

I've been trying to figure out what "courage" means to me. Is it doing things others consider scary, or doing things one finds scary or difficult oneself? Soldiers in battle are often called "courageous", as are extreme athletes. I personally feel that courage requires facing one's own fears and that sometimes what is seen as courage is really a projection of one's own feelings onto the behavior of another who is doing something that is actually (to him or her) primarily exciting or fun.

But there are times when we all move out of our comfort zones into more or less frightening territory. I have never been afraid to move halfway around the world, plunging into totally foreign cultures and making a life for a while in places where I knew few people and had only a rudimentary understanding of the language or the rules. But when I lived in California for five years I had to grit my teeth and swallow my terror every time I entered a metro area freeway, crossing over several lanes of speeding traffic to get into a lane where I could avoid getting spun off onto an exit ramp I didn't want, and then crossing over several lanes of insane traffic to reach the exit I actually wanted.

Lately, at age 80 I'm seeing many of my friends facing challenges that severely test their fortitude. One is losing her eyesight, one her balance; two or three have heart or blood pressure conditions. Nearly all of us have lost some hearing, to say nothing of names, titles, dates, etc. etc. I'm losing my voice. One of my closest friends lost it all a couple of years ago and the courage she showed in the face of her terminal cancer diagnosis has been a model and inspiration to me as I move closer to THE END (whether that happens in 20 years or next week.)

This friend had had a good life. She had her share of troubles along the way – two divorces, a period of estrangement from her only son, loss of her brother to colon cancer -- but she had enjoyed a fulfilling career, then an even more fulfilling retirement when she was able to devote all the time she wanted to her fiber arts interests and especially her concern for animals. She became a cherished Humane Society volunteer, providing a home for a few hard-to-adopt cats and hospice care for innumerable old and challenged dogs.

Shortly before her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday she broke her hip. She wasn't too worried about this. It was something several people she knew had experienced and recovered from. She was still happy with her life. We actually told each other one day that on a scale of one to ten we'd rate our current degree of happiness at 8 or 9, sometimes even 10. Then the hip failed to heal. Her son (the old wounds healed some years ago) came to stay and pursue some answers with her. They learned one day that previously undetected lung cancer had spread to her bones and she had months, maybe only weeks, to live. This diagnosis involved several days of testing, and they had kind of figured out before they got it, what it would be. When they got it they cracked up. They had been SO right. The doctor was horrified and said, "You know, this is *serious*." Well, anyway, they moved on through this process with incredible fortitude and humor. The son stayed till the end, hospice was great, the Humane Society found great homes for her adopted animals and she died without too much pain and when she was ready. This, to me, was an example of courage.