



## TRUE COURAGE

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To choose such a topic, I am compelled by my own thoughts. But I don't overlook other sources, which typically number in the hundreds. Among them are scores of books, for example, that fall under the worst of what may be called the "self-help" genre. There, values as courage are presumed achievable by easy "steps," comprised of old-fashioned aphorisms, snappy modernisms, and half-truths, as though elixirs for cures. At best are compendiums of examples; when it comes to courage, heroism in war is considered the outstanding, but other examples ordinary people under extraordinary circumstances, but considered short of dramatic or heroic.

I have no need to deny or denigrate any manner of exceptional behavior, however slight. Whatever is above average for people is remarkable, and the importance of that is taken from the fact that so many of our human kind must stretch to do even the commonplace—and more often are given to less. Courage, in all its forms and degrees, truly is a virtue, so I have no quarrel with it: I dislike mainly what is taken to be courage today. And that means I am at risk of being old-fashioned: to hold what has been a standard in my lifetime against the lives of younger people. Changing standards have little to do with whether today's standard for courage is considered right or proper by my generation, but with whether it suits the new generation. And so far, the world has survived every uppity succession of human life.

Still, I will brave the waters of subjective comparison in search of purification in the matter of courage—but already I fear I'm starting to sound like George F. Will and, if so, I should hasten to retreat.

### EXAMPLES OF COURAGE

Regrettably, comparisons of courage are now most often found in modern entertainment and in its latest manifestation: reality TV. I have to tell you, I find no reason to objectify, let alone to adore, Arnold Schwarzenegger, any more than I would the cast of Star Wars or Gone With the Wind, but many people do. Their muscles, abs and derring-do are wrapped around no courage, let alone heroism. I suggest we get closer to courage with modern athletics and rightly marvel at those who triumph in tight spots and in the face of a competitor's equal strength, but there is a prize: it is money and glory, not courage from necessity or for the sake of itself. When the camera puts me, howbeit safely, in the middle of the line during the Super Bowl, the thought comes to mind—these guys belong in the Marines, and if they will save us all from real Evil Empires, and for the pittance paid to modern Leathernecks, I will call them courageous and brave, but not until.

Instead our obsession with their celebrity makes us applaud everything they do: a day, or part of one, in a charitable act, usually arranged by their agents for purposes of self-promotion of the athlete, does indeed win our acclaim, as if no one else does such things. But others are so doing, and more of them, for nothing except that for such people, virtue is its own reward, yet done without the public's regard. Helen Keller considered it her "chief duty to do humble tasks

as though they were great and noble. The world,” she said, is moved along not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

### **COURAGE BY MANY NAMES**

Courage, clearly, goes by many names, most of which you already have heard this morning, or will hear in the next moments, whether: bravery, daring, and heroism; but also mettle, spirit, resolution—and I would throw in tenacity and risk as qualified synonyms. I love also the old-fashioned word Fortitude. Those of you who are lovers of Latin, know that it comes from a root meaning “heart,” but the Latin *animus* became the term for what was meant by courage, and was broad to include reason, thought, imagination and even opinion; also intangibles like heart, feelings, pride and passion—and went as deeply as will and purpose. So it was a muscular word that included mind, body and spirit.

A good dialogue on courage by Plato is that of Laches, something I found fun to read again as I prepared mentally for this sermon. So while I’m at it, let me share just a bit of it with you. Laches merely is one of the characters in the dialogue, in which he and another character are the concern of two other men, somewhat older, who hope to convince them.

### **COURAGE IN WAR—AND AT HOME**

The older men have a regret: their fathers were both men of war and of the community, and so engaged in “great” matters that they neglected the education of their own sons, the men in question, who became spoiled and realize, only in their later years, that age makes them unable to benefit their own sons or grandsons in achieving wisdom. Part of this wisdom would be courage, for which they choose the skill of fighting with armor as the object lesson for Laches and his friend. When Socrates joins the conversation, the older men want to defer to him, and he scolds them for it. I’ll stop there to show that the lesson of courage expanded immediately. First, the men not there, the grandfathers who were heroic in war and absorbed in community leadership, nonetheless lacked the courage of a decision that would have benefited their own sons—the decision to gift them with the same traits for which they themselves were considered great. When these sons hope that other men who are parents might avoid this mistake, at the first opportunity they try to shift this responsibility to someone else—who in turn scolds them for their lack of courage to do it themselves, that is, the courage of their own intentions.

