

# Academic Commentary

## A Matter of Courage: Vulnerable Women Prevailing Against the Odds

**Rabbinic Pastor De Fischler Herman**

Chaplain, Spiritual Director and Sage-ing Mentor

E-mail: [deherman@me.com](mailto:deherman@me.com)

### Author Note

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### Abstract

Heroic individuals abound and often are unsung. The acts of courageous women, mostly quieter than those of their male counterparts, model strength, fierce determination, humor, spirituality, and a deep sense of social justice. Their voices need amplification to effect the changes needed to heal the current existential crisis.

*Keywords:* courage, women, activism, climate change, environmental racism, human rights, visionary art, incarceration, midwifery

*“In our time of disturbance and radical change, we are crossing a threshold, a portal, or an unseen bridge from one world to another. It could be said that the bridge is either collapsing beneath us, or being made as we walk together, in the long twilight hours when one civilization gives way to another.”*

Geneen Marie Haugen

### To Begin...

Several stories and images from the Hebrew Scriptures provide an important portal and backdrop for the perspectives that are to follow in this article. As found in the Passover story, the Pharaoh's daughter, aka *Batyah* (God's daughter), lifts the baby Moses from the Nile and, with the support of the Hebrew baby's birth mother *Yocheved* (God's glory), his secret wet-nurse, and his sister *Miriam* (bitter sea), the prophetess, the child grows up in the Pharaoh's royal palace, eventually becoming the divinely guided leader of the enslaved Hebrews. *Batyah*, along with the Hebrew midwives *Shifrah* (beautiful) and *Puah* (cry out), resist Pharaoh's decree to kill all Hebrew baby boys and thus change the course of biblical history.

In chapter 27 of the book of Numbers, one reads about *Mahlah* (forgiven), Tirzah (pleasing), Hoglah (dancing), *Milcah* (queen), and *Noah* (movement), the five daughters of *Zelophehad* (dark shadow) whose father dies during the 40-year wandering of the Hebrews in the wilderness. As their mother had borne no sons, to whom would his estate be bequeathed?

The five women challenge the long-standing practice of father-to-son inheritance. They petition *Moshe* (Moses, drawn out) and the elders, all male, to grant them their father's property rights upon entering the Land of Israel. The daughters argue that, were they not granted their inheritance, their father's name and his tribe *Menashe* (causing to forget) would be lost. According to the text, Moses appeals to God, receives a positive response, and, along with the leaders, transmits the divine permission with the provision that the women only marry within their tribe, which the text states they do. The daughters, vulnerable women in a male dominated culture, dare to challenge male authority and succeed.

Soaring across millennia, Susan LaFlesche, a 19<sup>th</sup> century indigenous woman from the Omaha tribe, was determined from childhood to become a doctor and treat the ill among her people. Subject to colonialism, broken treaties, and an insensitive white male power structure, Susan faced seemingly insurmountable odds and prevailed, becoming the first native American woman physician. Not only did she achieve her childhood dream, her courageous lifelong struggle against the odds allowed Susan to establish a hospital on the reservation and provide the kind of healthcare only such an institution could.

Courage, from the French *coeur* (heart) and, as defined by Merriam Webster, is “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” What lies behind these character traits? Are they innate or can they be learned? What courageous acts are being called for now as we observe the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the contemporary terrors prompted by the global Covid 19 pandemic, mass migrations, exacerbating economic disparities, racial unrest, and climate chaos? What can we learn from history and past mistakes?

How, in this transitional and existential moment in history, can human beings manifest the courage needed to effect a behavioral sea change toward rectifying the ills humans have wrought upon each other, Earth, and her creatures? How can current and future generations handle everything from small injustices to oppressions, wars, and, ultimately, rally to reverse the disruption *Homo sapiens* have caused to our planet's climate? Are enough people ready to tackle such calamities as hurricanes, heatwaves, wildfires, unprecedented flooding, environmental racism, PTSD survivors of wars, underemployment, disproportionate incarceration of Blacks and minorities, economic inequity, mass shootings, and the aftermath of 9/11? Are the powerful and the privileged, as well as youth activists, the Sunrise Movement and Black Lives Matter, elders, and frontline workers during the present pandemic courageous, capable, and ready to step into the breach to preserve sentient life and the rest of Creation?

