

**To Sing Our Songs**  
**Habit Four: A Sense of Personal Voice and Agency**  
**Center for Courage and Renewal Habits of the Hearts Series**  
**A Sermon Offered At Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist**  
**On November 3, 2013**  
**By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

I'd like you to try something with me and only if you want to. I'd like you to say this phrase after me: My voice has power.

Thursday I dreamt that I was at a big family gathering – a wedding, probably because of the wedding I was performing on Friday. There were three pregnant women due to deliver in the next couple of weeks. Suddenly one of them went into labor and gave birth. The baby was sickly, silent, and she was whisked away to an infant care area, where, strangely, the level of care and attention wasn't great. Most of the family was distracted, the mother seemed preoccupied, so I went to see the baby. I held her, spoke to her and crooned, too, as we sometimes do with babies. She began to open her eyes as gaze, as babies do, vaguely in my direction. I got her a bottle and kept talking. As I did, her eyes grew clearer and, surprisingly, she began to talk with me – not coos and gurgles – but words, sentences, and whole and complex thoughts. Even though it was a dream, it was miraculous, I was amazed. I wanted to ask this remarkable child a million questions, but I took her to her mother. In the morning, when I awoke, my heart was still full of that sense of miracle and surprise.

The ability to use our voices, to express ourselves, to be effective – to have agency – to be an agent on our own behalf, is a primary human need. Even before we have words, our cries, help us to get what we need: fed, cleaned up, changed, held, protected. When our cries don't bring that help, I believe that we lose faith in the power of our voices, perhaps even our power as emerging persons.

*Now repeat this phrase after me:*

***My voice has power,***  
*again.*

***My voice has power,***

Let me take a moment to unpack the word power – people get snagged on it sometimes. Power is neither good nor bad – but there are different kinds: power over, power within, power to, and power with. Power *over* is when I can make you do something you might not, in your own interest or of your own accord, want to do. Power *within* is the power that I have to clarify my thoughts, tame unwieldy emotions, make my actions reflect my values rather than my more primitive reactions. Power *to* is the agency I have to lift the cup to my lip, make something happen. Power *with* is the ability I have to create, promote, or prevent change in partnership with you, according to mutually life affirming hopes. When I use the word power – I mean power within, power to, and power with.

Like the voice of an infant, the real power we need, rises, as our best voices rise, as the best most creative aspects of humanity rise, as the most authentic, faithful, fulfilling, relationships rise -- from vulnerability, from our willingness to share our hearts and to risk honoring the hearts and vulnerability of others. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown wrote: “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center of meaningful human

experience.” There ends the quote. The use of our voices begins in vulnerability and, no matter how we may armor ourselves, or shut down, that vulnerability never ends. And every one of us needs to have a voice, our own voice, a sense of agency – in our families, in our society, in our world.

*Now say it again: My voice has power.*

It’s a key paradox of this fourth habit that for our sense of agency to be a positive, creative force in our lives – our voice and agency must rise from the center, the heart – in other words: our vulnerability.

I would like, if you are willing, to repeat, these words:

***I am powerful and vulnerable.***

***My voice and my power come from my heart.***

Now, silence is golden – but our voices make some of the most vital music of relationship – certainly they are the music of democracy. In our faith, silence can carry us to a spiritual depth where we may hear the still small voice within, where we may hear the holy – by whatever name we call it – wisdom, insight, God – as it calls us. In that rich silence, you can listen with your heart and sometimes the holy speaks clear and sweet, wise and strong. Sometimes it’s drowned out by other layers of noise: grocery lists, advertisement jingles, too much loose data. Another layer is the noise of reaction: No, yes, agree, disagree, I got a better argument, win, wrong, right, my turn. Another layer is hunger, anxiety, yearning, fear, habit. Below all that clamor and more, is the holy voice, authentic, driven by heart. It’s one movement, one passage of your music. It needs to be heard so that it can be expressed because it has the power to shape, compose, to create.

On the front cover of the order of service is the ace of wands. Perhaps it's the wand the conducts the choir, the spirit of love that touches our hearts, minds, and voices with magic. But in the tarot deck the ace of wands is a sprouting stick, a living thing – a symbol of the spirit of courage, new life, creativity. May we all be touched with that living force, that creative force.

