

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
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## **Spiritual Courage**

I'm awake in the middle of the night, my heart bereft for the people of Ukraine, scrolling through Kem's Instagram feed, soothed and moved by photos of people who love their dogs and parents returning from military service surprising their children.

And then a photo comes up of hundreds and hundreds of people crowded into a cold city street, somewhere in Russia. The caption says, "The breathtaking bravery of the Russians who know they'll be arrested for protesting this war and do it anyway."

Tonight, there will be no more sleeping.

I carry a talisman from the work of American poet Adrienne Rich; it's always tucked into the back of my preaching notebook — these few lines from her long poem, "Natural Resources."<sup>1</sup>

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.

This is a sermon about spiritual courage.

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It is something to be unafraid in the face of fear, but spiritual courage is not fearlessness. Spiritual courage is taking action, even when we're afraid. Spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," *Dreams of a Common Language*

courage is acting from deep conviction — an everyday test of how we are growing our soul. Every day, we make choices about the life we are living — the kind of life we want to lead. Spiritual courage asks, Are we doing the right thing, even — and especially — when it’s the hard thing? Are our thoughts and deeds coming from love or fear?

*Love and fear cannot coexist.*

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In July of 1846, our Unitarian forbear, Henry David Thoreau, was arrested for failing to pay a poll tax. That failure was a choice: Henry believed the tax supported the Mexican-American war and the expansion of slavery into the American Southwest. He chose to spend a night in jail in the hope of raising awareness about the injustice of that war.

This experience was the inspiration for his essay, *On Civil Disobedience*, in which he argues for nonviolent disobedience to protest unjust government actions. It is said that he was “mad as the devil”<sup>2</sup> when he learned that an unidentified woman had paid the tax for him and he was free to go.

What he didn’t write about was his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson’s visit to him in jail. The story goes that Waldo said to Henry, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” To which Henry David Thoreau replied, “Waldo, what are you doing out there?”

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Many days, we’re proffered opportunities to test our character, including speaking the truth both to others and to ourselves, no matter what they think of us. Spiritual courage is drawing a bright line between what is acceptable and what is not. Sometimes, spiritual courage means changing our minds, admitting we’re wrong. Sometimes, it means saying we need help. The question of spiritual courage is important to our spiritual practice, for such a time as we might just need a lot of it.

Just after midnight on April 15th, 1912, two boats received the unimaginable message that the “unsinkable” Titanic was going down. One of the boats, the Californian, was around 12 miles away, and within eyeshot — a crew member informed Captain Stanley Lord that the Titanic was sending up distress rockets.

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<sup>2</sup> Quotation from Sheriff Sam Staples

Captain Lord chose not to act. He felt, he later said, that “the hazard to himself and his command was too great to risk responding.”<sup>3</sup> A United States senate inquiry concluded that, “Such conduct, whether arising from indifference or gross carelessness, is most reprehensible, and places upon the commander of the Californian a grave responsibility.” “Had he pushed through the ice to the foundering ship, the Californian might have saved many, if not all, of the lives that were lost.”

The second boat to receive the Titanic’s distress signal was well over 60 miles or as much as four hours away. The Carpathia’s wireless operator, Harold Cottam, had just sent a message to his counterpart on the Titanic, letting him know there were messages from shore waiting for his passengers. The response made his blood run cold. Harold Cottam raced up to Captain Arthur Rostron’s cabin, ignoring first officer Horace Dean, and flung open the door in a wild breach of protocol. “The Titanic has sent out a distress call,” he said. “She needs our assistance immediately.”

Captain Rostron famously responded, “Mr. Dean, turn this ship around.” As the Carpathia raced towards the sinking Titanic, Captain Rostron ordered his crew to prepare to take on as many as two thousand extra passengers. Designed to travel at a maximum of 14-and-a-half or 15 knots, the Carpathia was underway at 16 knots; the temperature on board plummeted as the captain ordered that the steam be shut off to every part of the ship but the engines, in order to arrive more quickly. Lookouts were posted throughout the ship to keep an eye out for ice.

Captain Rostron later said of this wildly dangerous undertaking, “I [believe] some other hand than mine was on the helm that night.”

At about 4 a.m., when they finally arrived at the scene, the Titanic was nowhere in sight. Impossibly, the unsinkable ship was gone.

And then there came a green flare from a lifeboat. Over the next four hours, the Carpathia navigated around the site of the wreck, collecting survivors.

In all, 705 survivors were rescued, brought aboard, and taken to New York. Captain Arthur Rostron was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal by the United States Congress and knighted by the British Empire.

