgiveness.

No wonder we're scared. Why would anyone choose that path? Why would anyone choose that life? Somehow sometime someone is bound to mess up—it's part of who and how we are. We never stop being human. So leadership starts to look like a path that ends in destruction, and unpleasant destruction at that. Since public humiliation is not popular, why would anyone take it on?

Sometimes it is worth facing death for what we believe in.

That's the obvious answer—we are called to work for justice even when the work is hard.

But there's another, more subtle, more important answer.

Institutions are different from people. At their best they are stronger and wiser and more persistent to the tune of generations. Institutions can live out and live down the vast majority of public scandals; institutions are adaptable in ways that individuals never can be; leaders move on, people come and go, but an institution, a good and useful and necessary institution, will endure.

And so institutions, despite the risk, are called to the hardest work of leadership, because they, composed of structures and individuals who create them, are strong enough to do it.

We are strong enough to do it.

When we remember that man in front of the tank; when we remember the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior, when we remember Gandhi, when we remember James Reeb, when we remember the people who crashed their 9/11 plane into a field in Pennsylvania, only a few of us anywhere in the world are privileged to remember the people themselves. For the rest of us what we remember are icons, single acts, single moments. What we remember are the things in them that made us wish we were more than we ever can be. None of them lived perfect lives; their days like ours were fraught with doubts and mistakes, errors in judgment and anger and fears. But what we want to remember—because it is what we need to remember—is the stuff that calls us to better lives.

What an institution can give us which an individual cannot is an ongoing and sustained leadership; a place for connection; something concrete that is bigger than ourselves. Causes are important but they wax and wane; compelling issues come and go. Institutions keep bringing us back to the larger story, to the bigger picture, to the multi-generational trends of human existence and the work needed to continue to be good humans, alone and in community. What an institution can give us is the support we need to live interdependently, and do it well.

But such institutions require people—people to make them and people to sustain them—and that that

is the work of religion.

That is the work of faith.

That is the work that has been so ably taken up by vast congregations of thousands of strongly-convicted members and their pastors. They are leaders in this world. They are calling us to a particular kind of life together, and people are hearing. People are listening. People are being

convinced. They are beacons for their beliefs, beacons for their members, beacons for their vision of a good future, and people are hungry—people are *starving* for a vision of a good future, and they are signing right up because there's not much in the way of strong vision out there. There's not much in the way of hope on our streets or in our factories or at our schools.

And even though the decision about what the vision is could be a discussion, it could be a dialogue, it could be a conversation, it is not. It is nearly always not. And why?

Because there's usually only one voice out there. There's only one image, only one candle in the darkness, and don't you know everyone who's looking for dropped pennies is going to flock to the light.

And it's a shame. Because people are like this: we need to see our options. We need to know what's out there. If someone offers us a drink we ask, "what have you got?"

What have you got—because we want to know what our choices are, we want to know what is on the table. We want to make an informed and well-made and careful decision. And we can only do that if we know as much as possible first.

Everyone else is just like that, just like us. But when people in our world in this country here today ask "What have you got?" there's often only one answer. There's only one bright light; there's only one harbor beacon.

So they choose about it—they choose for, or the choose against, but that's where the choosing stops. They can't make a better decision, they can't know what else is on offer, because in most places right now, nothing else is on offer. There's other stuff out there, but it's tucked in a back corner, or it's hidden in the woods, and they don't even know we're here.

And that
is a tragedy.

That is a travesty.

That is a failure of us and our systems and our lives and our convictions, and it is a fixable failure. It is a problem with a clear and present and powerful solution, and it is up to us to choose whether we will step up.

And at this moment in our history, the choice really is ours.

We can decide that our house is too messy, that our lives are too scary, that we lead in other places at other times and that that's enough for this lifetime. We can decide not to do more than we already have; we can decide that we are too small or too busy or that this town doesn't really need our voice anyway.

Or we can decide differently. We can decide radically. We can decide to stand up. We can decide to speak out. We can decide to take it on and embrace the work handed down to us by generations of leaders before us.

And if we are going to do this work, this good work, this important work, if we are going to let our voices be heard and our bodies be counted, then we have to figure some things out.

Because we cannot be a beacon for what we are not.

We cannot be a beacon for who we are not.

We cannot stand up and shout to the skies what we do not understand, what we do not believe, what we do not live.

We cannot bear false witness; we cannot be false prophets. Every person on this earth knows what falsehood sounds like, even if they cannot explain it, and lies will serve no one.

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But we cannot let the pressure discourage us. We cannot let the strain deter us. We cannot say, as so many have tried to say, "I know I can, Lord, I know I could...but take someone else." It's

an old story, older than the Bible, but whether we believe our call comes from god or from community or from that deep and perfect place in our hearts, we all know there's a call. We have all felt that rising up. We have all known the need to speak truth in the face of fear and injustice, and we cannot deny it. We cannot reject it. We cannot just walk away from it. For this world needs our *witness*, friends, this world needs our *message*. This world needs our truth to stand beside the other truths and our voice to rise up in the chorus of voices--we cannot be silent and we cannot be silenced; we *must* be heard.

We must be heard.

Because there are conversations out there, my friends, there are conversations and dialogues and discussions and if our voice is not there then they are not complete. They are lacking balance. The people who are looking for options and seeking possibilities, the people who are like so many of us, searching for a spiritual home, for a spiritual answer, they are not getting the whole story. They may find what they need elsewhere. They may not need this church; they may not be looking for this church, but if they do not know about this church then they cannot freely decide. And that is also an injustice. They are not seeing the whole of the possibilities and we *cannot let that happen*. Our message of hope is too important. Our message of joy is too important. Our message of possibility and examined truth and personal transformation in the context of community is *too important*.

And our own practice of speaking and living into justice is too important.

Because we have spiritual practice, here in the Unitarian Universalist Association. We have spiritual disciplines.

We come to weekly services. That's a practice.

We care for our community. That's a practice.

And we take seriously a commitment to justice, which means giving our time and money and energy to causes of our hearts—to soup kitchens and homeless shelters and rape crisis centers and food pantries and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender organizations and peace work and veteran's hospitals. And that is a practice.

But we don't just work behind the scenes, and we don't just work as individuals. We go as people of faith. We go as people moved by religion. We go as people doing our spiritual work in the world, and we go with a commitment to speak up when we know there is something to say. And that is also a practice.

It is a hard discipline. It is as challenging as scriptural study; it is as counterintuitive as fasting, it is as uncomfortable as sitting meditation.

And it is as important as all of them.

We go to do these things together because we are stronger together, we are wiser together, we have an institution that sustains us and encourages us together; we work together and we speak out together and we move together as one people bound by a common strength of hope and spirit and by the sustaining and compelling power of love.

We are called by our faith to this work.

And we are called by our faith to lead.

And I cannot imagine that we are going to let our fear restrain us.

I cannot imagine that we are going to let our trepidation censor us.

I cannot imagine that we are going to stand by and let these pivotal days pass through our fingers when we could seize them and make them *count*.

These days are days of *history*, friends,
they are days of change.

These are the days of tomorrow's roots and we know what tomorrow can be;
we know what tomorrow can have
we know what tomorrow can become
if only we speak up, stand up, and *let our voices be heard*.
We can be a beacon
and our light will shine to places beyond our wildest dreams.
This is the church we support.
This is the church we are.
Blessed be
and amen.