In my mid thirties, I was active at the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta. I offered a well-attended workshop series on awakening creativity. The last session was on songwriting and people seemed intimidated by the idea of writing, much less singing their songs. It was a small, casual congregation, with one service of unspecified length, but it had more than its share of amazing local vocalist members -- often, the Indigo Girls would return to do fundraisers for the congregation. I was, myself, more than a little anxious but I knew that the only way I could encourage others to take the risk of sharing their voices was to find share my own. I’d had a monumental lack of confidence in my singing voice ever since a serious illness in childhood had altered my voice. But I had confidence that if I, a nervous, sweaty palmed woman, with an ordinary voice could raise it alone, others would feel encouraged to take the risk and the workshop, too. So I stood for my announcement, went to the front of the sanctuary, and holding firmly in my mind an image of Kermit the Frog I sang: “Sing, Sing your song, Make it simple to last your whole life long. Don’t worry that it’s not good enough for anyone else to hear, just sing, sing your song.” Then I announced the workshop. It was the first time I’d sung in front of a group. Just as anxious as I had been before it, that was how alive I felt after. To use our authentic voice takes us to the edge, into vulnerability and makes us more fully alive.

It doesn't matter if we have performance ready voices – or perfect pitch, or velvet tones – it matters that we get to raise our true voices. Why?

You know the answer:

***My voice has power.***

Of course, it's not just speaking or singing that matters. Listening is the partner of speaking, just as silence is the partner of sound.

You know what it's like when children are involved in parallel play – not really connected, just playing in the same space. You know what it's like when a teacher asks a question and a small forest of hands pops up – the kids are covering the same material but each is engaged for her or himself. When people meet over a quick lunch or at the water cooler and kvetch about the boss, the president, the congress, the latest bad news in sports – they're making a light connection, appropriate, doubtless, to the time and place. And you know what it's like when you risk your center, your core, your heart, and that is graciously received. It can be amazing to be heard that way – to be witnessed.

We yearn to be heard and there's always the risk that we won't be. Last Tuesday I travelled with thousands of Illinoisans and about 9 members of our congregation, to Springfield to lobby, rally, and march for Marriage Equality. We sang on the bus ride down and, despite the cold and rain, the rainbow crowd was positive and high spirited. Still we knew that the issue had been skirted by the legislature before and it might be avoided again. There was a sense of urgency mixed in with good spirits and just maybe, a little anger at the way politicians have been more concerned with elections than with standing with the 15 other states that have, in their various ways, established marriage equality. I gave the bus a pep talk on staying positive: no matter what opposition they might encounter – to be gracious and civil. Along with the usual chants of “What do you want -- marriage equality; when do you want it? Now!” There were folks who, while largely positive and cheerful, were chanting “Pass the damned bill.” I understood it was playful but it was a real expression of frustration at having not been heard and taken seriously the earlier session. I worried a bit about the kids in strollers and on shoulders, who might show up at school the next day innocently saying, pass the damned pencil sharpener. But, really, it was a friendly demonstration and a vivid sign of how deeply people yearn to have their hearts heard. Whether the vote goes the right way – legalizing marriage equality, the wrong way, or no way if the lawmakers fail to address it – that gathering for fairness and inclusion, that joining of voices, was and is an expression of the beautiful, if at times imperfect music of democracy.

In that imperfect music is the combined power of our voices.

In 1995 to 96, an improbable story took place. Despite great opposition from Utah's citizens and conservationists from across the country, Utah's congressional delegates introduced the Utah Public Lands Management Act. This act would designate only 1.8 million acres of Utah public land as protected wilderness, rather than the 5.7 million acres that a prior act had proposed. Writer Terry Tempest Williams went before the Utah Legislature to testify on behalf of these irreplaceable lands. She was giving voice to the voiceless.

