

Chapter 19

Courage: A Trait Worth Working For

I found courage in a place you would least suspect you would find it. When I was in graduate school, finishing my degree in education, I took a student teaching position in a men's medium security prison.

Our school was located on the far side of the prison. We taught in little rooms with no guard. We had alarm bells hidden under our desks. The door to the school was always locked, except when prisoners came and went, and then there were guards there. All of the men in my classes were working for their GEDs or Graduate Equivalency Degrees. None of them had finished high school. Most of the men were young, in their early 20s. They were all very motivated. It was their choice to be in school. They wanted to make a better life for themselves when they were released. Some wouldn't be released for a long time. They had committed rape, murder, armed robbery and arson, just to name a few of their crimes.

Although the men were quiet and seemed afraid to speak at first, little by little they began to work together, and to talk about their lives. They had, for the most part, done terribly in school, even though some of them were very intelligent. One of the classes I taught became particularly close. The men were so enthusiastic. They wanted to learn about everything. So after they studied their core work we did extra lessons. They studied art, music and literature. We all came to look forward to our time together in class. I made it tough for them because I knew that they could do the work. And they did.

Every morning I would enter the main entrance to the prison. The guards would check my bags and I would be escorted by a guard to the school. I had to go through six locked doors. The last door I had to go

through before reaching the main door to the school opened up to a recreation room where men often played pool. Every day, a guard would walk me across the long recreation room and ring the bell to the school door. He would wait until I was inside the school area and the door was locked before leaving.

One day the guard who escorted me unlocked the door to the recreation room, opened the door, let me in and shut it behind me. He left me in the room by myself. How could he be so absent-minded? I was terrified. The door to the school seemed to be on the other side of the world. Two dozen or so prisoners were playing pool and I had to walk past them. As soon as they noticed that the guard was not with me, they stopped playing and crowded in front of the door to the school." Just get to the bell," I thought, dizzy with fear. I couldn't reach the door. The prisoners were blocking me.

Several of the men began to make rude comments. Others cheered them on. I thought I would be dead soon. My heart beat uncontrollably and my insides trembled. "Let me pass," I said calmly. They just laughed and held their pool sticks menacingly.

Then it happened. From the back of the crowd came three of my favorite students. None of them were particularly big or muscular. They came through the crowd together and stood in front of me, protectively. "Leave Dorothy alone," one student said. "She's our teacher and she's cool," said another. The room was held in silent tension for several unbearable moments. Then the men slowly parted and let me go to the school door where I used my last bit of steadiness to push the bell. If I live to be 101 years old, I will always thank those three young men for the incredible courage they showed.

Acting in the Face of Fear

Why did those three young men take the risk they took to come to the defense of someone else? From their point of view, the chances were great that they would suffer some kind of serious consequences for what they did. They lived in a dormitory with the other inmates, and they needed to watch out for and protect themselves.

Those men took the risk they took because they felt that what the other prisoners may have done against Dorothy was wrong, and they were in a position to try to stop the upcoming abuse. They decided they were willing to risk their own well-being for the sake of someone else. There was no direct benefit for them. No glory. No camera crew to shake their hands and put their pictures

in the newspaper. But they acted like heroes anyhow—in spite of the fact that they had all made bad choices in the past. They refused to let the fear of the majority and tougher inmates control them.



What is Courage?

Courage is doing what you know to be right in the face of fear. It is having the strength to do the right thing at a tough moment. Courage takes many forms, and challenges you often—you just may not recognize the challenges. Acting courageously does not always look glamorous. You may find that you have to go against the crowd to show your courage.

Here are some tough situations. How would you handle them?