While much can be explored about courage in many arenas, including intimate relationships, parenting, the workplace, business, politics, and war, this article focuses on activist women who have dared and are continuing to challenge patriarchy, the driver of much of the terror human beings have been experiencing. Given access to voluminous histories and dramatizations written by and about daring men and their accomplishments, works about courageous women are far fewer. It is timely, therefore, to examine how the voices and acts of courageous women contribute to changing the world toward one where human beings and other life forms threatened with extinction may survive. When it comes to courage, what do these extraordinary women share? How do they express it? This article aims to address these questions and, perhaps, inspire conversations and the swift, courageous actions necessary to help reverse the dangerous trajectory that humanity is hurtling toward at lightning speed.

### Courageous Character Traits

*“When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable.”*

Madeleine L’Engle

In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown, PhD, writes that what is necessary for human transformation and healthy growth is the courage to be vulnerable. “Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.” (p.2)

Brown continues, “What most of us fail to understand...is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.” (p. 34)

What gets in the way of being vulnerable is a pervasive sense of scarcity, “the never enough problem,” (Brown, p. 26) as in, “I am not \_\_\_\_\_ enough.” In Brown’s words, “The larger culture is always applying pressure, and unless we’re willing to push back and fight for what we believe in, the default becomes a state of scarcity.” (p. 29)

The American culture of rugged individualism does not permit showing signs of vulnerability, lest one is ridiculed, bullied, or otherwise put down as being weak. This only leads to feelings of shame and unworthiness as well as the fallout from collective trauma. Published in 2012, and, referring to the first years of the millennium, Brown notes:

...the feeling of scarcity does thrive in shame-prone cultures that are deeply steeped in comparison and fractured by disengagement... The world has never been an easy place, but the past decade has been traumatic for so many people that it’s made changes in our culture. From 9/11, multiple wars, and the recession, to catastrophic natural disasters and the increase in random violence and school shootings, we’ve survived and are surviving events that have torn at our sense of safety with such force that we’ve experienced them as trauma even if we weren’t directly involved. (p. 27)

Taking a courageous stand means being willing to “push past ‘the rules’ to assert oneself, advocate for one’s ideas, and feel comfortable with one’s power and gifts.” (p. 89) Additionally, it is not only the courage to lead a community that merits acknowledgment. A critical component in the work toward societal change is the courageous person who takes the first step in following the leader. Only then do more people feel emboldened to join in and thereby attract more followers until a critical mass develops, a phenomenon often referred to as the “3.5% rule.”

Author and Harvard University Professor Erica Chenoweth writes, “The ‘3.5% rule’ refers to the claim that no government has withstood a challenge of 3.5% of their population mobilized against it during a peak event.” While research has demonstrated that this metric doesn’t hold up in all cases of social movements for change, the author notes it is useful as a rule of thumb. (Carr Center, 2020, p. 1)

Common attributes of the courageous include: acting from one's heart and intuition, despite fear; determination; justice-seeking; humility; dignity; being part of a community; and, often, humor. Some also reference God as their guide.

Luminary girls and young women have been effectively using their newly acquired fame as a platform for their noble and courageous activism. Such young women include: Greta Thunberg, who started *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* (School Strike for Climate); Julia Butterfly Hill, who tree-sat for more than two years to protect an ancient redwood tree from logging; Malala Yousafzai, then a young Pakistani teenager, who received the Nobel Peace Prize for her advocacy promoting female education, and others.

On the elder end, Jane Fonda, noted for anti-war activism in the 1970s, approached her 80th birthday despairing about the dire consequences of human-caused climate change. She moved to Washington, DC, in the Fall of 2019 to inaugurate "Fire Drill Fridays," a weekly rally and demonstration on Capitol Hill highlighting the multifaceted social and economic ills connected to the climate crisis. Fonda drew attention to her cause by getting arrested multiple times and inviting other prominent figures to join her. Gloria Steinem, 87, journalist co-founder of *Ms. Magazine* and tireless advocate for women's issues, became an international media spokesperson on issues of equality beginning in the late 1960s. At 85, she joined Fonda at one of the Fire Drill Friday events (see photo). [Full disclosure: This author was arrested with Jane Fonda during a Fire Drill Friday demonstration in November, 2019.]

