True confession. I spent most of my life not riding on roller coasters. The reason – basic terror. I don’t like going fast, and could imagine remote chances of accidents. As fears go, not a big deal. Roller coasters are pretty easy to avoid. When at an amusement park, someone needs to carefully guard the bags of wet towels and car keys.

My impression was that people who love roller coasters are happy and adventurous. Maybe they worry less? I hoped my children would embrace roller coasters, and I’d send them to amusement parks with family and friends that were roller coaster lovers. The theory worked for my daughter, but not our older son. When he was about 10, he returned from the annual swim team trip to the Kings Dominion and shared, “it was ok...well, pretty good. I just hung out with Stacy and her mom.”

Later that summer our family was finishing a long, hot day at Adventure World. The park was about to close. Our college-aged cousin, who was more than willing to ride roller coasters, and had been with us all day, had left. Out of the blue, my son exclaimed, “I want to go on Mind Eraser. Now.”

“Let’s go.” I immediately responded, and we ran half way across the park. No line. We jumped on and the red bar came over my shoulders – click. Safety announcements. Gulp. As we accelerated from 0 to 60 in seconds, I closed my eyes, every muscle tightened. I could hear my son screaming, both scared and exhilarated. When the ride ended, he beamed.

My son showed courage...he faced his fear. Did I show courage? Was I brave? I think I was just a parent loving so naturally that in that moment my fear was seamlessly set aside. My heart took charge and together my son and I rode Mind Eraser. Neither of us hesitated. For me this was an experience of shared courage fueled by love.

Courage is often action in the face of fear. At times, courage is about facing a challenge and walking toward the reality. Courage is lifted up as a positive attribute - as grace under pressure or seeing the big picture and making the best of what is possible. Courage is a response, often a creative response.
We explain courage to children and to one another through stories. In our story this morning, Frog and Toad try to convince one another they are brave. Each shakes while uttering, “I am not afraid.” Acting courageously often occurs while we scared. Courage is not about eliminating fear, but about acting anyway.

What fears are in your life? Some of us ... most of us ... we fear loss. And there is our fear of failing, our fear of getting involved, and our fear of rejection. We fear being challenged – of being pulled into conflict or confrontation. We fear of losing identity. Fears are tucked in many corners of our lives. Not all big fears, but present in many ways.

Stories of courage often highlight extremes. On our bookshelves I found Antarctica: Journey to the Pole. The book jacket notes, “the group faces the ultimate test of endurance, loyalty and survival.” Similarly, in Far North, another novel for youth, a pilot takes two 15-year olds on a flight in Canada’s Northwest territory and “sets the plane down on the lake-like surface...the engine quits...the plane drifts helplessly toward the water fall and sheer cliffs...the boys are stranded in a frozen world of moose, wolves, and bears and depend on each other for their very survival.”

These stories of courage are set in the most barren of physical landscapes, with outcomes dependent on working through conflict and shared decisions. Other stories of courage put the main character in a new setting – a teen who immigrates to the New World alone and creatively adapts, or a family who must cope with a member’s new diagnosis and treatment.

These stories of courage are about forging new way in the unfamiliar -- often a lonely new reality. Some stories end with sustained acts of courage rewarded by a new sense of belonging, or even romance.

In these examples we see acts of courage when backed into corner. There is also courage in choosing to act when action could be avoided – where there is an option to turn away.

In Profiles in Courage, a book written over 50 years ago, John F. Kennedy portrays nine senators in US history who act with integrity, knowing their actions put their personal status and political survival at risk. These leaders spoke out and challenged prevailing views. Importantly, not only did they take a courageous stand, they also gained followers. A ‘We’ had to emerge for these leaders to have changed the course of history. Courageous acts often involve inspired leadership and persuasion.

Many remember the movie Erin Brockovich. Brockovich is a legal file clerk who spurs the challenge of Pacific Electric and Gas over its contamination of drinking water. A single mom, Brockovich is undeterred when told by her legal firm not to research the case further.
Brockovich then convinces one victim after another to join the suit, and then compassionately convinces them to settle. The group harmed was large (by the movie’s telling there were over 600 claimants) and full consensus was not possible without compromise. Brockovich led from a moral center. Her relational advocacy, working against the odds, was contagious.

The senators in Profiles in Courage and Erin Brockovich chose to act. They chose to lead. They persuaded others. They could have walked the other way.

If an individual can be courageous and face a challenge, can a whole group have a courageous core and be inclined to consistently act in courageous ways? I am not talking here of a bunch of individually courageous people that happen to be members of the same group, but of a courageous group.

In the poem “The low road” by Marge Piercy, there is a sense of this ‘We’. Picking up part way through:

...With six you can rent a whole house,
   eat pie for dinner with no
   seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
   A dozen make a demonstration.
   A hundred fill a hall. A thousand have solidarity and you own newsletter...