It isn’t necessary to make a choice as to which is the greater courage: one generation has it in war and in civic leadership; another generation must have courage to avoid the perilous mistake of parental neglect. It is a waste of time to say that, well, if there is no courage in war, the nation is lost and parentage is moot; or that if newer generations are not nurtured in courage and heroism, the nation soon will be lost anyway. The point being that there is a place, and it is an important one, for courage of any sort. As Socrates put it in the dialogue: courage in war or at sea, in disease, poverty or politics, and courage against pain or fear, as well as against desires or pleasures(!)

## **UNIVERSALITY OF COURAGE**

I regret that I risk seeming to trot out an Old Boys' story, but so much of ancient history and philosophy is just that, and I hasten to say that the principles apply to all, at any time. The courage to make proper decisions seldom is easy; most of us do not live heroic lives in desperate situations such as war or important ones like civic responsibility. But make them we must. Or, we may have had parents who for other reasons left us, as children, to our own designs, if not spoiling us with too much security. Certainly Plato's dialogue on courage is not about the skills and virtues of armored fighting but about how courage is unavoidable in our private and personal lives.

There is also in this dialogue reference to the courage to listen to one's elders, against the pressure of other youth who disdain such wisdom but are among one's friends; and the courage, in regard to one's own children, to seek the best knowledge for them and not what one's adult circle of friends may think.

## **THE WORLDS OF RELIGION & WORK**

We can extend these kinds of courage in all directions. As a clergyman who has had careers and experience other than religion, I am very aware of the differences in workplace culture compared with congregations where the purpose is to seek and urge the best and highest; that is what we expect of religion and the church. It is not as easy in the workplace where co-workers, supervisors or those who hire and fire us may have sharply different values. Even when we espouse our views moderately and rationally, we can be called variously: extremists, unreasonable, do-gooders, bleeding hearts, benighted, super-liberal, bitchy or menopausal—all endearing terms we could wear with pride.

As mentioned, courage in war is the most referenced, and the first thought of when courage is mentioned. Without diminishing that thought, there are other interesting notions to be included. Aristotle used such courage in war as the real yardstick, because of the mortal danger under which it had to be manifested. What is more interesting is that in such circumstances some people simply have it and some don't, and it is surprising who is who at those times. There is a point where it is not a matter of training or other preparation.

This arose in Plato's dialogue in reference to animals and it was determined that they cannot be said to have courage, however admirably they fight or struggle. Socrates also forced his discussants to think whether sticking to a battle that is hopeless is in truth "foolish" and thus lacking in both wisdom and courage. He also weighed the idea of whether a soldier, knowing he had greater numbers on his side and a lesser equipped enemy, could be considered truly courageous.

## HEROIC AGES

Aristotle was a great admirer of an earlier generation of warriors that existed some 1000 years before his own time. He wrote of war in that earlier time so esthetically that later translators chose words like noble and admirable where Aristotle really had spoken of it as beautiful and sublime. But in his own day, soldiers were long past fighting for glory and gain but in defensive positions to protect the city: clearly he missed a more chivalrous age and even longed for another one. As mentioned in an earlier sermon, Thomas Aquinas was a devotee of Aristotle, and used his philosophy to save the Roman Church by abandoning Plato. And he shared the idea of courage in war as a glorious thing. But, like Aristotle, the day of Christian martyrs dying heroically also was a 1000 years before Aquinas lived. The Church no longer was persecuted but had settled down into human struggles with every day hardships common to the time. Aquinas saw that and enlarged his idea of courage to threats on one's life and well-being, however mundane they might be.

## AN EQUIVALENT OF WAR

In almost another 1000 years, William James wrote (1896) his call for a "Moral Equivalent of War," in which young people would be drafted to other service that would harden them and make them appreciate life more than their ease and privilege otherwise could make them—and here we have somewhat the circumstance of Plato's dialogue again. He didn't advocate fighting with armor, however, but to serve (and I quote) in "coal and iron mines...freight trains ...(on) fishing fleets in December...dish-... clothes-... and window-washing [how about that?]. . .road-building ...tunnel-making...foundries...frames of skyscrapers ..." all "to get the childishness knocked out of them" so they could "come back into society with healthier sympathies and more sober ideas." How can you not like a dad like that? He concluded by saying, "They would have paid their blood-tax (and) would be better fathers and teachers" of the next generation. And you thought William James was a smart fellow, didn't you?

Certainly there are ongoing "cold warriors" in our time who worry that our way of life is making soft our young, who may not be able to protect us if we are attacked by the hardened toughs of North Korea or some such. They forget that they themselves hardly are examples, enjoying the same pleasures while insisting that the young forego them. We are also working hard to make conflicts as painless as possible, with push-button war—forgetting that the victims are going to feel something much like they did in olden days. Still, that is the human hope, to flush our enemies out of sight where rats in the sewers will take care of them without our having to see, worry or otherwise be concerned.

