

*Meg Riley, senior minister at CLF*

The older I get, the crankier I am about fear. My own fear, other people's fear. I can see back across decades to all of the times when I have stood moving my lips soundlessly like the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz* while some disembodied voice thundered, "QUIET!" And, way too many times, I have obeyed that formless voice.

Audre Lorde wrote an essay entitled "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" right after her cancer diagnosis. In it, she said:

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality...what I most regretted were my silences...[times when I had] waited for someone else's words...Of what had I ever been afraid? I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.

"Of what had I ever been afraid?" Lorde asks, and we could all give our answers. Physical pain, loss of important relationships, emotional shunning, humiliation, failure, torture, loss of jobs or money or stature, loss of comfort or privilege....And because of our fear, as Lorde says so eloquently, we betray ourselves into small silences.

It's in those moments, in the small silences, that we need to summon courage to speak or to act. But in those terrified moments, silence or remaining frozen often feels like our safest choice, and we heed that disembodied voice that bellows, "QUIET!"

How do we defy that voice? How do we choose courage? I'm as scared as anyone, but when I think back on moments when I didn't give fear the final word, I can see that what helped me to speak or act were connections. Connections to my own strength often come through my connections with other people's strength—people I know personally and people whose stories inspire me.

I have words that I call to mind from people I don't know, including Audre Lorde, from the same essay I referenced [before]. Her words ring out across the years, and her eventual death from cancer only sharpens them:

Perhaps...I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours?

Sometimes I imagine Audre Lorde asking me, *Are you doing your work?* Her presence, in that question, brings with it the risks she took throughout her life, crossing borders and pushing boundaries. Her life's work gives me courage to live my own.

Sometimes, in those terrified moments, I've imagined a time later, when I'm "safe" again, telling people who love me the story of a particular, frightening moment and what I did with it. This makes me consider how I want my story to unfold, what stories I'd like to be able to tell about myself. It also reminds me that there are people who are invisibly, with me, even when I am alone. Calling them to me can give me courage.

Unitarian Universalism has allowed me to know many people of courage whom I can call to mind when I am afraid. Folks like June Barrett. June and her husband, Lt. Col. James Barrett, were providing escort support to Dr. John Britton as part of their volunteer in the UU Congregation in Pensacola Florida in 1994. An anti-abortion zealot shot all three of them as they drove into a clinic where Britton would provide medical services including abortions. Jim Barrett and John Britton died immediately; June pretended to be dead until medical service personnel came and took her to the hospital. She had shrapnel in her body until she died in 2011.

I had the privilege of spending time with June in our work for reproductive justice. She told me that as she lay feigning her own death, knowing that her husband was dead, she recommitted her life to work for women's access to abortion. Rather than take this experience as a reason to back off and stay safe, it gave her more courage and clarified for her even more sharply what it meant to do her own work.

I hope I will never have to face what June faced, but there have been plenty of times when I have drawn on her courage to help me go forward. I take courage by drawing upon relationships, drawing strength from my connection with others who exhibit it. And I notice that the more courage I exhibit myself, the stronger those connections become.

It is my deepest wish that the unique and widely dispersed community that is the Church of the Larger Fellowship builds courage from the ingredients found here—from the words, the thoughts, the deed of others whom you may never personally know, or from connections with those you meet. Just as ours is not a faith that holds that our sins were atoned for by the death of Jesus on the cross, we also believe that each person must do their own work in life, manifest their own courage.

May you find courage to do the work that is uniquely yours to do on this fragile planet. May you speak when words are needed, and be boldly silent when that is called for. May you know the deep care and connections that are everywhere around you, holding you in place no less surely that planets are held in their orbits. And may you hear the stars sing hallelujah when you dare to do and be exactly what is yours.