



Touchstones Project

Small Group Discussion Guide

Courage & Repairing the World

Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

1. *Quiet Braveries* by Mark Nepo

Breeders shoot horses with broken legs, as if there's nothing else to be done. But now I know they do this for themselves, not wanting to care for a horse that cannot run.

In just this way, fearful and selfish people cut the cord to those who are broken, not wanting to sit with a friend who can't find tomorrow, not wanting to be saddled with someone who will slow them down, not wanting to face what is broken in themselves. In this lies the challenge of compassion. For when we dare to hold those forced to the ground, dare hold them close, the truth of the holding and listening sings and we are carried into the wisdom of broken bones and how things heal.

These are quiet braveries we all need: The courage to wait and to watch with all of who we are. The courage to admit that we are not alone. The courage to hold each other to the ear of our heart. And the courage to care for things that are broken.

Source: *The Exquisite Risk: Daring to Live an Authentic Life* by Mark Nepo

2. *Four Ways to Courage* by David Richo

Wholeness implies that we have all the virtues as potential within.... For instance, courage is always resident in our psyche. Like all virtues, it can be activated in any of four ways: It can happen by effort: keep acting as if you were courageous and eventually you will build the habit of courage (A virtue is a habit.) It can also happen interactively as the natural result of experiences that provide encouragement. ...As a result, we notice that we automatically have more courage.

...Virtue can also happen by grace, which takes two forms. It is sometimes available in an *essential* ongoing way so that it seems to be part of our personality. Sometimes grace is existentially

available, suddenly granted in the here-and-now moment of need. When the grace is essential, courage is an innate gift that we have always been able to access. The daredevil you remember in grammar school may be an example of someone with that gift. When the grace is *existential*, courage comes to us suddenly: we see someone in need or are confronted with a challenge and we respond courageously without thinking. It seems to come from nowhere, not from familiar ego resources but from a power beyond our limitations; hence it is called grace.

So, virtues manifest in four ways: by effort, interaction, essential grace, and existential grace. Look within yourself and ask how courage lives in you.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/11794>

3. *Courage, Perseverance, and Community* by Amy Sander Montanez

This process of healing and being healed, of living into our uniqueness and fullness, is ...[a] joy.... We are all trying to find our way back Home, home to our holy nature, and ...we do it, healing thread by thread. I believe this kind of personal transformation requires three things of us: courage, perseverance, and community.

Courage, because one of the hardest things we do as people who believe in transformation is to look at the truth of ourselves. Being vulnerable and truthful with ourselves ...and others is courageous work. Sometimes the process of this inner work, the process of claiming our personal truths can feel negative, dark, and full of grief. For some of us, it is even scary to look at our light and our strengths. Somehow, we know that our lives will change if we claim and share our stories and our personal truths. We also know that we can't control how they will change, and giving up that control can be frightening. It can also be freeing.

That is why perseverance is necessary. Transformation is not an easy process and there is no quick fix. ...Sticking with the process and believing we are worth it; we will come out transformed into our own unique Self.

...The aspect that seems the hardest for some of us is belonging to and participating in community. Most of us need support and encouragement, ...[to] ...stay on the path. ...That's simply the truth.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/25815>

4. *Carson's Courage* by Terry Tempest Williams

...Rachel Carson's spirit is among us. Like her, we can be both fierce and compassionate at once. ...We can carry a healthy sense of indignation within us that will shatter the complacency that has seeped into our society in the name of all we have lost, knowing there is still so much to be saved.

Call it sacred rage, rage grounded in the understanding that all life is intertwined. And we can come to know and continue to learn from the grace of wild things as they hold an organic wisdom that sustains peace.

...Do we have the moral courage to step forward and openly question every law, person, and practice that denies justice toward nature?

...And do we have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that inspires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism?

Rachel Carson's name is synonymous with courage. She dared to expose the underbelly of the chemical industry and show how it was disrupting the balance of nature. In *Silent Spring* we see her signature strengths on the page, and witness how a confluence of poetry and politics with sound science can create an ethical stance toward life. But perhaps Rachel Carson's true courage lies in her willingness to align science with the sacred, to admit that her bond toward nature is a spiritual one.