The women featured in the following sections of this article all live near the author in Maryland. One does not have to go far to find heroes. Their stories of courage are extraordinary in large part because they are not well known. They include a midwife who advocated both for her profession and birthing women by championing legislative changes in her state; a Black woman recently given a prestigious award for her efforts to combat environmental racism; a Holocaust survivor and couples therapist; an African American woman of limited education who advocates the release of incarcerated Black men and helps them re-enter society; a transgender woman and retired eye surgeon advocating for LGBTQ people; and a visionary art activist and museum founder. Each one dares greatly, perseveres through vulnerability, and models what is possible and necessary to challenge patriarchy and to grow and thrive in this uncertain world. Perhaps their stories will inspire and enlighten others to face the contemporary challenges with greater courage than they might have otherwise dared.

### *Mairi Breen Rothman—Midwife*

The Irish Catholic Russian Jew was born in South Korea and lived in nine places by the time she turned 19. Just as circuitously, Mairi Breen Rothman found her way to becoming a midwife. Studying dance and music, Mairi received her master's degree and taught choreography at a private school until she was radicalized by the hazards of hospital births. After bearing two babies in-hospital 20 months apart, she entered an accelerated nursing program at Catholic University followed by Georgetown University and the Frontier Nursing School of Midwifery and Family Nursing.

Once certified to practice midwifery, Mairi found herself confronting the backward practices of obstetricians in hospital settings, where, for example, birthing women were kept prone on their backs with their feet in stirrups. A rudimentary understanding of physics would

## Articles

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negate this as appropriate protocol for giving birth. Before working with clients at one particular hospital, Mairi had to sign a doula agreement, stating she “would not argue with anything the doctor said needed to happen and that I would not help the client push. The agreement is offensive for doulas. The fact that they would ask a colleague to sign it is offensive. And there was nothing else I could do but sign or else I would have to leave the hospital.” Reluctantly, she signed.

One doctor urged a client to hold her breath while pushing and reprimanded her for screaming, which could tear her cervix, thus requiring an emergency Caesarean section. As Mairi said, “This was fiction. She [the obstetrician] just made it up... I’ve never heard of someone tearing their cervix from making noise.” The doctor recommended an epidural injection to prevent the woman from screaming. Not wanting the epidural, the woman said she would be quiet until the doctor “badgered her” into finally accepting it. The birthing process continued to deteriorate, leaving the new mother vulnerable to additional trauma at potential future births.

The unnecessarily stressful experience led Mairi and a partner to found the Association of Independent Midwives of Maryland, an organization whose mission was to legalize lay midwives, now called Certified Professional Midwives (CPMs) and certified by the North American Registry of Midwives (NARM). Mairi succeeded in legalizing the work of home midwives, easing countless births, and in changing the Maryland law that required a physician’s signature for midwives to work alongside a doctor. While the doctors may have wanted to collaborate with the midwives, they didn’t want to be responsible for anything that might have gone awry. Mairi defines courage:

*When you forge ahead despite your fears. You can’t have courage unless you have fear. If you didn’t have any fear, it wouldn’t take any courage to do whatever it is you’re trying to do. So, courage is the ability to persist despite your fears. That’s what I think people do every time they decide to have a baby because it is an inherently risky thing to do. And it’s a heroic thing to do. Because if all the women having babies decided not to be that brave, then the human race would die out. That’s who keeps the species going. And we have zero appreciation for this. You can go and kill 12 people in a war and get a medal! But if a woman creates 10 people, she doesn’t get a medal. She often gets uterine prolapse and all the other things that go along with that because you’re risking your body every time you get pregnant.*

Receiving a call for this vocation has given Mairi the courage to do the work, for, as she says, she is “naturally a fearful person. My daughter Emma always tells me I’m a ‘badass.’ I really don’t feel like a ‘badass.’ I feel like a scaredy cat, but I do feel determined to forge ahead despite that.”