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<sup>3</sup> quotation: Daniel Allen Butler, *The Other Side of the Night*

Spiritual courage is not necessarily heroism, although that may be its fruit. Spiritual courage is the courage of conviction. Using language borrowed from Christianity, to be possessed of spiritual courage is to be convicted. Christians use this word to mean that the Holy Spirit is working sanctification in the life of the believer. I use it to mean a feeling of being uplifted, and upheld; to be convicted is being the right person in the right place at the right time and to receive the torch — or the cup — as it is passed.

Stories from the Montgomery Bus Boycott are stories of conviction.

Recently, I got curious about the woman who sat down and wouldn't get up, wouldn't go to the back of the bus — not my hero Rosa Parks, but another woman, who did the same thing nine months before her; the one who didn't have the force of an entire movement behind her. Her name was Claudette Colvin.

Claudette was 15 years old. It was Black History Month, and at her segregated school, she had been studying about Harriet Tubman leading more than 70 enslaved people along the Underground Railroad to freedom; and Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved abolitionist and women's rights activist, speaking truth to power. This was 1955, a mere 67 years ago and still ten years before the end of Jim Crow; both in and out of the classroom, Claudette learned and lived the daily indignities and injustices of segregation.

On the afternoon of March 2nd, Claudette took her rightful seat on the bus. The bus driver called the police. She remained unmoved. “My head was just too full of black history,” she says. “... It felt like Sojourner Truth was on one side of me, pushing me down, and Harriet Tubman was on the other side of me, pushing me down. I couldn't get up.”

Two police officers stood over her. “Aren't you going to get up?,” one asked. “No, sir,” she answered. “He shouted, “Get up!”

“I started crying,” she says, “but I felt even more defiant. I kept saying over and over, ... ‘It's my constitutional right!’ I knew I was talking to a white policeman, but I had had enough.

“One [officer] grabbed one of my hands and his partner grabbed the other and they pulled me straight up out of my seat. My books went flying everywhere. I went limp as a baby — I was too smart to fight back. They stated dragging me backwards off the bus..... I [just] kept screaming, ‘It's my constitutional right!’

“It just killed me to leave the bus. I hated to give that white woman my seat when so many Black people were standing.” They put me in the back of a police car and handcuffed me. I started praying, “reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm over and over in my head, trying to push back the fear.”

At the police station, “they booked me and took my fingerprints.... Someone led me straight to a cell without giving me [a] chance to make a phone call. He opened the door, ... shut it behind me, and turned the key. The lock fell into place with a heavy sound. It was the worst sound I ever heard.... I was trapped.”

Schoolmates who had been on the bus alerted Claudette’s mother, Mary Ann Colvin, who called her pastor. Arriving at the police station, Rev. H.H. Johnson posted bail. Together, they drove home.

“Coming over the viaduct [into King Hill],” Claudette Colvin remembers, “Rev. Johnson said something to me I’ll never forget. He was an adult whom everyone respected and his opinion meant a lot to me. ‘Claudette,’ he said, ‘I’m so proud of you. Everyone prays for freedom. We’ve all been praying and praying. But you’re different. You want your answer the next morning! And I think you just brought the revolution to Montgomery.’”<sup>4</sup>

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I tell you this story of spiritual courage because it is astonishing but also because it makes a huge difference to have role models. Eve Fogelman, author of *Conscience and Courage*, conducted research on rescuers of Jewish people during the Holocaust that revealed an astonishing 89 percent of rescuers “had a parent or adult figure who acted as an altruistic role model.” One child of a rescuer who was raising money for the resistance spoke of watching her mother open a box that had been a wedding gift. It held 12 treasured place settings of silverware. “She took out one of the spoons and I saw her hold and weigh it in her hand, apparently far away in thought.

“‘Wouldn’t you rather keep it?’, I asked, and anxiously waited for her reply.

“‘Keep it?’, she repeated, after a long silence.

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<sup>4</sup> Please see [npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin](http://npr.org/2009/03/15/101719889/before-rosa-parks-there-was-claudette-colvin)

“The spoon was engraved with her initials. She looked at [it] and suddenly smiled as if something had occurred to her. Putting [it] down, she turned to me and took my hand.... ‘You must learn to understand that only what you give, you’ll have.’”

This is another lesson in spiritual courage. Role models, teachers, heroes: Once you look for them, they are everywhere. We are called to join them and to be them — to hold up a mirror and take the measure of our souls.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Russian citizens  
pouring into the streets,  
knowing they’ll be arrested for protesting the war  
and doing it anyway.

Henry David Thoreau,  
asking from his jail cell,  
“What are you doing out there?”

Captain Arthur Rostron,  
“Mr. Dean, turn this ship around.”

Claudette Colvin,  
with Sojourner Truth on one side  
and Harriet Tubman on the other,  
bringing the revolution to Montgomery.

And the anonymous Holocaust rescuer teaching her child,  
Only what you give, you’ll have.”

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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,  
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