... I walked outside and sat on our back porch. The blinking bodies of fireflies were rising and falling above the grasses. They appeared as a company of code talkers flashing S.O.S. on a very dark night.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/28781/patriotism-and-the-american-land>

5. *Fear and Moral Courage* by Ben Dean

Whatever the circumstances testing courage, fear must be overcome.

The fear that accompanies physical courage relates to bodily injury or death. It is also possible for a fear of shame, opprobrium, or similar humiliations to spur physical courage, producing what is popularly called the "courage born of fear." In warfare, for example, some individuals may display physical courage because they fear cowardice. Or they may accept that they are cowards yet fear being recognized as such by others.

Moral courage, too, may relate to fear of others' adverse opinions. Looking foolish before peers, for example, is a common fear. But moral courage compels or allows an individual to do what he or she believes is right, despite fear of the consequences.

The fear that can summon moral courage takes many forms: fear of job loss, fear of poverty, fear of losing friends, fear of criticism, fear of ostracism, fear of embarrassment, fear of making enemies, fear of losing status, to name but a few potential human fears. In addition, one may fear a loss of ethical integrity or even a loss of authenticity if he or she fails to act in accord with conscience.

As there are many variations of fear, there are many dimensions to moral courage, ranging from the social courage represented by Rosa Parks and Gandhi to the political courage represented, if infrequently, by elected officials. The opportunities to act with moral courage are numerous, and the fears calling for moral courage are as varied as individuals themselves.

Source:

<https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletters/authentic happiness coaching/courage>

6. *Courage Requires Vulnerability*

by Rev. Marisol Caballero

...Courage requires both vulnerability and careful strategy.

...Courage is not demanding "safety" when confronting the annoyance of having one's haughty and long-held answers questioned. It is incompatible with despair.

Courage is not becoming defensive, or insisting upon being viewed as an individual when the privileges of membership in a dominant group are

brought to light. Rather, courage recognizes that growth insists on a willingness to be utterly transformed.

Courage is not believing that anyone is “helping” or coming to “the assistance of” members of marginalized groups. Rather, it is recognizing that the need to play savior comes from societal brainwashing caused by systems that convince some they are superior over others.

Courage is seeking one’s own liberation from these lies, knowing it will require a relinquishment of power and an admittance that they’ve been bamboozled. Courage does not require perfection from us, or air-tight plans, or even expertise.

I’ll tell you what courage does require: Courage requires taking great risks while stepping into the unknown.

It takes no courage to shut one’s mouth, step aside, and listen when needed. The only thing at risk here is one’s ego; a self-identity built around the myth of superiority.

Courage does not ask us to stop trembling; it asks us to find ways to incorporate our trembles into our dance.

Courage, the faithful companion of hope, is sticking around when “we” and “us” are spoken in contexts that clearly don’t mean “me.”

Courage is claiming this faith as home when nearly everything around me says I am out of place, yet everything inside me says I am home.

Courage is the generations and generations of ancestors who taught us to actively pursue joy, laughter, and celebration alongside outrage, grief, and fatigue. ...

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/courage-requires-vulnerability>

Gathering

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: *We Gather*

by Rev. Gary Kowalski

We gather...

to seek the truth, to grow in love, to join in service;
to celebrate life’s beauty and find healing for its pain;

to honor our kinship with each other and with the earth;

to create a more compassionate world,
beginning with ourselves;
to wonder at the mystery that gave us birth;
to find courage for the journey’s end;
and to listen for the wisdom that guides us
in the quietness of this moment.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/5440.shtml>

Chalice Lighting: *A Chalice*

by Rev. Lindsay Bates

To face the world’s shadows, a chalice of light.
To face the world’s coldness, a chalice of warmth,
To face the world’s terrors, a chalice of courage.
To face the world’s turmoil, a chalice of peace.
May its glow fill our spirits, our hearts, and our lives.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/face-worlds-shadows>

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Invite someone to read aloud the following:

How to Defeat Fear by Pema Chödrön

Once there was a young warrior. Her teacher told her that she had to do battle with fear. She didn’t want to do that. It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly. But the teacher said she had to do it and gave her the instructions for the battle. The day arrived. The student warrior stood on one side, and fear stood on the other. The warrior was feeling very small, and fear was looking big and wrathful. They both had their weapons. The young warrior roused herself and went toward fear, prostrated three times, and asked, “May I have permission to go into battle with you?” Fear said, “Thank you for showing me so much respect that you ask permission.” Then the young warrior said, “How can I defeat you?” Fear replied, “My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to

your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don't do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me. You can even be convinced by me. But if you don't do what I say, I have no power." In that way, the student warrior learned how to defeat fear.