### *Sharon Lavigne--Environmental Justice Activist*

Hailing from St. James Parish, Louisiana, land that straddles the Mississippi River, Sharon Lavigne grew up as she says, “living the American dream.” The land, she recalls fondly, had clean air and water, and the people were healthy until recently, when in short order she lost neighbors on both sides of her property to cancer. Petro-chemical plants along the river numbering 150 spew toxic chemicals into the air, one of the highest concentrations of any area in the United States. The largely African American community has cancer rates 50 times higher than the national average, prompting the moniker “Cancer Alley.”

Anger and hopelessness pervaded the residents. When Wanhua, a Chinese chemical company, proposed constructing a plastics plant nearby, Sharon Lavigne mobilized her neighbors to fight against it, thus becoming an activist. Inexperienced as an organizer, she nevertheless attracted a score of supporters at the start, “not knowing what in the world I was doing. The more they said there was no hope, the more something inside of me riled up.” Sharon made the cause her full-time work, founding a group called Rise St. James. She began a media campaign doing radio interviews, distributing flyers, posting billboards, running newspaper ads, and writing letters to parish council members as well as educating the public. Rise St. James’ effective campaign caused Wanhua to halt its \$1.25 billion application in September 2019.

Yet the activist’s work is not done. Formosa Plastics, a Taiwan-based company, announced a plan to build a plastics factory a mile from Lavigne’s home. “I don’t care what nobody says, the governor, anyone. I’m not afraid. God told me Formosa’s not going to do that to us.” For her courageous work, Lavigne was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for North America in June, 2021.

### *Hedy Schleifer--Couples Therapist*

Born in a refugee camp in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1944, Hedy Schleifer commands attention upon entering a room. Elegant and graceful, she captivates listeners with her stories and teachings as a couples therapist. Hedy credits her parents with the bequest of courage. Her definition of courage, which Hedy received from her mother, “is the capacity to embrace what is and to welcome it, not just accommodate it.”

Rounded up in occupied Antwerp early in World War II, her parents were in a line about to be herded aboard a truck. Her mother knew their destination would not be good. As she observed the Nazi guard yelling, “*Schnell, schnell!* (Fast, fast!),” her mother realized something that might dramatically affect the outcome: every human being has a human essence and “Nazi was just a uniform, but inside is a human being.” Hedy’s mother decided to speak directly to that human being. “As she got close to him, she looked directly into his eyes, looked inside to the soul of the man, and said, ‘Let us all go.’ He did.”

Humor also figured into her mother’s ability to endure the seemingly impossible circumstances of her imprisonment during the war. Hedy recalls the story of her mother sitting on her cot in the refugee camp barracks when it started to rain. Just above her was a hole in the roof. Finding an umbrella nearby, she opened it to realize that it, too, had a hole. The rain poured through the hole in the roof and then through the hole in the umbrella onto her cot. The absurdity of the situation struck her immediately and she “cracked up.” And, as she began to laugh, so did all her fellow internees. On another occasion when Hedy’s mother spotted and opened a box of Red Cross donations, inside she found nothing but ragged, cast-off clothing. To her it was a perfect opportunity to create and model in a fashion show, using the space between the cots as a runway. In both instances, laughter erupted in a place where there was virtually nothing to laugh about.

After the war, freed prisoners were sent to displaced persons’ or DP camps. The camp housing Hedy’s mother was populated by pregnant women and those who had just given birth. The camp’s commandant was a man Hedy called a “sadist,” a bureaucrat who not only did not

## Articles

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provide adequate food to the inhabitants, but who continued to treat the displaced persons as prisoners. He insisted on daily roll call, keeping the starving women standing for long stretches. To protest, Hedy's mother initiated a hunger strike, not an easy undertaking in any situation, but even more challenging in a DP camp where she had to find another woman willing to strike so the Red Cross would take them seriously and investigate the matter. Despite the short rations in the camp, another woman was willing to strike with her.

The commandant invited the two of them to his office, whereby her mother sat, defying the protocol of his authority. He said, "I didn't tell you you could sit down. Aren't you afraid of me?"