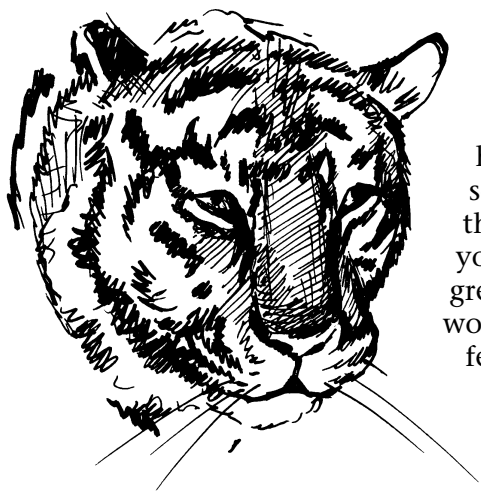
- ☉ *Your friend starts to badmouth a group of students in your school. The other people around you are agreeing with him. You don't. You know what he is saying is wrong.*
- ☉ *You are asked to help with a special fundraiser for a club you are in at school. You will have to speak in front of a large crowd. You hate speaking in front of crowds, but you know in your heart you are the best person for the job.*
- ☉ *Your friends start experimenting with drugs. They urge you to try and join their "fun." You have made a commitment not to do drugs, but you want your friends to accept you.*
- ☉ *You see a friend get in a car with someone who has been drinking. You know your parents will call the police if you tell them. You don't want to get anyone in trouble, but you don't want your friend dead either.*
- ☉ *You are on the track team. You want to jump hurdles. You have never done it before. You are afraid you won't be any good at jumping.*
- ☉ *Your best friend tells you she has an eating disorder, and it is making her sick. You know your mom will be able to help because your older sister went through the same difficulty. Your mom knew exactly what to do without accusing your sister or embarrassing her. Your best friend has asked you not to tell anyone, but you feel that her situation is desperate.*

The Tiger Tamer

Have you ever been to the circus? Isn't it fun to watch the tiger tamer in the tiger pit cracking the whip and controlling those powerful wild beasts? What a feeling it must be to be the head honcho in a ring of snarling tigers!

Think of your fears as tigers to be tamed. It takes real courage to grab hold and take charge of them. You may be afraid that they will eat you up. But the farther you run away from your fears, the more quickly they will follow behind you.

There is an expression that fears are often like paper tigers. This means that although something may seem impossible, or totally terrifying, in reality it is within your ability to conquer. A tiger can be a terrifying animal, capable of killing a person, but a paper tiger isn't going to do any harm.



What do you need courage to face? Maybe you have to give a presentation in front of a class, or you want to be a dancer but you are afraid to perform. Maybe you want to talk honestly with one of your friends about something important but you are afraid that your friend will desert you. Perhaps you want to take a tough class with a great teacher but you are afraid that you won't do well. Remember, whatever your fears are, no matter how big they may seem, you have the power to tame them. And when you face them you may find that they are only paper tigers after all.

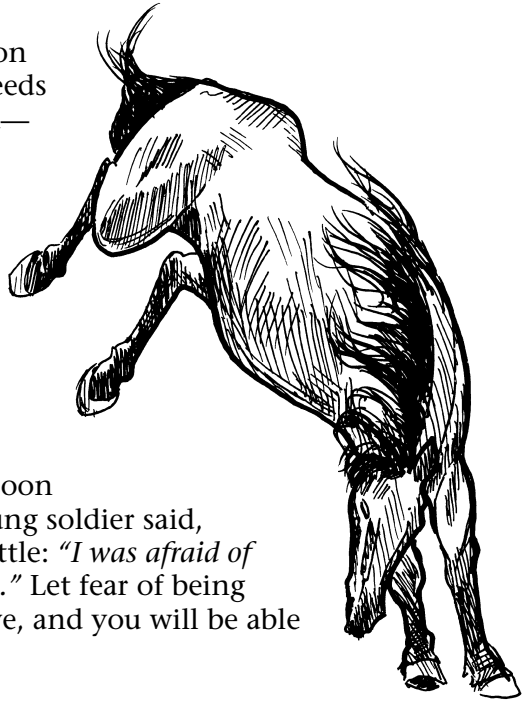
The Skittish Horse—Courage is Contagious

Maybe you have never ridden a horse, so we will try to help you imagine it. You are on the back of a big, brown furry horse. Imagine that your horse is full of fear. The horse perks his ears up at every little fly that buzzes. He jumps at any sound. He feels nervous and tense under you. He acts like he has had enough caffeine to last a lifetime. What is the best way to handle this animal?

Such a skittish horse needs encouragement—a little nudge of the heel, or a tightening of the reins. If you respond to his fear

with fear you will probably be on the ground soon. Your horse needs to know that you are not afraid—that you have taken control of your fear. Your courage will encourage him and help him to overcome his jumpiness.

It is the same with people. Courage is contagious. Fear is also contagious. If you show courage in a fearful situation, you will help others to show courage also. If you show fear, you will add to what will soon become mass hysteria. One young soldier said, after returning from his first battle: *"I was afraid of being afraid, and I was not afraid."* Let fear of being fearful be the only fear you have, and you will be able to act courageously!



It Takes Courage...

