

## Authentic and Brave

Who do you think of when I say, “Authentic and Brave”? We all probably have heroes and sheroes who come to mind. Maybe they are real people and maybe they are fictional. Maybe they look like us and maybe they don’t. I’m guessing that many of them are not people we are in contact with every day but people we have learned about through history books, media and stories other people tell. So if someone’s story is **not** told, we are never aware of their accomplishments. Often a story is not told as a way of minimizing the contributions of marginalized people to perpetuate the myth of their “less than” value. Our awareness campaigns in February lift up the accomplishments of African-Americans throughout history to overcome their absence in our history books.

First of all, what does it mean to be authentic and what does it mean to be brave? Webster says that to be authentic means to be “true to one’s own personality or spirit”, which we might interpret to be two different things. Brené Brown says that “Authenticity demands whole hearted living--even when it’s hard, even when we’re wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough.” Where would we get the idea that we, the individualization of Spirit that is me, is lacking—not good enough? We aren’t born with shame. We learn it. We get repeated messages about what is wrong with us and often it is not something we can change. So to be authentic means overcoming the error thinking the world imposes on us and being willing to be ourselves anyway!

Many people say that to be brave doesn’t mean to be fearless but to face the fear and do it anyway. I am picky. I add an element of intention. WHY do you do it anyway? If you face the fear, know that something is risky or dangerous, and do it to win a bet, promote your ego self, or are too drunk or high to overcome your impulsivity, I do not consider this brave. If, however, you do it anyway because you believe passionately it is the right thing to do or that doing this thing despite your fear will heal some wound in you, then I believe that is brave. Authentic and brave are both elements of self-awareness and the ability to overcome some patterns of belief that may be deeply programmed into us. These are valued qualities that a dominate culture might not want attributed to marginalized people. Here we are in 2020, ready to see things in a new way, expand our worldview to include honoring all people and acknowledge the accomplishments of those who have been overlooked.

How many of you have seen the movie “Harriet”? Which Harriet was the movie about? Harriet Tubman. Most of us did hear a little about Harriet Tubman in school. She had something to do with the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. That’s really all I knew. I didn’t know the challenges in getting her brothers to go north. I didn’t know about the relationship challenges and her husband’s unwillingness to wait for her—or believe that she would come back. I really didn’t understand how many people doubted her ability to do exactly what she did—which was to repeatedly lead groups of people to freedom, even after the freedom line moved north to Canada. I didn’t know she battled headaches and “spells” from an early head injury. What exactly was authentic about Harriet Tubman? She was an African-American slave who believed in her own worth; who believed in her own power; and defied those even in her own people who doubted her abilities. I don’t think we have to ponder too much about what was brave—every trip placed her in physical danger. Her motivation was the simple belief that people could not and should not own other people. She butted heads with some African-American male leaders after the Civil War ended when she turned her efforts towards the rights of women. An irony in freeing the expression of all the aspects of our authentic humanity.

George Washington Carver experienced some of those ironies in his own life. Most of you learned in history that Carver was the “Peanut Man” and was famous for inventions related to uses for the peanut. But can you name anything he invented? The more I study, the more complicated the legacy of Carver becomes. He was not a civil rights activist and was criticized for accommodating the post-war Jim Crow practices, despite staying at Tuskegee while being recruited by Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and others. He was committed to raising up the position of the African-American in the South through education and economic freedom yet toured the South from 1923 to 1933 on behalf of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. None of his science ever really changed the trajectory of industry but he was both faith-based and an environmentalist when neither of those things was associated with science. He attributed his ideas and his success to God, which left his science subject to scrutiny. Because he was afraid his ideas might be stolen, he lacked documentation and patents we might associate with successful science. Yet he was among the first African Americans to testify before Congress, having been invited by the Peanut Growers Association to advocate for a tariff on peanuts from China.