"No, I am not," she replied, "I'm afraid of God."

He then commanded the other woman to sit down, reasserting control of the situation. "What do you want?" he asked her mother. She responded, "I want to be your partner in making this a place where women can regain their dignity." He listened and became her partner. She asked for the things that enable people to regain their dignity after what they had gone through--food, sleep, rest, and putting an end to the roll call. The commandant complied with all her demands. Hedy's mother had employed the same approach as she had earlier with the Nazi guard, seeing this man as a human being. "That distinction," Hedy shared, "between the human essence and what we do to survive, is a really big part of the work my husband and I taught... We shouldn't confuse the survival pattern with essence of the person, because often we think that's who the person is. No, that's the survival uniform that person is wearing. Inside lives the human essence. And, often it's hard even to see the essence. Some people's essence is so buried... Not everyone will actually, in their lifetime, express it or even access it."

Hedy employed her mother's attitude when she received a terrifying cancer diagnosis. With her husband Yumi's support and encouragement, she released the fear and approached the situation, "not as a problem to be solved but as an adventure to be lived." Once they decided to embark on the adventure together, Yumi suggested they name it, "Rallying Around the Boob." Everyone who rallied with them became part of what they called the "International Boob Brigade." When they went to inquire about treatment options, they asked if the doctors would like to join the Boob Brigade. If the doctors did not see the humor, they were not brought in as part of her medical team.

Visiting her oncologist's office, Hedy noticed a sign high on the waiting room wall that read, "Welcome cancer survivor." She informed the receptionist that the sign had a mistake. It was not a grammatical or spelling error, Hedy pointed out. Although she had a cancer diagnosis and was being treated for it, she didn't see herself as a "survivor." The puzzled receptionist asked then what she was. Hedy said she was not willing to survive cancer. If someone had the flu, she queried, does that make that person a flu survivor? Would a person want, for the rest of their lives, to be brought back to the past? Well, then, what would she want to be called? Her response, "Hedy Schleifer will do." As a result of her enlightening, the receptionist shared her newfound understanding with the doctor who changed the sign and shared the revelation with colleagues. For anyone who has struggled with labels that diminish one's power in the world, this is a powerful example of courage from a place of vulnerability and an effective instance of social change.

Deeply spiritual, emotional, and creative, Hedy expresses passion about the couples therapy practice she shares with Yumi, her husband and professional partner. In addition to the lessons she received from her mother, Hedy offers a parable that informs her life's work: "The fox has a lot of theories and strategies and wants to capture the hedgehog. But the hedgehog turns into a ball with all those spikes and the fox can't grab the hedgehog. So, he goes back to the drawing board."

As she continued to share:

*The philosopher Isaiah Berlin said that the world is divided into foxes and hedgehogs. The foxes are people with a lot of theories and strategies. The hedgehogs have one idea: in it is crystallized their whole life. For example, Darwin, evolution; Einstein, relativity; Jung, the collective unconscious. When I found out about the hedgehog concept, I decided I am a hedgehog and that's my big lesson. That is, there are three invisible connectors. And, if we embrace those connectors, we will be deeply connected [with one another]. The first is relational space: that between people, between a couple, there is relational space. It's invisible, but palpable. Martin Buber [20th century Austrian Jewish and Israeli philosopher] said that relational space is sacred. The second is the bridge. Buber also said that between the two worlds there needs to be a bridge because [people are] incompatible. We need to be able to cross the bridge to learn the culture and language of each other. The third is the encounter. The encounter is the meeting of the souls. The way these three are connected is that when we honor the space and cross the bridge we then create the conditions for the encounter.*

Hedy's philosophy can be summed up in her focus on the heart, *coeur* (French), the root of the word "courage," that she says, "is the key to life. And life gives opportunities continuously to open one's heart."

