

## Finding Courage

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At the IWC Seminar on August 25th, six presenters offered examples of Courageous Women of Conscience. The variety of time, place and purpose reflected in the lives of the women presented did not obscure some common observations about their courage use of conscience. Anne Hutchinson, Jeannette Rankin, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary Parker Follett, Aung San Suu Kyi, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and our very present participant Fariba Enteshari, all demonstrated similar qualities in facing challenges to their goals. Creative thought with commitment to principles was the starting point of their endeavors. Since conscience is founded upon a knowledge of right and wrong, its use requires the thoughtful application of ethical principles such as non-violence and tolerance in very hostile situations. These women showed that the courage to confront corruption and authoritarian institutions is nourished by ethics. Seminar participants agreed that this use of the mind must be combined with a deeply felt empathy for human beings, and indeed for all of life. The lives of the women presented showed that they cared for others and envisioned a better society than the one in which they lived. Extreme human suffering was not inevitable, as is sometimes argued by those lacking in courage. Whether they faced the brutality

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of a military dictatorship, as did Burmese activist Suu Kyi, or the deadness of organizations that Mary Parker Follett sought to reform, women of courage and conscience inspire others with a spirit that is vital, creative, universal and all-pervasive. Thereby, they defy stereotypes of weakness and provide leadership and hope for many. For some, a teacher or guide provided the wisdom or method for choosing what needed to be done. Fariba Enteshari described how the Sufi poet Rumi gave metaphors and stories that helped her find a way through three

alien countries and the study of difficult scientific subjects in foreign languages until she found a surprising calling as a teacher of Sufi texts. Sowing seeds of spiritual reformation in a very material universe is a challenge she shares with the grand Russian lady of the 19th century, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. We learned that becoming a voice of universal recognition of many religions, mythologies, philosophies and scientific approaches requires the courage to withstand the attacks of those seeking uncritical protection for dogmas and self-serving, authoritarian institutions. The accomplishments of dauntless women provide a rich and flourishing source of inspiration, such the days when Anne Hutchinson stood alone in a Massachusetts court defending her understanding of the Bible. Whether standing up for religious liberty or saying no to war, as Jeannette Rankin did, these fearless pioneers of conscience inspire us to seek the instantiation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that Eleanor Roosevelt successfully promoted in the face of formidable opposition from self-interested governments. In keeping with the Institute of World Culture's aim *to honour through appropriate observance the contributions of men and women of all ages to world culture*, surely our best means of honouring these courageous women of conscience would be to emulate them by finding our own courage.

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