Much of his agriculture research was to maintain the sustainability of crops and avoid soil depletion. He advocated moving the South's dependence on cotton towards peanuts and sweet potatoes, although both of those were crops in cultivation already. Due to his fame, he was given two rooms in which to live at Tuskegee while other single faculty had to share a single room. This did not sit well with other faculty. He never married and although he had a three-year relationship with Sarah Hunt, his last years he shared his residence and research with a young Cornell graduate, Austin Curtis Jr. Carver left Curtis the royalties from his only authorized biography. Carver's personality and nature placed him at odds with society's practices, the opinions and rules of his employer and friends, and the path to career recognition. Still, he remained true to how he saw the world; true to his relationship with his spirituality. Oddly, because he was not an activist, many did not see him as brave. He was the first black student at what is now the University of Iowa. He never denied his faith, perhaps at the cost of scientific success. He maintained a bi-sexual lifestyle decades before that was possible to talk about. Maybe he was a quieter kind of brave than we are used to.

So how many of you know who Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson are? How many of you have seen the movie "Hidden Figures"? The movie tells the story of these three women who were integral to the NASA program which launched John Glenn into orbit around the planet in 1962. Computers were not quite a thing that could be accessed and so early space research depended on humans to check the complex equations being used in calculations. The pool included African American, primarily women, who were paid less than their white counter-parts and relegated to use the segregated facilities in "West Computer" section of NASA's campus. As shown in the movie, this often required long treks in the rain to use the bathroom—until the practice was abolished. What was so authentic about these women? That they were black and women was not so much a secret. That each of them was wicked smart was not an expectation and not expressed without challenge. Each of them excelled in school and broke barriers on their march to NASA. Sometimes authenticity is claiming our power and being willing to exceed every expectation about us. Limited expectations intended to hold us back and keep us in our place. Why do I think these women are brave? I see their bravery in challenging the status quo at NASA—that blacks are not smart, that women are not independent. When Katherine Johnson asked to attend a meeting about the upcoming flight she was told there was no protocol for women to attend the meeting. Seriously!

At home, these women faced a more intimate version of those same challenges. To be wicked smart made husbands uncomfortable. To be independently employed and paid, even if it was less than white counterparts, challenged the rules of domestic relationships. These women were at the forefront of women trying to balance life as a professional, a wife and a mother. We take those struggles for granted now, even though the battle for equal pay and equal rights isn't really over. These women were early warriors yet, until the movie I don't remember these women in my history lessons on space travel.

One last person I want to introduce. Johnnie Coleman was the Rosa Parks of the desegregation of Unity's campus in Kansas City. Coleman discovered Unity after getting a life-limiting diagnosis. She overcame the health challenge and resolved to become a minister in this new faith tradition. One day in the 1950's, a student in a class of white classmates, Coleman was contemplating another bus trip in the rain because she was **not** allowed to live on campus with her classmates. She simply said, "No more." She said she would not become a Unity minister unless she was allowed to live on campus. Her classmates rallied with her and declared they would quit too if she was not permitted to come on campus. She was given space at the farthest spot on campus, which became known as Cottage J, until her graduation and ordination. Coleman went on to establish her own ministry, Universal Foundation for Better Living. Christ Universal Temple in Chicago became a mega-church in the New Thought Movement and continues today. In recent years our Unity organizations have reconnected with UFBL to acknowledge the past injustice and to honor the contributions of Rev. Dr. Coleman. For too many years this story was relegated to an unspoken past we refused to view because of our own shame and guilt. To claim your power, your rights and your place at the table and risk losing what you are working for is authenticity and bravery. I have to say that facing injustice we have caused and making amends is also authentic and brave.

So what is really the point of today's sermon? Aside from a history lesson you might have been unaware of?

What qualities in these people I spoke of resonated with you? What qualities surprised you? What ideas in the oppression of this history made you uncomfortable? Asking these questions is the point of the sermon. It is practicing our principles in ways that invite us to become a part of a bigger solution to a problem we don't like to look at.

Acknowledging these qualities in others also, hopefully, invites us to look at our own authenticity. What limited expectations have been expressed to us that we have **not** risen above? Are there ways we make ourselves “less than” to conform to social rules? WHY? Why would we do that?

We sing, “IF I were brave.” Brave is who we are in essence so *when do we begin to choose brave?* Authentic is allowing our essence to be seen so *when do we begin to choose authentic?* If we think we face challenges, so have those who have gone before us. Even if we have not been allowed to see their path, it remains in the consciousness available to us to tap in to. I invite you this week to resolve to be authentic and brave and to find the unheralded ones who have blazed a path before you. The best way to honor those who went before is to be authentic and brave now.