

“Who Would True Valour See?”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I’m not exactly sure which supermarket it was,
but it could, of course, have been most anywhere.

A Mum was pushing her three-year old daughter along in a shopping cart.

It had already been a long day, with the mother getting out of work late
and then rushing across the city to pick up her daughter
before the day care closed.

She knew there was nothing at home to eat for dinner,
so by the store they stopped to pick up a few groceries.

As they passed the cookie aisle,
the little girl asked for Oreo cookies,
and then oatmeal, and then chocolate chip.
The mother blurted out a “no” and kept the cart moving at a good clip.

As they turned out of that aisle,
the little girl began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly,
“Now Monica, we just have a few more aisles left to go;
don’t be upset. It won’t be long.”

Soon they came to the candy aisle,
and the little girl began to shout, this time for candy.
And when told she couldn’t have any, she began to cry.

The mother said, “Monica, don’t cry—only two more aisles to go,
and then we’ll check out.”

When they got to the cash stand, the little girl
immediately began to clamour for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum

when it became clear there would be no gum purchased that night.

The mother just calmly said,
“Monica, we’ll be done in five minutes, and then we can go home.”

Another shopper in the store, who had never been far behind the mother and child, on her way out of the store, turned to the mother to pay a heartfelt compliment.

“I couldn’t help noticing how patient you were with little Monica.”

The mother suddenly got a confused look on her face and said,
“Actually, my little girl’s name is Jessica. I’m Monica . . .”

It takes a certain amount of courage just to get through the day, doesn’t it?
To rise from our beds and contend with the world.
To open ourselves to the demands of daily life,
and somehow make it through to the other side—
of the day, or the city, or the supermarket—in one piece.

Courage is so often, and maybe too often,
thought of as the stuff called for in big, defining moments:
the strength of character summoned when it matters the most.

We equate courage with great acts of heroism, of bravery on the battlefield.
The highly esteemed virtue that hopefully shows up
when the fire is raging, the bullets flying, or the storm waters rising.

And yet courage is also more common than we tend to appreciate.

There’s a great deal of courage to be found in small and ordinary moments.

Moments when we stick our neck out.
When we live from our convictions.
When we face our fears.
When we risk being honest about our shortcomings.
When we get real about who we are.

When we put something of ourselves on the line,
knowing that things might not play out exactly as we might hope,
but we do it anyway.

Seen in this way, courage isn't so much a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but, instead, a way of life.

G. K. Chesterton said that, "Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."

"A strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die."

Now, hopefully, courage will never actually demand of any of us our lives.

Yet, at the core of courage is a sure and certain demand for vulnerability, an intentional willingness to make ourselves susceptible to loss, to risk some danger to our own well-being.

To truly venture something, in hopes that something might be gained.

It's often been observed that the root of the word courage is found in the French word for heart, *le coeur*.

To live with courage is to live with heart.

And it doesn't so much matter, when it comes to courage, whether your heart is strong or weak, pure or broken, as much as it matters that it is open—wide open to the reality of the moment and to what life is asking of you.

In the 1970s, Stanley Rachman, a professor at the University of British Columbia studied both the physiology and behaviour of paratroopers as they prepared for their first parachute jump.¹

He found that the paratroopers divided into basically three groups:

There were those who were unnaturally fearless, people "who displayed scant signs of the racing heart, sweaty palms, [a] spike in blood pressure and other fight-or-flight responses [typically] associated with ordinary fear."

¹ Natalie Angier, "Searching for the Source of a Fountain of Courage," *New York Times*, 3 January 2011.

These guys “jumped without hesitation.”
They were fearless.

Then there were the handwringers,
“whose powerful fear response at the critical moment
kept them from jumping” at all.

There was nothing that could make them hurl themselves out the hatch.

And, finally, there were the ones who
“reacted physiologically like the handwringers
but who acted like the fearless leapers.”

They were able to fling themselves from the plane,
even though there were absolutely terrified.

Dr. Rachman rightly called these guys the courageous ones.

The vision of them jumping, in spite of their fears,
puts, for me, an indelible image to Chesterton’s definition of courage as,
that “strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.”

Now, I’m guessing there might be some predisposition,
born of genetics or life experience or both,
that makes it either easy or hard for a person
to jump out of a perfectly functional plane.

When it comes to courage in our every day lives, though,
I imagine we’ve all spent some time in each category:
times when we’ve counted ourselves among the fearless,
the handwringers, and the courageous.

Moments when we’ve been able
to throw all caution to the wind and leap with abandon.

Moments when we thought whatever we had to face just might kill us,
and so found ourselves frozen with fear,
clinging to whatever last shred of safety we could find.

Or those other moments, the ones marked by genuine courage,

when filled-to-overflowing with fear,
we knew we had to let go and leap anyway.