Source: <https://waldronleadership.com/defeat-fear-pema-chodron/>

Readings from the Common Bowl: Invite group members to read the following selections aloud. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

"The word *courage* comes from the Latin *cor*, which means heart. According to poet Mark Nepo, the original use of the word courage meant to stand by one's core: a 'striking concept that reinforces the belief found in almost all traditions that living from the Center is what enables us to face whatever life has to offer.' To 'encourage' means to hearten; to impart strength and confidence. This is our work, as a religious community: to encourage one another; to be bold in engaging the world around us, as well as what scares us internally; to give one another the confidence and heart to live as fully as possible." *Rev. Erika A. Hewitt*

"...Martin Luther King Jr. ...talked about love as a transformational source. It's come down to us as a sort of a watered-down version of "Love your neighbor as yourself," not as an empowering force that changes everything. I love Dr. King's book *Strength to Love*, in which he talks about the courage it takes, in the midst of domination, to decide to love. ...How do we make that commitment? How do we start to love? We're in such a climate of hate right now. We're seeing diminishing acts of kindness and love because fear of the stranger has been so deeply cultivated in us. Breaking down that us-and-them binary is part of the work of love. [...] Our innate capacity to love is like a seed in the soil. What do we need to do to activate that seed, to make it capable of blossoming?" *bell hooks*

"Courage as a warrior depends on getting to know fear. If we ignore fear, we can't go beyond it. ...The way to develop courage is not to cast out

fear, but to find out more about it by looking directly at fear. Until you see what the problem is, trying to get away from the fear just gives the fear more energy. Finding out more about your own fear is fearlessness. It is the leap you need to take..." *Cynthia Kneen*

"...Listen is a quiet word, that half swallowed L and diffident I and softly hissing S. It defies the clamorous words it absorbs, the words that have defined this year, the shouts and roars, the bray and bluster. Listening is hard when the sounds around us grow mean and ugly. And listening takes particular courage in divisive times. 'Courage is not just about standing up for what you believe,' Doug Elmendorf tells his students at Harvard. 'Sometimes courage is about sitting down and listening to what you may not initially believe.'" *Nancy Gibbs*

"Broken dreams, broken hearts, hopes unrealized should not be seen as emblems of shame, badges of failure. If anything, they are tokens of courage. We were brave enough to dream, brave enough to long for so much, and when we did not get it, we were brave enough to carry the fragments of those dashed hopes with us into the future, telling us who we used to be as a prelude to discovering who we might become." *Harold S. Kushner*

"I have come to believe that we can only discover the capacity and meaning of our courage in the context of our struggles, in how we face and inhabit the challenges life presents to us. In this, courage is an applied art of spirit. It is not something we can manipulate, but only live into. Recovering the Source and living it out in the world, alone and together, is a lifelong devotion. One that we must, ultimately, inhabit alone, but one which we must enliven together." *Mark Nepo*

"What we call our destiny is truly our character and that character can be altered. The knowledge that we are responsible for our actions and attitudes does not need to be discouraging, because it also means that we are free to change this destiny. One is not in bondage to the past, which has shaped our feelings, to race, inheritance, background. All this can be altered if we have the courage to examine how it formed us. We can alter the chemistry provided we

have the courage to dissect the elements.” *Anais Nin*

“Everyone thinks that courage is about facing death without flinching. But almost anyone can do that. Almost anyone can hold their breath and not scream for as long as it takes to die. True courage is about facing life without flinching. I don’t mean the times when the right path is hard, but glorious at the end. I’m talking about enduring the boredom, the messiness, and the inconvenience of doing what is right.” *Robin Hobb*

“Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is *cor*—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But in my opinion, this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences—good and bad. Speaking from our hearts is what I think of as “ordinary courage.” *Brené Brown*

“I am not a courageous person by nature. I have simply discovered that, at certain key moments in this life, you must find courage in yourself, in order to move forward and live. It is like a muscle and it must be exercised, first a little, and then more and more. All the really exciting things possible during the course of a lifetime require a little more courage than we currently have. A deep breath and a leap.” *John Patrick Shanley*

Reading

7. *The Inward Rappel* by Parker Palmer

...Years ago, I went on an amazing, week-long *Outward Bound* program. I say “amazing” now. At the time, what amazed me was that I was paying good money to do things that scared me to death!