   It goes one at a time,
   it starts when you care
   to act, it starts when you do
   it again and they said no,
   it starts when you say We and know you who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

In our reading this morning we heard of Myles Horton, and his invitation to 120 white and black YMCA students to an illegal hotel banquet. Horton at the time was only 23. In his autobiography, the long haul, he reflects on this event:

That was 1928, long before any civil rights movement activity in Knoxville. At the hotel everybody was confronted. I took a gamble: we could have been arrested; we could have been thrown out; the kids could have walked out; the waiters could have walked out. I took the gamble of doing something about a moral problem instead of simply talking about it. I just reversed the process that was going on in the universities and churches, and over 120 people learned that they could change things if they wanted to.

Some background on Myles Horton. He was born in 1905 in Georgia and grew up poor. His parents were both educators, and eventually Horton attended Union Theological Seminary in
NYC – it’s the seminary connected with Columbia University. (Of note, many UU ministers study at ‘Union’ today.)

As Horton studied at Union, and then the University of Chicago, and eventually in Denmark, he hypothesized that changing systems, particularly systems of oppression, was tied to learning. Horton focused on groups, and saw groups gravitated to and learned through conflict. His focus was not conflict resolution, or having those in currently in power act as referee, but rather he saw conflict as a path for the struggling group to raise issues and discover and name their shared problem. Through this process the soul of the group emerged.

To test these views, in 1932 Horton and several other faith leaders formed the Highlander Folk Center in the hills of Tennessee. The core mission of the organization was to provide a center for those with little power to understand they did have a collective voice.

Horton was an educator at heart and refused to focus on outcomes and fix-it remedies. He offered a setting for groups to gather and develop the courage to act. He was patient. He trusted groups would gain a sense of identity and realize their shared problems could not be solved individually. Horton would not use theoretical problems to teach skills. To learn to make decisions, at Highlander groups that were learning did so by making real decisions about issues that mattered. The center stressed the need to make such decisions apart from those who already in power that had been making decisions.

We are familiar with the story of Rosa Parks, and her refusal to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery to a white man. As I’ve heard the story told – and how we tell stories of courage matters – Rosa Parks was prepared to act. While that moment on the bus was not scripted, she had been an Executive Secretary at the NAACP and was well-aware the group needed a test case on bus seating. She knew there would consequences, and knew she was acting as part of a morally courageous group. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat shortly after being trained at the Highlander Center. Of her training at the center, Rosa Parks said, “I gained [at Highlander] the strength to persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks, but for all oppressed people.”

As a group – as a congregation - we don’t stumble into morally courageous action. It is through our shared understanding of issues and our preparation that we sense our power as a group and choose to act.

Myles Horton’s understanding of effective groups is similar to the perspectives of James Luther Adams, a Unitarian minister and theologian. Writing in 1950, Adams looked at the nature of those groups who act in meaningful ways.
He found such groups are innately relational groups; groups of care and even intimacy and tenderness. He observed such groups offer connection and belonging and act as a counterforce to the realities of disconnection and alienation in society. Adams found effective groups acted out of a sense of mutuality. At its best, a congregation meets these descriptions.

Courageous groups also need to consider the group’s power. Adams emphasized that the power of a group is not just about the group and leaders being proactive, i.e. having a sense of active power, but a group must also have a sense of passive power – an openness, a porosity – to being changed. Power is not just about influencing, but about a willingness of the group to be influenced. Courageous groups do not fear power, but grow to understand power. (In fact, fear of power can result in retreat from the group.)

Adam’s describes effective communities are free communities, but this is not freedom at any cost. Freedom comes with accountability. A community, be it a congregation or other organization, needs to have a sense of working toward good. This might be described has a sense of an underlying power of the spirit pointing toward a greater purpose.

Finally, a morally courageous community accepts risk taking and acts even when it feels scary. Like Frog and Toad, we something have to remind ourselves, “We are not afraid, We are not afraid.”

When there is a sense of ‘We’ – a growing ‘we’ – a sense when ‘we’ matters, we act from our core of shared values. We continually learn. We continually change. In morally courageous groups there is leadership that is intentional, and communicates well, but there is not an expectation that leadership is perfect. In the group there is an intuitive sense of trust on what to hold onto when things get a bit rocky.

My thoughts on morally courageous communities are being formed by this congregation – this morally courageous community. From my immersion in September to work on the Dream Act and Marriage Equality, to the collections for Hurricane Sandy victims, to the most recent commitment of the congregation to the work to end gun violence, I have a sense of what Myles Horton and James Luther Adam imagined as an effective group with power. I am proud to be a part of the ‘We’ of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville.

The proof of a morally courageous community is in its actions and a sense of collective courage. That courage needs to emanate from love.

As a community may we walk, and at times run, toward the roller coaster, and step on – not fear free – but in the confidence love will sustain our morally courageous work together.
May It Be So