### Sarah Coleman--Prisoner Advocate

While she does not go to church, God speaks through Sarah Coleman, a Black woman who, without a law degree, or any degree for that matter, takes on the cases of incarcerated Black men coming up for parole. Her clients have been imprisoned for murder, child molestation, rape, drug dealing, and have no resources nor anyone to advocate for them. The courts appoint public defenders, attorneys who do not know the people they are assigned to help. Once released, parolees fall prey to recidivism. Sarah, however, has succeeded in getting 39 men released from prison and back on their feet as they begin a new life.

No matter that Sarah's father, Stonewall Jackson Motley, was a decorated war hero who served under General George Patton and was a veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. No matter that Sarah, a precocious child and early reader, told her dad at age three that she wanted to be an attorney. No matter that Sarah was an excellent student and a candidate for an early award and a place in the spelling bee. Molested, raped, and impregnated at 13, Sarah knows all too well what it is like to feel turned away by society. By age 19 she had birthed her third child. Her life's trajectory took her to hell and beyond, yet her gifts have been used far differently than she could have ever imagined.

Sarah sensed from childhood that she was special and set apart from others. She feels she learns from all her life's experiences, especially those early challenges. They taught her compassion,



## Articles

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empathy, and strength, and opened her to take the risks she now takes in dealing with incarcerated Black men, the very sort who had assaulted her and even murdered her son Joshua at age 30. She says, “You can’t heal brokenness if you’ve never experienced anything yourself.”

Sarah’s children were molested by a relative she had trusted. She vowed never to see him again. Yet, when he contacted Sarah, she felt God’s presence and she had to work through her forgiveness. Sarah understands that “every predator was once prey themselves. I saw he was truly contrite--he broke all the way down.” Sarah could identify with his victimhood, as he, too, had been shamed and shunned as a child. Recently, another man, released from federal prison after serving a sentence for child molestation, sought her help. Sarah was reluctant to meet with him at first, but, she says:

*I could identify with his story because I had been through it with my relative. I decided to take a chance on him because he was forthcoming. It was very hard for him to admit. Imagine telling this to someone who could judge him, someone who could have hung up the phone, someone who could have belittled him... But I listened to this man. The obstacle was getting his driver’s license to get a job. All it took was a phone call because I have a friend who works in the DMV. Where he had a month before he could get in, through the grace and mercy of God I was able to get him an appointment in a couple of days.*

She told him that if he ever found himself with “urges,” to call her and she would pray with him. Now, one year later, Sarah reports he is doing very well, working, getting assistance from the Veterans Administration, attending church, receiving counseling, and regularly reporting to his parole officer. He accepted her invitation to share his story in a recent zoom call. Sarah continued,

*Instead of people talking to me and getting to know me, people judged me. I was shunned. I knew what it felt like for people not to know anything about me. They had their own perceptions of me. That’s what makes me take the chances I do with the ones who are incarcerated--society’s throwaways, because they were prepared to throw me away. No one pulled me aside to see what was going on with me... It just starts with having a conversation and people will realize you have more in common.*

A woman of great faith, Sarah shared that her friend had prophesied she would work to free incarcerated Black men. She did not know then what she was taking on. She now says she is “here to lend a voice to the voiceless,” and assures the men she helps, “I will be your voice on the outside.” Sarah continues to serve society’s “throwaways,” hoping and praying for them to make it in this difficult society as she speaks up, takes a stand, and does not worry about what others think. A more courageous person would be hard to find.

### ***Dr. Dana Beyer--Retired Eye Surgeon and Transgender Activist***

An activist for LGBTQ+ people, Dana Beyer realized at age seven that she was not a boy, although that was her assigned gender at birth. She felt like a girl, though no one referred to her in the feminine. It was confusing at best. At worst, it led to low self-esteem and a lack of understanding by her elders and her peers. Only later did she learn that her mother had been given the drug diethylstilbestrol, DES, early in her pregnancy to prevent miscarriage. The drug’s side effects would leave many offspring of DES mothers, like Dana, afflicted with hormonal maladies, such as transsexuality and homosexuality that would wreak havoc with their

own reproductive capacity. And, as in Dana's experience, she would be afflicted with gender confusion, untreated sexual abnormalities, and social maladjustment.

