

The Changing Face of Courage

January 9, 2011

I was grateful that the Honey Dew donut shop in Melrose MA, was nearly empty. I was in a rush and the no-line register, visible from the window, made this unauthorized stop a true "go for it" situation!

There was only one other individual waiting to be served, an elderly woman with a prominent uncomfortable looking hunchback, whom I had seen feeding the pigeons and seagulls in her yard, on my way back and forth to visit family and friends during the Christmas Vacation. Her home, sandwiched between a white concrete office building and a nature food store, was reminiscent of the sturdy white farmhouses characteristic of the 1890's.

I had wondered about her with great interest as I remembered her daily routine from years ago.

That morning as I waited behind her as she scrambled through her purse to pay the cashier for her coffee and donut, I leaned forward with the \$2.98 cents, she owed, and wished her a Merry Christmas. She pushed my hand away with a vehemence that caught me off guard and snapped, " No... no... no...I don't accept charity, I am independent and I can take care of myself..." She paid for her own coffee and stomped off to settle down at a table in the back of the room to enjoy her morning snack, alone.

The cashier who was familiar with her routine, smiled and said, "I knew she would do that..." and then added, whispering, " She is the most courageous woman I know, to walk everywhere with that hump on her back and she never lets anyone help her."

Somehow the word courageous just did not seem to fit. Yes, she had made her way to the coffee shop, had a significant debilitating deformity and certainly her efforts under difficult circumstances deserved much recognition. However, I suspected that her abrupt response to my offer was more angry bitter and mistrustful than courageous. She spoke to no one,

snapped at everyone in her path, and rebuffed someone who could have become a friend. No I don't think courageous was the right word.

Funny, I had not heard the word courageous used in a long time. I left the donut shop wishing I had the time to sit and talk to that woman, although I knew she probably wouldn't let me. The details of how she become so bitter, and fearful of others would probably always remain unshared.

As I thought about this lady's life and all the unanswered questions, which arose in my mind, I also thought about the many facets of courage and what it means in this day and age.

We think of courage as applying to one who has exhibited an extraordinary selfless act at the risk of great potential physical harm to him or herself... an act of bravery commonly attributed to firefighters, police officers, rescue personnel and soldiers on the battlefield whose job it is to put themselves in harms way for the benefit of others.

But I wondered how many other forms of courage have become part of our culture, that have gone unnoticed or have been overlooked.

There were several incidents that come to mind, two occurred during my employment at a funeral home, so I began to take an inventory of acts of courage that I would call extraordinary.

Several years ago at the funeral for an elderly man with a large extended family, his granddaughter entered the funeral home with her daughter in tow. She could not have been more than eight or nine and she was wearing a navy blue suit, a white shirt and a black necktie. The wife of the deceased, her great grandmother, approached the girl, looked at her with a disapproving scowl on her face, turned to her mother and said harshly, "I hope she outgrows that," and walked away.

The child looked down at her attire and in a very audible voice said to her distraught mother who seemed about to reprimand her, "I love Gran but I'm not changing my clothes. This is who I am." What that little girl did, was truly courageous at great emotional risk to herself and to those like her.

Later on in the week I was talking with a woman whose mother had been buried a few weeks before. She told me what she had gone through legally and emotionally to enact the 'do not resuscitate' clause that her mother had verbally expressed to her but had not written it down.

As the story unfolded and she shared with me the ensuing ostracism and legal implications levied by her siblings for carrying out her mother's wishes, I began to realize that very few people in this day and age would label what she had done as courageous.

There may be a nasty court battle over her act of kindness and respect for the wishes of her mother. In the end there will remain only a winner and a loser, a legal precedent and court docket number to add to the record books.

Today courage wears a very different face. We seldom think of the child whose expression of their deepest self is revealed for all to see in the clothing he or she has chosen to wear as an act of courage. Rather she has become a spectacle for social or religious commentary. We seldom honor the actions of one who has fulfilled the last wishes of a dying parent spouse, lover or child as a hero. Instead we wait for the courts to decide whether there is innocence or guilt.

In re-thinking what courage means in this time, I have indeed met so many truly brave individuals, the most courageous of whom have never been recognized for what they have done. Sometimes just the opposite.

I met a Catholic Priest, who against the orders of his Bishop presided over the funeral of a Gay man who died of aids and who let his partner share equally in communion. I met a truck driver who drove an 18 wheeler for 47 hours straight across country to be present at his father's funeral against the orders of his boss who wanted him to pick up his load in Kansas instead. He will probably lost his job and some even called him a fool.

I met the Uncle of an 18 year- old boy who was murdered by his best friend for disagreeing with him. The Uncle stood between two rival gangs on the porch of the funeral home I worked at and told them that tonight there will

be no more violence and he stood there with no weapons or reservations about his mission for that evening. His presence assured that there was no trouble, in spite of his feelings about his nephew's killer.

I know the mother of two children whose husband is away for two to three weeks a month earning a living, who has redesigned her life to find as much joy in raising her children as possible, never finding an ounce of negativity in the fact that much of the parenting is done alone. I know a woman who struggles with a debilitating illness who goes to work everyday and never takes advantage of the fact she doesn't have to work.

I know teachers and administrators who struggle to teach children whose parents are too busy doing drugs, or finding ways to take advantage of a crippled system of family support, to bother making sure their children have clothes to wear or food to eat. The determination of these educators, who are committed to giving these kids a better view of love and life are rarely called courageous.

What a difference it would make should we see courage in a new light. How much better our lives could be if we looked around and really saw the new age struggles for what they are, tremendous acts of emotional courage in the face of a society that would prefer to leave that assessment to the social, political or religious powers that have managed to take the place of our own conscience.

I guess that's the difference between then and now. Much of what we do, of how we handle life and all its quirks has little to do with the enormous physical encounters of yesterday, rather it is an emotional one, an exercise in finding the joy of living under great emotional duress. It is a practiced lifestyle requiring an extraordinary kind of ongoing mental perseverance that is very different from the acts of courage we once knew. And at times courage is not an act of obvious physical prowess it may even mean doing nothing, but using words to change what could potentially become a threat

to oneself and those around us. I recently came across a story that resonated with me.. and I quote

“Sophia, a 5-year old girl, walks out on the diving board. Her mom is in the swimming pool below encouraging her to jump. Sophia's legs are shaking. She tells her mom that she doesn't think she can do it. Sophia's mom offers more words of encouragement. Sophia plugs her nose, closes her eyes and jumps in the pool. Did Sophia act with courage?”

Another anonymous author offered this piece of advice: “Don't die without embracing the daring adventure your life is meant to be. You may go broke. You may experience failure and rejection repeatedly. You may endure multiple dysfunctional relationships. But these are all milestones along the path of a life lived courageously. They are your private victories, carving a deeper space within you to be filled with an abundance of joy, happiness, and fulfillment.

So go ahead and feel the fear - then summon the courage to follow your dreams anyway. That is strength undefeatable.”

The public definition of what it means to be courageous may seemed to have changed but the extreme inner resources required to do the right thing even when there is no one out there who is going to appreciate how much strength it took, defines the meaning of a truly courageous act in the 21st century.

Eleanor Roosevelt said...

" You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, " I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." You must do the thing you think you cannot do.... Today, to pursue, to endure to enter into the challenges of this life with determination and joy and to keep a loving communion with those around us”.. is the changing face of courage.

So be it Amen.

