

COURAGE IN QUESTION

Courage is not courage if fear is not present. We assume courage is evident in another, based on our own meaning-making. It is not an absolute measure applied to particular behaviours. Sometimes people have commented on my apparent acts of courage. When I ask them what leads them to their conclusion, what they often reveal is that they have seen me do something that, if they were to do it, would evoke in them great fear. Sometimes fear has certainly been present for me and many times not at all. In truth, their conclusions tell me more about them than it does about me.

Sadly in our machismo society the kinds of behaviours that attract the 'courage badge' seem to be those that involve physical risk. Often it is framed as 'one' winning and others losing: defending a nation against the enemy; beating back a bully; going faster, higher, deeper, further than anyone else. I worry that these caricatures distract us from paying attention to the multitudinous ways and moments in which human courage reveals itself. What might you be doing if you were courageously facing your greatest fears? Your fear may not be mine; so what is courageous to you may not be to me.

What I have come to know in my work with myself and as a facilitator, Coach and Coach Supervisor, is that fear is part of the human condition and many people come for support to access the courage to face challenges (aka fears) they are experiencing in their lives and at work.

Over the years I have come to realise that some of our biggest fears are created by fictions (imagined threats rather than actual ones) conjured up in our own minds. It takes a different kind of courage to begin to face these – to dare to do battle with those parts of ourselves that hold us back, mistakenly believing they are protecting us? One of the problems we face, is that mostly we are unaware of what is going on in our minds and tend to project the battle outside of ourselves – it is how so much conflict gets played out between people. We blame and physically fight another rather than admit that what is tearing us apart inside ourselves, seems too terrifying to face. What could be a courageous inner battle becomes a blind fight with another person that has no hope of peaceful resolution – simply because they are not the 'real' cause of the fear.

When we finally realise this... and begin to talk about our inner lives, we begin to discover others who are also engaged in this noble, most intimate of battles. We become champions of the kind of truth-telling that literally does have the capacity for each of us to set ourselves free. When we dare to express what we see, feel and hear inside and outside of ourselves... WE cannot NOT be changed; our relationships, our world cannot not be changed. Why? Because in naming these truths – insofar as we see them – we open up to the possibility of the death of an old Self and to the promise of birthing something new.

What terrifies us is that to go on this journey, we must enter what is currently unknown to us. No amount of another telling their story will equip us for what is required: the simple act of letting go. Letting go of how we have seen ourselves, of knowing, holding on, controlling, predicting..... it is one of the most counter-intuitive, choice-ful, transforming acts in which we can engage. What makes it so hard is that in letting go, we relinquish any semblance of pretence. We stand naked before others facing them not only with ourselves but also presenting to them a mirror in which to see themselves. So often, they cannot take it and then blame us for their endemic and systemic denial. If we are not aware of the cyclical dance of accusation and counter-accusation, we can find ourselves racing back into our own undertow. Eventually, for some of us, the cost of losing 'another' and/or their 'approval' becomes infinitely preferable to drowning in our own oceans of self-denial. At this point, we finally begin to recover our Selves.

We simply cannot come to be our 'New' until our 'Old' has passed away. We do (sort of) have to die! As we confront each debilitating fear, going through the 'death-birth' cycle, we come to learn about Faith - but not in the religious sense; rather it is a faith borne out of experiencing the realisation that when we knowingly step forward into the unknown, more prescient options for being become available to us. Fight reality and we create more of what we don't want – less breath, narrow vision and reactive, defensive behaviour – a vicious downward spiral, breeding more of the same. Or we can surrender to what we resist – fear - and be delivered to what is on the other side – inspiration, authenticity, possibility, gratitude, power, love, joy, grace. Faith only emerges in the space where 'known' gives way to



‘unknown’. Faith is not certainty. In this context, it is belief without absolute proof – that we will come out the other side, being more of who we were born to be.

Yet how do we prepare ourselves for these metaphorical ‘deaths’? Make no mistake – such opportunities arrive unexpectedly, often out of context. They catch us by surprise. When they show up, we are presented with a moment of choice. If faced with actual mortal danger, we recognise our more usual options for action: fight, flee or freeze. These predictable reactions do not include the choiceful response of letting go, which might be useful when dealing with metaphorical ‘ego’ death-threats. Our best preparation is to practise expanding our capacity to notice what is happening around us and inside us. We sharpen our acuity and this helps us with our sense-making so that when those critical moments present themselves, something in us knows that it is time.....

The first ‘letting go’ or ‘surrendering’ is always the most terrifying. The moment we choose to set down the walls of defence and denial, we become open to the rushing in of all the sights, sounds, smells, emotions, possibilities, potential that have been held back for our whole lives until that moment. The tsunami that floods our inner realms comes with such power – it literally can knock our breath away, engulfing us in topsy-turvy turmoil. We may call what we are feeling ‘terror, panic, overwhelm’ and we may, in those in-rushing moments, literally and metaphorically fear for our lives. If we allow ourselves to simply BE in the midst of it all, in its own time, strangely, it begins to subside. Stillness and quiet visits and someone emerges. It is You - the same and yet profoundly different.

Perhaps you recognise something of yourself and your journey? If you do - that you are still here, having come through all that being here on this planet has delivered, is an indication of a life lived courageously.

Perhaps you are One who daily chooses to let your ego die, so that you may truly live? This is what I call courage – courage of the human spirit to meet fear every day, holding its hand, saying ‘take me with you so I may come to know you well’.

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This article is dedicated to those with whom I have the privilege to work, play, Be, love. No matter where each of us are on this journey of coming to be our most potent, authentic Selves, I thank you for being my teachers, my courageous collaborators, my companions in time, motion and emotion.