

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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The End of a Million Years

At a church meeting where members were being encouraged to invite their friends to a Sunday service, the wife of one of the Yankee pillars of the congregation said, “My husband wouldn’t do that in a million years.” Someone spoke up and said, “The great thing about a million years is that you never know when it’s over.”¹

Ten years ago this weekend, a million years were over.

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“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a little bird asks a dove.

“Nothing more than nothing,” the dove replies.

“Then I must tell you a marvelous story,” the little bird says. “I sat on a fir branch, close to the trunk, and it began to snow. Not heavily, not in a raging blizzard. No, it snowed, just as in in a dream. And since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes landing on my branch, settling on its twigs and needles. They numbered exactly 3 million, 471 thousand, 952. And then, when the next snowflake dropped onto the branch – *nothing more than nothing*, as you say – the branch broke.”²

At any moment, the last snowflake could fall, and a million years could be over. Nelson Mandela said, “It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

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It’s true, you never know, but it’s also true that it doesn’t just happen.

Ten years ago yesterday morning, seven plaintiff couples stepped up to city and town clerk’s windows throughout the Commonwealth and asked

¹ Thanks to David Rynick. Please see davidrynick.com/

² An anonymous teaching tale, told in many ways!

for a marriage license. Like hundreds of thousands of couples before them, they were filled with the promise of that exalted and extraordinary moment in the life of an intimate relationship. Only for these seven, it was not their first trip to city hall. They had asked before, and been refused, representing the hundreds of thousands of couples who had not even hoped or dreamed of trying.

Whether or not any of them really thought that it would happen in their lifetime was beside the point. In the face of injustice, in our good name, they chose to walk the talk of justice.

On this anniversary morning, I want to speak their names in this great sanctuary, to read this honor roll of courage:

Gloria and Linda Bailey-Davies
 Ed Balmelli and Mike Horgan
 Gary Chalmers and Richard Linnell
 Hillary and Julie Goodridge
 Gina and Heidi Nortonsmith
 Ellen Wade and Maureen Brodoff
 David Wilson and Rob Compton

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Helen Keller said, “Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.” Without risk, there is nothing. Mexican author Carlos Fuentes says, “Without risk there is no art. You should always be on the edge of a cliff, about to fall down and break your neck.” Sometimes, the end of a million years is ushered-in on a high wire without a net. But it’s not always that dramatic. Sometimes, courage is about ordinary people surpassing the boundaries of ordinary ways:

Taking responsibility for unacceptable circumstances –
 circumstances that you cannot control, but to which you *can* respond.

Choosing to live with integrity, to do the right thing.

Daring to face down your fear and live into a vision.

Being who you are,

saying no to conformity and yes to your unique individuality.

Saying no to hatred and yes love.

Speaking up.

Taking the leap.

Persevering.

Saying no; saying yes.
Opening your heart.³

That arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice is long, *and it doesn't bend by itself*. We are called to do our part ... even a tiny part.

The weekend after Kem and I were legally married, I was waiting in line at a deli counter in Chatham, on Cape Cod. The oldest member of the founding family of Chatham, Mr. Eldredge, came in and stood just behind me. I was in running clothes; he was wearing a seersucker suit and bowtie. We'd never met, but he struck up a conversation.

"I'm here to get cole slaw. They have the best cole slaw on Cape Cod. Do you like cole slaw?"

I thought, This is it, girl. You're *legally married*. Change one little word, and change the world. *Say it!*

"I'm not much for cole slaw," I told him, "but my wife loves it."

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O, g*d, I said it. I said "wife" to Mr. Eldredge.

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It seemed to me that everything stopped at the deli counter. It got very, very quiet. Old Mr. Eldredge looked me up and down, thinking, perhaps, that he had mistaken me for a woman. You could almost see the gears grinding as the paradigm shifted.

"Your wife."

Another pause. Years passed.

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"Well, then," he said, "if your wife likes cole slaw, you should get her some of this."

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One last snowflake, the branch breaks, and a million years are over.

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On March 17th, Chao-Lin Kuo, an assistant professor of physics at Stanford University, appeared, unannounced, at the home of his senior

³ Some good ideas from Margie Warrell! Please see margiewarrell.com

colleagues, Renata Ernestovna Kallosh and Andre Dimitriyevitch Linde. As the cameras roll, Kuo knocks, the door opens, and he announces to the astonished professors that Linde's "cosmic inflation theory," the theory of the expanding universe that Linde pioneered more than 30 years ago, has just been confirmed.

Something about the Big Bang, the South Pole, and gravitational waves.... Kuo and Kallosh embrace; Linde stands in the doorway, trying to parse the news for which he has waited 30 years. His expression is priceless. He asks Kuo, twice, to repeat what he's said.

(Please go find this on YouTube; it will do your heart good!⁴)

"This is a moment of understanding of nature of such a magnitude that it just overwhelms...." says Linde in a Russian accent. "I always live with this feeling, What if I am tricked? What if I believe into this just because it is beautiful?"

What do we choose to "believe into" just because it is beautiful? Are we willing to live courageous lives? What are we willing to do for beauty, truth, justice, peace, love?

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Most everyday heroes find themselves in the right place at the wrong time, and take action rather than stand idly by.

June 5th will mark the 25th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Uprising. As a phalanx of tanks rolled down Chang'an Avenue toward the square, a single, unarmed man, wearing a white shirt and black pants, stepped into the street, stopping them in their terrible tracks. Stuart Franklin captured the moment for what went on to become one of *Life Magazine's 100 Photos That Changed the World*. And although he disappeared without a trace, the Unknown Rebel, as he is called, was named one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.

"You know, sometimes all you need is 20 seconds of insane courage." This is Matt Damon's line from the 2011 family comedy-drama, *We Bought a Zoo*. "Just literally 20 seconds of bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it."

⁴ Please see youtube.com/watch?v=ZlfIVEy_YOA

Spiritual director Rachelle Mee Chapman writes, “It is not a surrendering of self. But, rather, a time when you scramble a bit to find your footing, and then stand in your own power, ... look the Vast Beast in the eye, and say, ‘I choose this.’”

“I choose this thing that can both protect me and tear me apart; that can and will bring me ... my most excruciating and unanticipated pain [and] ... my most enthralling joys.... I choose the risk. I choose the possibility of endings. I choose ... to be ... heartrendingly misunderstood. I choose to be at intervals rashly taken advantage of and unexpectedly worshipped. I choose this terror and this beauty. I choose love.”⁵

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Beloved spiritual companions,

One last snowflake, the branch breaks, and a million years are over.

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”⁶

But the arc of the moral universe doesn’t bend by itself.

What do we choose to “believe into?”

May we choose to risk,
choose to live courageous lives
for justice and peace.

Let’s do it for love.

⁵ Rachelle Mee Chapman. Please see magpie-girl.com/

⁶ Nelson Mandela. *Presente!*