

## “Someone with Courage and Vision”

a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio

Today’s service was inspired by a quote in our hymnal from Mahatma Gandhi: “If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead,” he said, “the winter of despair can, in the twinkling of an eye, be turned into the summer of hope.” Over the past several days and weeks, as this particular winter has begun to show hints of spring – and the promise of summer – our televisions and computer screens, our newspapers and magazines – our minds and our hearts – have been filled with inspiring images of people whose courage and vision, the world over, is creating freedom, where none existed, before.

In the words of the great protest song from the 1960’s, “something’s happening here.” Something very important – maybe even something *momentous* – is happening, in our world. From the streets of the Mediterranean, to the statehouse halls of Madison – there is a new sense of empowerment, of people coming together in the name of liberty and justice, for all. What we are witnessing, *right now* – what we have been *blessed* to be alive to witness – is exactly that kind of moment Robert F. Kennedy spoke of, in 1966, in a speech to South African students, at the height of apartheid, when he said, “Each time [someone] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. Crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

What began just nine weeks ago – think of it ... *nine weeks* – as an all-too-routine act of police harassment against an ordinary man who was selling vegetables on a street in Tunisia – has created a tidal wave of people power that has toppled two dictators (who between them had ruled their countries for more than half a century). It has swept out entire parliaments and cabinets in two other countries. And it has sparked widespread, popular uprisings that continue, literally, at this hour – in no less than *seven more* Arab nations.

Throughout the region – and in fact, all around the world – people are realizing that indeed, they can be free; they can organize; they can determine their own destiny. There is German word, that I simply love: *zeitgeist*. It means “the spirit of the times.” The spirit of these times, is one of freedom. Of people uniting, as perhaps never before, in principled resistance to oppression – and doing it, *non-violently*. What I left out of that quote I shared a moment ago from Gandhi, is this: “If someone with courage and vision can rise to lead *in non-violent action*, [he said, then] the winter of despair can ... be turned into the summer of hope.”

The *zeitgeist* of this winter, my friends, is indeed, one of hope. Millions of people have decided – seemingly *spontaneously*, though we know that is not the case – to stand in solidarity, in sometimes massive, non-violent demonstrations, against regimes and lawmakers who would deny them their rights – those “inalienable rights” of which Thomas Jefferson spoke, so long ago.

They will not control us, the people are saying. We will be victorious.

That is exactly what happened during the final, tense days of Egypt’s so-called Facebook Revolution. It was, in many ways, the first revolution of its kind – one in which the world was able to literally watch, *live* – thanks to the miracle of modern technology which both enabled a people to unite against a repressive government, and allowed people in *other* nations to help keep the pressure on an entrenched, and corrupt administration.

As a result of this new *kind* of revolution – people-power multiplied exponentially by instant communication – we could *see* what was happening on television, we could follow it and even *participate in it*, on Facebook and Twitter. We could exchange messages with our own friends and loved ones to talk about it – as it was happening – regardless of where they happen to live. For days the world eagerly followed the developments – the cat-and-mouse game, between hundreds of thousands of peaceful protestors, and a government on the brink of collapse.

And then, came the morning of February 11. I’ll never forget turning on my satellite radio, that morning, in the car – in order to check on the latest developments in Egypt – and hearing a CNN reporter describe the scene in Tahrir Square, where people were suddenly dancing and shouting, celebrating the surprise announcement that Hosni Mubarek had, at last, resigned. I listened as I drove home, then turned on the TV, only to see another reporter interviewing one of the jubilant demonstrators. The reporter was asking what had motivated him – and the young man simply looked into the camera, and said in heavily accented English, “Give me liberty, or give me death.”

Half way around the world, in the safety and sanctity of my own living room, I suddenly realized that tears, were streaming down my cheeks. I wept, to think of the courage and conviction of literally millions of average people, who had just staged the kind of non-violent revolution that Gandhi himself had

predicted – and had, in India two generations earlier – demonstrated was possible. I wept, at the honor and vision demonstrated by the Egyptian military, in remaining steadfastly unwilling to massacre their own people, though they well could have. But most of all, I think, I wept at the intensity of the connection created by those few, simple words, uttered by an anonymous, Egyptian young man – “Give me liberty, or give me death” – the immediate, and deep *connection* those words made me feel, with the people in Tahrir Square.