She wrote about it... “to be speaking from your heart, with as much passion, as much intelligence, with as much authority as you can muster—about Utah wilderness, to have your congressman look at you from the riser, with his glasses sloping down his nose and say, “I'm sorry, Ms. Williams. There is something about your voice I cannot hear...”

it diminishes you. It did me. I don't think he was talking about the microphone. On one hand it can be viewed as a rude or patronizing dismissal. On the other hand, he did me a great favor... I thought, "You may not be able to understand what I'm saying as one voice, but perhaps you can hear what I'm trying to say with a chorus."

In two weeks, Williams and Steve Trimble, another writer, had narrowed writings from some of the most prominent writers-conservationists in the country down to twenty, published a book called *Testimony* and given one to every member of the Utah Legislature and to Congress in Washington, DC.

Now, I believe in the power of the pen, of poets and visionaries to give a voice to the heart. But it seems like a fantasy to send poetry to the front line, so to speak. Williams wrote: "In mid-September we held a press conference in Washington, D.C... (after) a reporter from The Washington Post approached Steve and me. "What a waste of time. Do you have any idea how much paper gets passed around Congress? You are so naive. This will never see the light of day." I was ... ready to have a good, spirited debate. Steve had a calmer presence of mind. He said to the reporter, "Writing is always an act of faith." In March 1996, the Utah Act found its way to the Senate floor. The Senate went into a filibuster. Throughout the filibuster, essay after essay... was read out. *Testimony* is now part of the Congressional Record. Six months later, on September 18, 1996, President Clinton designated the new Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, protecting nearly two million acres of wilderness in Utah. I was still free to move in open country that for now remained wild. More than a decade later America's Red Rock Wilderness Act continues to be a bill before Congress, now advocating for 9.2 million acres of protected wilderness in Utah. Our voices are still singing on the margins." So she wrote.

This fourth habit of the heart – calls for practice and lots of it – just as the other habits do – not so that we can become acclaimed authors or brilliant orators – but because we each have a song to sing – a still, small voice that yearns and deserves to be heard. The risk isn't only that we won't be heard but that, in a culture that uses violence to settle too many disputes, using our voices in a one sided way, we may discount the people hearing us and use our voices as weapons instead of bridges. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who looked like they were listening, but who was really just waiting for you to finish so that they could drive their point home. Or had a conversation where someone rather than talking with you, hammered you with their opinion so that you felt that verbal resistance was futile? Good listening takes practice. But in that listening, witness – in truly hearing one another – there is the greatest spark of creativity – the aliveness that happens between people – from the music of voices, the interchange of hearts, from an encounter that creates something neither person could say or think alone. It's unpredictable and uncertain. It leads us to uncharted places and takes courage. When we come together in a community of faith – we are blessed with a place to practice our voices, deeply engage, be heard, learn to listen with our hearts, make space for one another, to encourage – to give courage to one another. Williams wrote, "The human heart is the first home of democracy." (it's) where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable?... generous? Can we listen with our whole being, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?"

That sounds like it would take a lifetime of courage. But, from the time we are born, though we struggle for survival – food, shelter, the basics – the central, core of our

being is this other struggle – to be courageously and fully alive. And when we gather as a religious community – it is the perfect time to visit this fourth habit. We come here to connect, to be changed by our connections – with the sacred and with one another. And each person – if she or he is open and willing – will grow here, find and share his or her voice here, be changed here and with the songs of their hearts, change this place in the present and the future. This is power with, creative power – the greatest power we have – the kind that Terry Tempest Williams found when she turned to other writers to say together what she could not say alone – the kind of power we have when we bring our voices together as people, as a congregation. When we listen with our whole beings a greater power rises -- between people. And just as the core of our being yearns – beyond silence or clamor – to be more fully alive – so does all of being – every soul, every living thing reaches for life and when the voices of our hearts rise together we will find within the courage to sing, to hear, to speak and to act on behalf of all life. To speak – on behalf of all of life is to know, speak out, and keep our faith with the interdependent web of all existence. To feel that oneness of life, that spirit, coursing through us – speaking through us – is to be graced with the great power of that spirit. It is to open our souls and our mouths – to receive and to give back, to give back and to receive and to know -- please repeat after me –

*My voice has power,*

*Our voices together have power*

*May we use this power to bless our world*

*To be a blessing to our world.*