

# ***The Courage To Be Ourselves***

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*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose. —Kris Kristopherson*

*No man quite understands his own artful dodges from the grim shadow of self-knowledge. —Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim*

## **Ancient Witness:** Isaiah 6:1-8

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Holy One sitting on a throne, high and lofty, in a robe whose train filled the temple. Seraphs, or Flaming Creatures, were in stationed above; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the God of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of God's glory.”*

*The doorposts and the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I have unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Ruler, the God of hosts!”*

*Then one of the flaming creatures flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The flaming creature touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, all your faults and wrongdoings are overcome.” Then I heard the voice of the Holy One saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”*

“Just be yourself, and you’ll do O.K.” I can remember hearing these words, and maybe you have heard them at certain key times of your life, too. Maybe it was somebody’s advice to you before going on a date or going to a job interview. But sometimes we’re tempted to put on airs, to act how we think people want us to act, to play it safe, instead of being ourselves.

Natalie Goldberg, in her book, *Long Quiet Highway*, wrote about how she found herself teaching a sixth-grade class in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The veteran teacher of eleven years had quit because she couldn’t control this particular group of kids.

*“Please, class, be still,” I would beg, but the class was never still. There were paper planes on the floor... Paper clips, textbooks, pencils, empty cellophane Frito-Lay bags. A whistle, three sweaters and two pairs of sneakers were also on the floor. The wooden desks with attached chairs were in jagged rows, some turned all the way around and facing each other...*

*“Please, be quiet,” I said, and suddenly stopped.. I felt my chest opening red and enormous like a great peony, and it was radiating throughout my body. I felt the blood flowing in my hands and legs. I turned and looked out the window. I looked at the*

*smokey appearance of the spring cottonwoods near the parking lot... suddenly they looked so beautiful... and I felt that nothing else was so important...*

*I had no idea what was happening... I was frightened... I had signed a teaching contract, my first, and I hated my job. I wasn't qualified for it—which, in this case, simply meant keeping control of everybody... I had two months until the end of school and now something was erupting, changing inside of me...*

*After struggling for a few more days, on Monday, without thought or plan, I marched down the waxed linoleum corridor... to the principals' office. I have no idea what I said to him as I sat across from him at his large brown desk, because while my mouth, connected with my body, spoke one thing, my busy mind was screaming at me, "What are you doing? You're crazy. You're finished! You'll starve in a gutter." I must have been eloquent, however, because at the end of our conversation Mr. Peterson, the principal stood up, gave me a strong handshake, and said, "I understand completely. And if you ever want a job again, just call me."*

*I felt such relief. I flew down the hall back to my kids. I was free. This was my last week of trying to get them back in their seats. As a matter of fact, when I entered the class I remember thinking to myself, "What the heck, let them do what they want. They do it anyway." I sat behind my desk the rest of the afternoon, smiling. We all seemed happier and, given freedom, they seemed less unruly.*

*Each day of that week we did something different. (Knowing that I would soon be gone) I trusted something inside me... and the kids responded. It wasn't obvious to me at the time, but it was the beginning of something new...*

*On Friday, I stood in front of the blackboard. "I have something to tell you." They were all attentive. "Today is the last day of the week and the last day I'll be here." There was an awkward, stunned silence. "Look, I know that this has been a tough year for you. Let's face it, none of you were dolls... But this week was a great week." They all nod to remember it. It's important.*

*"Now, all of you get in your seats, and when you do, I want you to close your eyes and put out your hands." I walked around and placed a Hershey's Kiss in each kid's palm. "Now unwrap it, and all on the same count, when I say 'yes' put it on your tongue, close your mouth, let it melt slowly, and remember this week. Promise never to forget it, no matter what happens in your life." I switched off the classroom lights.*

I suspect that not many people experience the kind of freedom that Natalie Goldberg felt when she was able to let go of everything and follow her inner voice. How many of us have gone to the edge, only to turn back, I wonder. Sometimes it takes being pushed or having things taken from us, against our will. Janis Joplin sang it: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

It's not surprising to me that when Goldberg was able to have nothing to lose, to let go, and to embrace herself fully, that she experience her best week as a teacher. I suspect that her children could detect her freedom and new sense of purpose, and so they responded to her. How often does this happen to us, when we stop trying so hard to be someone who we are not?

Perhaps most of us have started out like Goldberg. We adopt someone else's script; follow the conventional standards, guidelines and protocols, and then we wonder why it doesn't seem to work. Don't get me wrong—the script is important. But we have to learn to give it our own interpretation and put our own stamp on it.

Sometimes there are external pressures that prevent and hinder us from being ourselves.