A bright, inquisitive child, Dana grew up inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. She attended the Bronx High School of Science and pursued higher education at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, specializing in eye surgery. Dana performed cataract surgeries on patients in Nepal, served residents of Mississippi as a glaucoma and retina specialist, and provided care to underserved African American and Cajun patients, retiring from clinical practice in 1990.

The most courageous act in Dana's life was transitioning from her assigned male gender at birth to female. By the time she was seven, she realized "something was wrong" with her, yet "My 7- to 11-year-old consciousness didn't allow me to figure that stuff out. Girls at school didn't treat me as a girl. My parents didn't treat me as a girl. So, how could that be? At 11, I came out to my parents. They wouldn't talk about it." Later, getting married, becoming a parent, and getting divorced, Dana was 50 years old by the time of her transition and only then did her parents finally acknowledge and accept her as a woman.

Dana's strong voice and political activism for human rights grew through the years, leading to her induction into Montgomery County, Maryland's Human Rights Hall of Fame in 2014. Her successful advocacy efforts focused, in part, on reclassifying "transgender" from a mental illness to a medical condition, and in helping passing one state and three county anti-discrimination laws in Maryland on gender identity.

### *Rebecca Alban Hoffberger--Museum Founder*

The famed mime Marcel Marceau invited the teenage Rebecca Alban to be his first American apprentice at his international Mime School, changing her life, she says, "in wonderful ways." A high school dropout and the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates, Rebecca realized early on that she "had thoughts that weren't mainstream."

She was inspired to found the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM), a unique and hugely successful venue, exhibiting from its inception works by people who simply need to express themselves and, often in the process, heal from the traumas of life and war. Visionary art, she wrote, "is made up of wild, untamed, dancing on the edge works created by those not afraid to make mistakes or use materials not usually incorporated into the creation of art. It is formed by naked self-examination and often by obsessive concentration and quest. The themes behind visionary art are most often spiritual ones." (Hoffberger, 1993)

After 10 years of dreaming and planning, Rebecca opened AVAM in 1995 in her hometown of Baltimore. The visionary has inaugurated major themed exhibits, beginning with "Tree of Life," featuring works by "people who have been institutionalized, the elderly, homeless, and those with vocations not traditionally associated with the creation of art." (Hoffberger, 1995). AVAM is an unusual museum with its focus on healing. No matter how serious the subject matter, such as the recent "Secret Life of Earth," Rebecca includes humor, reflecting her own sensibilities and playfulness. Alongside works exposing the enormous problems of human caused climate change, this exhibit featured works of Far Side cartoonist Gary Larson. One surely needs to be able to laugh in order to tackle even the most difficult ecological challenges. Preparing to retire as she

## Articles

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turns 70 in 2022, Rebecca is opening her last exhibit, “Healing and the Art of Compassion (and the Lack Thereof)” as this article goes to publication.

In her 1993 essay, “Every Individual a Universe” for *The Baltimore Jewish Times*, Rebecca wrote, “The law of singularity, of standing tall by oneself, of being fully that which each one of us alone is uniquely suited to be--and accomplishing this in that brief span before our lifetime runs out--is the essential human challenge...”

Perhaps this is another way of defining “courage”--“standing tall by oneself and being fully that which each one of us alone is uniquely suited to be.” It seems as though Rebecca Alban Hoffberger has managed to do just that.

### A Final Thought...

Courage, it seems, requires one to be able to take a stand while being vulnerable, feeling fear, and engaging in action because one must, despite the strong possibility of being judged, shunned, or otherwise demeaned by family, peers, or society at large. A courageous woman faces the additional challenge of taking that stand in a patriarchal culture. As these brave women show, it is possible, it is frightening, and it is clear that their voices and courageous acts are needed now more than ever.



*Courageous women risking arrest at Fire Drill Friday demonstration on Capitol Hill, December 20, 2019; including starting third from left: Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, Heather Toney, Roshi Joan Halifax, and Dolores Huerta.*

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  - Rebecca Hoffberger, August 2, 2021, via Zoom.
  - Sarah Coleman, August 11, 2021, via Zoom.
  - Mairi Breen Rothman, August 14, 2021, via Zoom.
  - Hedy Schleifer, August 17, 2021, via Zoom.