One of those things was rappelling down a 110-foot cliff on Hurricane Island off the coast of Maine. I was not alone in my fear. Most of the ten people who came on that program were fearful about rappelling, as well as the other physical and mental challenges we faced day and night.

I’ve forgotten how to rappel. But I will never forget the way ten strangers offered each other constant encouragement and support that week. Not once was anyone ignored — let alone scoffed at or shamed — as they wrestled with their fears. Instead, we talked openly about what scared us, and offered each other the kind of compassion that gave everyone courage to make it through.

When I came home and went back to work, I looked around and said to myself, “If only we could see the ‘inward rappel’ so many of us are making right now — the daunting challenges so many folks wake up to each morning — we’d have more compassion and offer each other more support. If our inner struggles were more visible, more compassion would flow.”

...All of us can exercise an empathetic imagination about the “inward rappels” others are making, just as the poet Miller Williams urges us to do: “Have compassion for everyone you meet / even if they don’t want it ...”

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/rappelling-together-downward-and-inward/>

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time and interest allow. Fully explore one question before moving to the next. The questions do not need to be discussed in order.

1. In reading #1, Mark Nepo chastises horse breeders who shoot a horse with a broken leg because it can no longer race, not because it can’t heal and live. He then lifts up the importance of quiet braveries that may be visible, but often are not. What are examples of quiet braveries? Why are they important? He writes about holding another person “to the ear of our heart.” How is this done? Why is it important? Finally, he writes about, “the courage to care for things that are broken.” Has society become less caring? If so, how? Less courageous? If so, how? What can be done about both of these?
2. In reading #2, David Richo writes that courage can be activated in four ways: by effort, through interactions that encourage, by essential grace (i.e., what is innate in us emerging), and by existential grace (i.e., courage that comes to us from outside of us). Has courage come to you in

any of these four ways? Which ones? How does courage live within you?

3. In reading #3, Amy Sander Montanez writes that it requires courage “to look at the truth of ourselves” as part of the process of personal transformation. Do you agree? Why or why not? Why can looking at the truth of ourselves be so difficult? Perseverance or persistence is also considered an expression of courage, because giving up is often so easy to do. What role has perseverance played in your life? The final aspect that Montanez emphasizes is the support of community. What role has a UU community played in encouraging you in your journey of personal transportation?
4. In reading #4, Terry Tempest Williams writes about the courage of Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, exposed the dangers of DDT. It meant going up against powerful interests. She died in 1964 after a four-year battle with breast cancer. DDT was finally banned in 1972. Williams writes, “perhaps Rachel Carson’s true courage lies in her willingness to align science with the sacred, to admit that her bond toward nature is a spiritual one.” In what ways do these involve courage? How would you answer these two questions posed by Williams: “Do we have the moral courage to step forward and openly question every law, person, and practice that denies justice toward nature? And do we have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that inspires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism?”
5. In reading #5, Ben Dean focuses on the challenges of overcoming fear and fostering moral courage. He recounts various fears including fear of criticism, ostracism, and embarrassment that get in the way of moral courage. How does fear undermine moral courage? What can exemplars like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Gandhi teach us about overcoming fear and living courageously?
6. In reading #6, Marisol Caballero offers a thoughtful exposition of courage, one from the perspective of the marginalized. She writes. “It takes no courage to shut one’s mouth, step aside, and listen when needed. The only thing at risk here is one’s ego; a self-identity built around the myth of superiority.” How might

courage be different for the marginalized versus the privileged? Caballero also writes that, “Courage requires both vulnerability and careful strategy.” How might strategy differ between these two groups?