- ☞ *It takes courage to do what you know is right when doing what is right is not easy.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to be honest when it is easier to tell lies.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to stand up for what you believe to be just.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to forget about yourself for a while and help someone else.*
- ☞ *It takes courage not to run away from difficulties, but rather to stay and face them.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to be yourself around new people.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to tell the truth about yourself and others.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to say no, when saying no might make you unpopular.*
- ☞ *It takes courage to leave behind your comforts to try new things.*

Is Fearlessness the Same as Courage?

Fearlessness is not the same as courage. All courageous people have fears, but courage is doing what is right even though you are

afraid. To have courage is to recognize that you are afraid to do what you need to do, but also to have the strength and perseverance to do it anyway.

Fearlessness, on the other hand, can be very dangerous. If you are not afraid of things that can hurt you, you may run blindly into danger and be hurt. The fearless person is not smart, and may hurt himself and others without helping anyone.

What is a Coward?

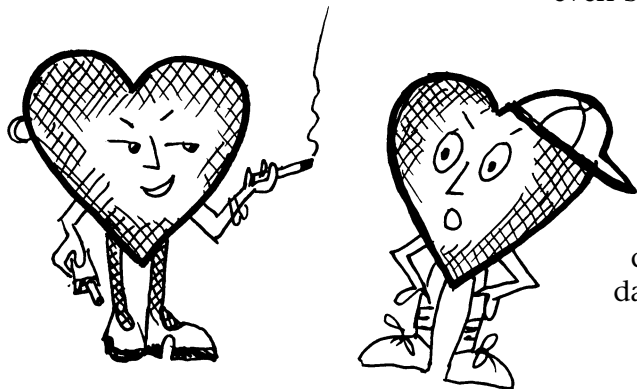
A coward is called many different names in many different languages that all basically mean the same thing: one who lacks courage. A coward sees what needs to be done but is unable to act because he is paralyzed by his fears. He may be afraid of many things—afraid of being hurt, afraid of being rejected, afraid of being laughed at, or afraid of being different. Whatever the challenge, a coward shrinks from it because of fear.

There is probably no culture in the whole world where a coward is respected. In some countries, boys have to go through many difficult tests before they will be called men in their community. Young girls also have to go through ceremonies and trials to prove that they are worthy of womanhood. Until they are able to prove their courageousness, they are still considered children.

Bad Peer Pressure—Having the Courage to Say No!

Why does this heading say *Bad Peer Pressure*? Isn't all peer pressure bad? No. In fact, some types of peer pressure are great. If you have friends who encourage you to do your best, to work hard and to go after your goals, then you are surrounded by good peer pressure. People on teams and people who work closely together to achieve the same goal often help each other to be successful—even by putting the pressure on, at times.

Then it goes without saying what bad peer pressure is. It doesn't matter if you are 10 or 50, you will always find people who want to tempt you into doing things that will be damaging in some way. You



have to make some tough choices and stick with your decisions. After all, the choices you make now will affect you for many years to come.

The first part of making a good decision is to listen to your inner voice—your conscience. If you are unsure about something, talk to someone who is older, someone you respect and trust. The second step is to have to courage to say *No thanks!* It feels good to stand up for yourself.

Small Victories Grow

It is easy to recognize courage when we see it, but hard to act courageously. If you have decided that you are going to start to stand up for what you know to be right, be patient with yourself. Being courageous becomes a habit. Start by looking at your daily life. Small victories will help you when you are faced with bigger and tougher situations. If being courageous were easy, it wouldn't be such a rare characteristic to find in people.

Jim was a big bully on our bus last year. He always wanted to copy my math homework. It made me so mad because I worked really hard on it and he just copied it from me in a few minutes. One day when he asked I just said, "No." He tried to grab my bag from me and tried to punch me but he missed and the bus driver pulled over. He actually got in trouble for jumping at me. He bothered me after that too but I didn't even care. I'll never let anyone bully me around again.

Mike, 13

Journal

How would you describe a courageous person? What courageous acts have you seen others doing? Why is it more difficult to act courageously than it is to act cowardly?



To Do

1. As a class, research courage. Find as many true stories as possible about courage. You might want to look through magazines, newspapers, the Internet and books. Bring your stories to class and discuss the qualities of a courageous person. How do you think a person can act courageously on a day-to-day basis?



2. *Make two lists, titled: Characteristics of a Courageous Person, and Characteristics of a Coward. What are the differences? Do you agree with your classmates?*



Key Ideas

- ⊙ The most courageous people show their courage through their actions.
- ⊙ Sometimes being courageous is not the glamorous thing to do, but it is the right thing to do.

**You become courageous by doing
courageous acts... Courage is a habit.**

Mary Daly