And in that moment, I think for the first time in my life, I truly realized just how profound were the events that took place on the streets, and in the fields and forests of New England and Pennsylvania and Virginia, more than two hundred years ago – because the American Revolution indeed *changed the world* – and *continues* to change the world, even to this very day. By inspiring generation after generation, in countless countries and cultures, to yearn for *freedom* – and to accept nothing less, than liberty – our American ancestors left a legacy both profound, and permanent.

And although our attention, in recent weeks, has been focused on the uprisings in the Arab world – the timeless ideals of liberty and justice that arose in the European Enlightenment and the American Revolution have now touched every corner of this globe. I think, for example, of Burma – where 50 million people have lived under tight-fisted totalitarian rule for more than 20 years. Yet the Burmese people have adopted, as their leader, not greedy generals or a despotic dictator – but a slender woman with flowers in her hair, whose own courage and vision has inspired a resistance movement that, despite several brutal crackdowns, has not gone away – and which will, in the end, prevail – *because that’s what freedom does*.

Her name is Aung San Suu Kyi, and her words are printed at the top of your order of service today. She is a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Her father helped bring about the end of British colonial rule in Burma – only to be assassinated as a military dictatorship took control of the country.

Undaunted by her father’s death, she formed an opposition party that overwhelmingly won a national election in 1990. By rights, Suu Kyi should have become Prime Minister – but the military refused to let the elected government take office. In the two decades since then, she has spent most of her time in jail, or under house arrest – but three months ago, inexplicably, the military simply released her from confinement.

Since that time, “The Lady,” as she is reverently known to the Burmese people, has been relentlessly organizing, giving speeches, and frantically laying the groundwork for a groundswell of people power that she believes is as inevitable as is her own re-imprisonment. But this time, The Lady says, she has a trump card: a new generation that came of age while she was imprisoned – because the young

people of Burma have armed themselves with the same two weapons that the young people of Egypt used to overthrow Hosni Mubarek – a commitment to non-violence, and the power of the internet.

“They’re very electronic,” says the 65-year-old Suu Kyi of her younger compatriots. “They can communicate with the world... Everything [happens] on the internet... My very top priority is [to help them] understand that they have the power to change things, *themselves*. We can do it, together.”

That, my friends, is the spirit of the times in which we are blessed to live. That is the zeitgeist that is uniting the human family as never before. Old borders of geography and even culture, are crumbling like the Berlin Wall – being torn down by the unquenchable human thirst for *freedom*. Today we have lifted up the names of just a few of those people whose courage and vision have led us to this moment of hope, this flowering of freedom. Some, like Lincoln and Gandhi, are household names; others, like Aung San Suu Kyi, or the young Egyptian who organized his people using Facebook, Wael Ghonim, are not.

In them all, I hear the echoes of Martin Luther King: I have a dream. It is a dream that will never die: the dream of freedom, the dream of self-determination, the dream of equality. Yes, there will be setbacks along the road. Yes, there is always the potential for a Tahrir Square to turn into a Tiananmen Square. Just two days ago – a week almost to the hour after Hosni Mubarek’s resignation – troops in Bahrain fired into a crowd of unarmed protestors, killing at least seven. And this morning, we learned that up to 200 people have been killed in Libya today, where protests against Muammar Kadhafi are growing each day.

We mourn this tragic, senseless loss of life – but we know that despots will not win the day – freedom *will* be victorious. Such acts of cold-blooded repression – once committed with impunity, in virtual secrecy, by dictators the world over – now take place in the light of day, in front of the eyes of the world – a world that has forever changed – a world that sees them clearly, for what they are: the last, desperate acts of desperate men whose time has passed.

Yes, there’s a change in the air. Millions of people – millions of ordinary people whose names will never go down in history – are beginning to be the change we seek. May their courage and vision be an inspiration to us all. And may we – we Americans who bequeathed to the world, the ideal of freedom – may we stand ready to lift our own voices, to march in the streets if necessary, to join hands with our brothers and sisters of whatever religion, of whatever nation, in the ongoing human struggle for liberty and justice, for all.

Something’s happening, in our world. Something *wonderful*. Let us, be a part of it!

May it be so. Amen!...