When we knew in the depths of who we are
that even if it killed us, we had to die trying.

What counts as those moments for you?

When have you been fierce and fearless?

When have you been frightened and frozen?

When have you pushed through the paralysis,
and found courage you didn't know you had?

And, maybe most important of all,
how did you get from hanging on for dear life
to letting go—for dear life?

How we answer that last question
says a lot about what we've learned from life.

It reveals whether and how we've managed to risk opening our heart
to what scares us in the sacred hope
of breaking through to the other side of fear.

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron,
in her book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*,
tells the story of a young warrior whose teacher
instructed her that she had to do battle with fear.

She didn't want to do that.
It seemed too aggressive; it was scary; it seemed unfriendly.

But her teacher [pressed] her to do it,
and gave her instructions for [how to wage] battle.

[When the day arrived,] the student warrior stood on one side,
and fear stood on the other.

The warrior was feeling very small,

and fear was looking big and wrathful.
They both had their weapons.

The young warrior[, doing as she was taught,]
roused herself and went toward fear,
prostrated three times, and asked,
“May I have permission to go into battle with you?”

[And] fear said, “Thank you for showing me so much respect
that you [even] ask permission.”

[The young warrior then boldly asked],
“How [is it that I can] defeat you?”

[And] fear replied, “My weapons are that I talk fast,
and I get very close to your face.
Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say.

If you don’t do what I tell you, I have no power.
You can listen to me, and you can have respect for me.
You can even be convinced by me.
But if you don’t do what I say, I have no [real] power.”

Pema Chodron says that she once asked the
Zen master Kobun Chino Roshi how he related [to] fear,
and he simply said, “I agree. I agree.”

There’s something to be said for hearing out our fears,
looking for the truth in their arguments,
heeding whatever wisdom they may hold,
but refusing to let them keep captive the power of our own lives
by unduly exerting their own.

That’s never an easy thing to do.

As Chodron puts it: “the advice we usually [get in regard to fear]
is to sweeten it up, smooth it over, take a pill, or distract ourselves,
but by all means [to just] make it go away.”

Rarely are we told to move directly toward it.
To face it head on, to see it for precisely what it is,

but not to give it a single bit more power than it deserves.

So often when we move toward our fears,
what we find is that there's not actually all that much, if anything, there.

Sure, sometimes fear can be a reasonable councilor.

There are things—lions, and tigers, and bears—
that we certainly from time to time need saving from.

There are times when fear is fully justified.

But, too often, fear has a poor grip on reality.

Far too frequently, our fears
have more to do with what we are afraid others will think
than they really have to do with any real threat to our well-being.

It's the thought of simply being judged by others
that we may sometimes think could kill us.

“[Courage is a] strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die.”

Courage means being willing to give something up, to let something go.

I think that kind of courage truly kicks in
whenever we decide we simply can't continue on the way we are.

When we decide we're ready to let die some aspect of ourselves
or some part of our life, because we realize that without doing so,
we're not really alive anyway.

The theologian Frederick Buechner writes that,
“The central paradox of our condition is that what we hunger for
perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness,
and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else.”²

² Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*, Harper Collins: New York, 199, p. 2-3.

My hope, this day, is that each of us might be ever more willing to summon the courage required to be known in our full humanness, wondrous warts and all.

Nadine Stair wrote in her memoirs, at the age of 85:

I'd dare to make more mistakes next time.
I'd relax, I would limber up.

I would be sillier than I have been this trip.

I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances.

I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers.
I would eat more ice cream and [fewer] beans.

I would perhaps have more actual troubles,
but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.

I'm one of those people who live sensibly and sanely
hour after hour, day after day.

Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had it to do over again,
I'd have more of them.

In fact, I'd try to have nothing else.

Just moments, one after another,
instead of living so many years ahead of each day.

I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere
without a thermometer, a hot water bottle,
a raincoat, and a parachute.

If I had my life to live over,
I would start barefoot earlier in the spring
and stay that way later in the fall.

I would go to more dances.
I would ride more merry-go-rounds.
I would pick more daisies.

I would call that courageous living.

For leaving behind the raincoat and the parachute requires a leap of faith—
faith to step out into the fullness of life beyond fear,
knowing full well that the rain will most certainly come,
and that the parachute we set aside may one day come in handy.

A wiser man once taught about this paradox:
that those who labour to save their lives will surely lose them.

And so it is that we see the evidence of this teaching all around us—
and all too often all too close to home—
as the life we struggle to hold on to slips through our very fingers,
whenever we hang on too tightly.

This world isn't made for handwringers.
So, let us live with hearts wide open,
and give ourselves over each day to the life-giving risks of courage.

Amen.