7. In reading #7, Parker Palmer writes about his fear of “rappelling down a 110-foot cliff on Hurricane Island off the coast of Maine.” The group of ten shared their fears and encouraged each other. That gave everyone the courage to make it through. The experience prompted him to ponder the “inward rappel” that so many people face daily, all the people facing struggles of which we are seldom aware. Palmer concludes, “If our inner struggles were more visible, more compassion would flow.” Do you agree? Why or why not? If we showed more compassion, would it encourage people as they deal with their “inward rappels?” Palmer quotes the poet Miller Williams: “Have compassion for everyone you meet / even if they don’t want it ...” How might such compassion influence our interactions with others? How might this spiritual practice of compassion change us, and give us more courage?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

8. Erika Hewitt writes about the root of the word courage, which is heart. To encourage another is to put heart in to. Who has encouraged you? What did it mean? How did it help? Hewitt the writes, “This is our work, as a religious community: to encourage one another; to be bold in engaging the world around us, as well as what scares us internally; to give one another the confidence and heart to live as fully as possible.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How can our religious communities encourage us?
9. bell hooks reminds us of Martin Luther King’s assertion, “about the courage it takes, in the midst of domination, to decide to love.” hooks asks, “How do we make that commitment? How do we start to love?” How would you answer. She suggests that this is made more difficult because, “We’re in such a climate of hate right now.” Do you agree? Why or why not? As King famously said, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” How can courage help us to love when hate dominates? hooks concludes, “Our innate capacity to love is like a seed in the

soil. What do we need to do to activate that seed, to make it capable of blossoming?" What is your response?

10. Cynthia Kneen writes about the necessity of engaging our fear. What role has fear played in your life, especially when you were young? Did you confront it? How? Sometimes fear is a reasonable reaction. What can we learn from our fear? The problem is that our fear can paralyze us, reducing our options. Consider this question, "What would I do in this situation if I wasn't afraid?" How might such a question help to engage and manage fear?
11. Nancy Gibbs writes about listening, observing that "listening takes particular courage in divisive times." Does it seem that listening is in short supply? If yes, what has led to this? How can we use listening to motivate others to communicate authentically? She quotes Elmendorf: "Sometimes courage is about sitting down and listening to what you may not initially believe." Have you ever done this? What made it hard? What helped?
12. Harold Kushner connects courage to hope, writing that, "Broken dreams, broken hearts, hopes unrealized ... are tokens of courage." What role can failure do to a sense of self? What role can courage play in recovering from failure? (Courage can help us understand that we "made" a mistake, not that we "are" a mistake.)
13. Mark Nepo writes "that we can only discover the capacity and meaning of our courage in the context of our struggles, in how we face and inhabit the challenges life presents to us." What has your life taught you about the courage that is unique to your life and to you?
14. Anais Nin wrote that we can alter our character and destiny "if we have the courage to examine how it formed us." Of note, she mentions the influence of race on character and destiny. For those who are white, is the process she suggests an approach that can help engage white privilege/supremacy and make changes in our character to come to terms with it? Why or why not?
15. Robin Hobb writes that true courage is not facing death without flinching, but of facing life without flinching. Do you agree? Why or why not? She is not talking about the courage of

being a hero, but the courage to endure "the boredom, the messiness, and the inconvenience of doing what is right." As you survey the landscape, does it seem that courage, especially in leaders, is in short supply? Has this been made starker by the courage of Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people?

16. Brené Brown recalls an early definition of the word courage: "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." She *en-courages* us "to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences—good and bad." This is to speak the truth in love about ourselves. What makes this difficult? Why do people often want to hide the bad? Recall that Brown has associated courage with vulnerability. Why do we resist being vulnerable? In what ways could vulnerability be a doorway to courage?
17. John Shanley compares courage to a muscle that must be exercised. Does this make sense? If yes, why and how? If no, why not? Shanley suggests that "the really exciting things possible during the course of a lifetime require a little more courage than we currently have." If that is the case, how do we summon more courage in any given moment? What helps with this? What gets in the way?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice by Elizabeth Selle Jones
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Source: [SLT #456](#)

Closing Words: *Take Courage*

by Rev. Wayne Arnason

Take courage....

The way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:
you are not alone.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/183796.shtml>