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 Arlington Street Church
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Confidence in Confidence

“Daring Greatly” are words from a speech Teddy Roosevelt gave at the Sorbonne in Paris on April 23rd, 1910. He called the speech “Citizen in a Republic;” here’s the passage that made it famous. I’m not going to change his language, but invite you to translate it to be gender-neutral:

“It is not the critic who counts;” he writes, “not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly....”

I invite you to join me this morning in a reflection on daring greatly: the spiritual practice of confidence.

After my father left her with two young daughters, my mother was, understandably, occasionally undone. A lot of the time she was brave and resourceful, but sometimes it would all come apart. That was unpredictable, but things going wrong that were traditionally in the male sphere of responsibility always set her off. It was my job, as the oldest and the closest she had to a boy, to make it better.

One of those times was at the epic fail of the only toilet in the house. I think I was eleven years old. As my mother began to escalate over this crisis – she’d have to call a plumber, and wait g*d-only-knows how long for him to come, and then where was the money coming from to pay him? – I said, “Don’t worry. I’ll fix it.”

The summer before, I had watched a couple of camp counselors take apart the guts of a toilet tank. Before that, I'm not sure it had ever occurred to me that you could even take off the lid, much less that you'd want to. And I don't think I learned anything much from watching, except the most important thing of all: some combination of curiosity and confidence goes a long way.

And now, what was the alternative? It wasn't pretty. Better to try and fail. At least, for the moment, my mother stopped crying and raging.

I locked myself in the bathroom and got to work. The problem was blessedly evident: If any of you has ever had the handle disconnect from the chain that holds the stopper, you know this wasn't rocket science. I sent my seven-year-old sister to get a paper clip without our mother seeing – I knew she'd have a cow if she thought I was repairing her toilet with a paper clip. It snapped into place, and ta-dah! Triumphant, I flushed the toilet, and made Superman/Batman arms! One crisis averted, 10,000 to go....

This is my earliest memory of the power of confidence. I'm going to call it confidence, anyway, even though it was all smoke and mirrors – a kind of primitive “fake it 'til you make it.” I'm going to call it confidence, rather than faith, because I didn't have the resources, then, to turn to a higher power – real or imagined – and ask for help. I'm going to call it confidence because, over and over, I see the power attributed to those who speak as if they know what they're talking about, act as if they know what they're doing, and, at best, leverage their expertise and wisdom into a deeply compelling way of inspiring and reassuring those around them that all is well. As Teddy Roosevelt said, it begins with daring greatly.

I probably first saw *The Sound of Music* when the movie opened in 1965, and, perhaps like some of you, I've seen it countless times since. After Kem and I took our adult daughters to the Broadway play as it swung through Boston recently, a Christmas gift we all loved, I was reflecting on what it means to have been raised singing along with Julie Andrews,

I have confidence in sunshine
 I have confidence in rain
 I have confidence that spring will come again
 Besides which you see I have confidence in me.

Strength doesn't lie in numbers
 Strength doesn't lie in wealth
 Strength lies in nights of peaceful slumbers
 When you wake up, wake up!

It tells me all I trust I lead my heart to
 All I trust becomes my own
 I have confidence in confidence alone....

[And then, for the first time, mid-song, she lays eyes on the von Trapp estate; interrupts herself to say, "O, help;" recovers; and finishes, strong:]

I have confidence in confidence alone,
 Besides which you see I have confidence in me!

Confidence has everything to do with risk-taking. Mustering the courage and daring greatly to lean against the velvet rope of our comfort zone and takes risks is critical to growth and depth and compassion towards humanity, starting with our own.

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable, but more useful than a life spent doing nothing." I can still hear my fearsome high school chorus director, Dorothy DiDomenico yelling at us, "If you're going to make a mistake, make it a good one!" She disliked nothing more passionately than a feeble entrance. If we wobbled in, the air would turn blue as she exhorted us to sing boldly. She vastly preferred us to sing horribly off-key than to hesitate to sing at all. Off-key she could fix, she said; timidity could send her through the roof.

Walter Anderson is the author of *The Confidence Course*. He writes, "In order to live a fulfilled life, to feel exhilarated by your accomplishments, ... you must expect mistakes to occur, and you must practice what I call R.I.P., which stands for Responsibility, Insight, and Perspective. [As you know,] it also means ... Rest in Peace, which, in itself, may not be a bad way to look at [our] mistakes."¹

¹ Walter Anderson, *The Confidence Course*

Confidence is not a natural byproduct of daring greatly and making a mistake; confidence comes from learning from the experience. As usual, we're back to the Serenity Prayer: G*d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. We can't change the past; agonizing over it is a terrible waste of time. Digging in and understanding what happened, and then what happened, and why – concluding with, “Let's not do that again,” or “Let's try this and hope for a better outcome this time” – is the only good use of reflection on the past.

We are not a mistake, and we are not a failure because we've made a mistake; a mistake is a mistake; to err is human.

Nobel prize winning physicist Niels Bohr says, “An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field.” I love the Thomas Edison story about his experiments with electricity on the way to the invention of the light bulb. Edison had been working for more than five months on the development of a nickel-iron battery when his long-time associate, Walter Mallory, came into the lab. He wrote, “I found [Edison seated] at a bench about three feet wide and twelve to fifteen feet long, on which there were hundreds of little test cells that had been made up by his corps of chemists and [researchers].... Testing, figuring, and planning ... he had made over nine thousand experiments in trying to devise this new type of storage battery, but had not produced a single thing that promised to solve the question.

“In view of this immense amount of thought and labor,” Walter Mallory continues, “my sympathy got the better of my judgment, and I said, ‘Isn't it a shame that, with the tremendous amount of work you have done, you haven't been able to get any results?’ Edison turned on me like a flash, and with a smile, replied, ‘Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results! I know several thousand things that won't work!’”²

At best, says motivational speaker Lisa Nichols, “[mistakes] are not failures; they're feedback.” Daring greatly, making a mistake, finding out what doesn't work is all a remedy to “what if?” The confidence that comes from being able to say we dared greatly, we tried and gave it our all, is

² Walter S. Mallory as quoted in Frank Lewis Dyer and Thomas Commerford Martin, *Edison: His Life and Inventions*, Volume 2 (of two), Chapter 24: Edison's Method in Inventing, pp. 615-616 (Harper & Brothers, New York; Google Books in full)

priceless ... immeasurably preferable to the dead end of regret. One of the greatest enemies of spiritual awakening is giving up. Life coach Mike Kemski says, “The people that quit when they get knocked down from life’s blows call it failure. The people that get up and keep on moving towards their goals and desires call it experience.” The only way that we can succeed is always to try, try again. Daring greatly – failing and falling and, at best, getting back up again – is the very best of the human spirit.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us engage ourselves in the spiritual practice of confidence.

Lock yourself in the bathroom and make superhero arms!

Invoke confidence in confidence alone,

and if you need a reminder, sing along with Fräulein Maria.

Even at worst, “a life spent making mistakes
is ... better than a life spent doing nothing.”³

Make a good mistake, and remember RIP:
responsibility, insight, perspective.

Rest in peace.

May we dare greatly!

³ George Bernard Shaw

there's a blessing of the runners immediately after the opening hymn (348, guide my feet) tomorrow morning. after the blessing is finished (amen!), people will be returning to their seats while i spend another moment in the center aisle with the runners. **will you please play some kind of vamp from the "amen" until i'm back up in the pulpit?**