I think of Martin Luther King, who was criticized and pressured for his leadership in the civil rights movement. On one hand, some felt that King's strategy of nonviolent resistance was too weak, too accommodating. On the other hand, some thought that he was much too radical and extreme. I am told that Thurgood Marshall, who successfully argued before the Supreme Court against the doctrine of "separate but equal" in our public schools and who later became a Supreme Court justice, himself, excoriated King for being too radical, too "in your face," too reckless. Marshall argued that change should come from the inside, slowly, through appropriate channels.

And we all know the real pressures that King was facing to not follow his convictions of his heart. The death threats, the violence and hatred directed toward him, the legal persecution and jail. Even the love he had for his family became a pressure for him to change who he was, to turn back and back down. What anguish he must have felt when he was faced to choose being true to himself, to follow his dream, when it meant neglecting his loved ones, taking time away from them, possibly not being able to provide for them, and ultimately, his premature and final absence from their lives. What pressure he must have felt!

Of course, we know all-too-well the pressures in the church not be ourselves, not to think for ourselves, not to imagine, dream and have visions of justice. For gay and lesbian persons, many churches still tell them that they cannot be themselves, that they must deny who they are, in order to be part of the body of Christ. And for those of us straight allies who dare to interpret the holy scriptures differently, who dare to have a different understanding of the Word of God, we are told to shut up and not act upon our convictions and an essential part of our being.

You know, Jesus himself faced a kind of religious fundamentalism that was more concerned about enforcement of institutional rules than compassion. Fundamentalism has never wanted Jesus to be himself. It tried to silence his religious expression. But, thank God, Jesus was free to be himself anyway. And in Jesus we have an example of the courage and freedom to be ourselves.

It was over 23 years ago, that a lawyer from Virginia filed a disciplinary complaint against me in the courts of the Presbyterian Church. We had decided as a congregation to dissent and not to comply openly with church laws against gay and lesbian members. Officially the accusation was that I refused to obey with the constitution of the Presbyterian Church by saying that same-sex marriages were the same as other marriages and by ordaining gay and lesbian persons who had the courage to be themselves. So I was looking down the barrel of being on trial in the church courts. This is what I told my congregation that Sunday:

*I don't mind telling you that my initial reaction to this can be summarized in one word: Yikes! The possibility of being removed from office and defrocked is not a pleasant one. I love this work. I can't imagine doing anything else. And I also love being able to*

*provide for my family. I want my children to have what they need—college educations, basic things, health care, vacations. I like my house.*

Well... Thirteen years later the Presbyterian Church finally removed its ban against same-sex marriage!

I wish I could say it gets easier—being ourselves. But it is a never-ending struggle. The issues simply change, it seems to me. I love this great line by the author, Anais Nin:

*And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to bloom.*

Sometimes painful circumstances lead us finally to take the risk to blossom. And we are meant to bloom in our lives not just once, but over and over again, year after year.

In the ancient text it says that when the prophet Isaiah heard the messengers of God calling to him, he said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!” Isaiah was overwhelmed with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. He had no confidence. He questioned his own ability. “I am not enough; I am not worthy,” he thought.

But then, Isaiah heard a fearsome voice burning within him say, “You know, you do have weaknesses and imperfections, you do have doubts and fears. But that’s O.K., you are enough!” This is when the prophet is finally able to say, “Here am *I*; send *me*!” Here is *not* someone who is perfect, who has no weaknesses or who has no questions. Here am I, in my full but frail humanity. Don’t just send my strengths, my admirable qualities; send the *whole me*. I’m ready.

Notice something about Isaiah. His sense of self-approval didn’t resolve his issue of self-doubt. One can feel generally secure in the core of our being, yet still troubled by inconsistencies and contradictions. In fact, to make the most of our visit on this planet, we must never stop questioning ourselves and learn to welcome our doubt as a friend and ally.

So where did Isaiah’s courage come from? Where did he find the strength to accept himself as he was and to venture forth into the unknown? In the last sentence of his classic book, *The Courage to Be*, the great theologian Paul Tillich wrote:

*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*

The God of our human understanding and preconceptions disappears in the anxiety of doubt. When this happens, the unknowable, mysterious, holy God appears to us. When we give ourselves over and let ourselves be upheld by *this* God, we find the courage to be. We trust something that is deep inside us, and we are set free.

Marianne Williamson famously wrote,

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.*

In other words, in spite of my fear, I can actually step out with trust into the unknown. I am capable of doing it, and *that* scares the hell out of me. And perhaps on a certain level Isaiah knew he was capable of being a powerful voice, and it scared him to death. But, says Williamson,

*We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us... And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

Friends, may we face our fear that we are stronger and more gifted than we think, and go forth into the unknown future, beyond the safety of certainty. May we find courage to be who we truly are, to let go, and to blossom in the radiance of God's love. May we discover that we have something to offer the world that is unique and valuable, and may we say, "Here am I, send me! Send the whole me, complete with doubts and fears and weakness." And may we be free and exhilarated and fully alive!

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*