

COURAGE

“Physical courage is bravery in the face of physical pain, hardship, death or threat of death, while moral courage is the ability to act rightly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, discouragement or personal loss.”

Wikipedia.

I’ve always been drawn to stories of courage. Physical courage, bravery in the face of physical pain, hardship, death or threat of death was less compelling to me than stories of moral courage. While still a high school student I met a man from South Africa who had been forced to leave his country after speaking out against apartheid. He was white, a member of a very privileged group, and had no example in either his parents or teachers. And yet he spoke out fearlessly, although I never learned whether or not he felt fear at the time. Without the example of family and friends, where did his courage come from? I still wonder when and how courage begins.

For it surely takes courage for a child to differentiate, to move from the protection of parental dependence and to face the anxiety which arises when you achieve new levels of freedom. The fear and thrill of riding a bike, of sleeping over at a friend’s house, of going to summer camp all move us towards new levels of autonomy and anxiety as we move away from our protected status as children. This must be the very beginning of courage.

When my daughter was very young, perhaps 8 or 9, she befriended another child at school. Rachel’s mother had left her to be raised by a well meaning but inept father. She came to school in wrinkled clothes and was badly in need of a shower. No other child would have anything to do with her, but Jen took her on and would not allow anyone to ridicule her friend; not even when the ridicule spread to her. Children can be brave.

My father was not a brave man. The child of Russian immigrants, he grew up with 7 siblings in Brooklyn; a tough neighborhood populated with Jewish, Irish,

and Italian families who fought constantly. Children played stickball in the street, and my father's nose was broken several times during confrontations over these games. His family was large and noisy, and he would do anything to avoid a fight or an argument. Although he put himself through college and law school, becoming a very successful stockbroker, he often allowed people to cheat him because of this fear of conflict. It was a family joke that for years he bought his cars from a neighbor who overcharged him. He would never confront the man, never speak up for himself. I loved my father deeply for his kindness, but wished he was more courageous. He had a great capacity for love and joy, but he was a frightened man.

My son is not like his grandfather. We used to say, when describing him, that the Nazi's would not be able to send their death trains through Boulder without him speaking up. He has never let an injustice go by, even when it had nothing to do with him. Although we nurtured this aspect of his character, we didn't create it. Some things seem to be innate, and some children are more attuned to inequalities than others. They have moral courage.

It appears to me that of all the elements that constitute character, courage is the essential one. Physical courage is in part innate, in part something that can be nurtured by training and experience. What is rare and more difficult is moral courage. As the historian Allan Nevins put it, "moral courage is allied with the other traits that make up character: honesty, deep seriousness, a firm sense of principle, candor and resolution." I check myself regularly for signs of moral courage, hoping to see signs, however faint, of Nevins' traits.

We are living in frightening times; with many opportunities to be courageous and to speak up for what we believe in. It also takes courage to listen to others, to offer respect for their humanity, if not validation of their beliefs. At this critical time in our history it seems to me that we need to remember that flawed people can also be courageous. It may be a challenge to maintain an appreciation of the imperfect courage of flawed people, but it makes us human. A

very wise woman once said to me, “We need to listen to others as if they might actually change our minds.” To open our hearts, to be generous to others takes courage, even when we don’t agree with with their most deeply held beliefs. For me this is a work in progress. I doubt my courage but I persevere.

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