## OTHER COURAGE

The reason Stephen Crane's book, *The Red Badge of Courage*, is so remarkable is that it was written by a very young man of barely 25 who never had experienced war. Somehow he could perceive the mind of a young soldier trying to find or keep a sense of reality during bloody conflict. Then the book's hero faces and survives his own fear, not to mention his cowardice and

goes on to discover courage and humility. None of us would prefer to get those virtues that way, or wish them on others, but we admire them as qualities and have to ask ourselves: how else do we achieve them? How else does one become a remarkable human being without the desperation and struggle for survival that may create the empathy, sympathy and understanding for others, as well?

If we can dip back into some important subtleties, maybe it will help. Courage, since ancient times, generally had to do with the “mental or moral strength to...persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty.” Much of the time our lives are more in need of, e.g., “mettle,” the “ingrained capacity for meeting strain or difficulty”—things that test our “mettle.” “Spirit” is another more useful word for us, the “temperament (that) enables us to hold our own or keep up our morale when opposed or threatened”—our spirits are “unbroken” by frustration or failure. “Resolution” refers to “firm determination” to achieve something, and “tenacity” implies a “stubborn persistence and unwillingness to admit defeat.”

### **SPIRIT AND METTLE**

I have known unemployment in my time, and it was occasioned by my refusal to continue in occupations I considered a waste of time or in which I could not morally remain. Sometimes that isn't the nature of the work itself, but the culture of the company or its owners that may be unethical. I did not, and still don't, consider that courage on my part, for I was younger and much of life still was before me. But when we are happy and find fulfillment in our labor, and to lose it not because of our or others' doing, but, e.g., a downturn in the economy and a shift in the workplace away from our skills, or at a time when our age becomes a liability, it is a struggle for our sanity, mental stability, and perseverance. That is when the old courageous virtues of mettle, spirit, resolution and tenacity are needed—and valuable. Truly it is a “war” for our souls and well-being and a time when one needs friends and community as much as, well, yes, courage.

So let's settle down now, and perhaps appreciate what others mean and not take their wisdom as mere platitudes. What does it mean to you that Aristotle said that moral excellence is a result of habit; that by doing “just” acts we ourselves become just; and brave by being brave?

### **AFFIRMATIONS & LETTING GO**

Dorothy Thompson added to the notion of courage as overcoming danger by adding that we must continue “to affirm inwardly that life with all its sorrow is good; that all is meaningful even if beyond our understanding; and that there always is tomorrow.” She added that it is only when we are no longer afraid that we begin to live.

An old favorite of mine, Erich Fromm, asserted that “creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties.” And Margaret Chase Smith declared, remarkably, that the “moral cowardice that keeps us from speaking our minds is as dangerous to this country as irresponsible talk. The right way is not always the popular and easy way. Standing for right when unpopular is a true test of moral character.” Again, that is a notion as old as Plato's dialogue on courage.

Our Unitarian forebear, Susan B. Anthony, said “cautious, careful people, always to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about reform. (One) must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation, and publicly and privately... avow their sympathy with despised and persecuted ideas...and bear the consequences.”

I found a wonderful suggestion in the course of this exploration. It is in William Miller’s book on the subject of courage, that we may let courage keep all reference to the physical and “daring” side of the matter, and embrace instead that old word fortitude as the more “mental and patient” side of the encounter with danger—and, I would submit—the burden of ill-being that confronts modern life. Physical danger and its desperation is obvious, but there are, as Miller says, “moral thresholds” that too are “high and hard,” and they have been referred to earlier. Our lives still take self-determination, he notes, faced as we are with the prices of the self-indulgence that surrounds us, and seductive promises as well as lack of accountability. “The decision to cross thresholds must be made daily,” and to do so requires “arduously acquired and faithfully maintained habit”—which I would say is a virtue.

Courage however, he concludes, is “not quite the right name for it, but fortitude is...and needs to become the defining virtue” of our kinds of lives and times.

May we so live.

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For courage and its synonyms, I deferred to definitions found in Merriam-Webster.

Plato’s dialogue, “Laches, or Courage,” was written in 380 BCE.

Stephen Crane lived 1871-1900 or twenty-nine years; *The Red Badge of Courage* was written 1895 when he was in his mid-twenties. Never a soldier, even his experience as a war correspondent (the Cuban insurrection of 1897 and the Greco-Turkish war, came after publication of the highly acclaimed novel.

William Miller’s *The Mystery of Courage* is published by Harvard University Press.

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