

## **BECOMING COURAGEOUS: A Life-Long Process**

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*This article is adapted from Ruth's dissertation, [Becoming Courageous: A Search for Process](#). The original research provides some of the theory and inspiration for Ruth's career and life management consulting process with her clients. If you are interested in more specific guidance to access your capacity for courage, send your request to [ruth@ruthschimel.com](mailto:ruth@ruthschimel.com).*

**"Courage is rightly deemed the first of human qualities . . . because it is the quality that guarantees all others."**

~ Winston Churchill ~

### **Introduction.**

Reports of heroes who stand up to terrorists or brave burning buildings to save victims seem the essence of courage. But you are unlikely to even be in such situations.

In fact, these examples of physical courage can be discouraging because few people have the training to act effectively. Nor do such stories show the marvelous mystery of how individuals became able to take action.

Take heart! This article will help you access your own capacity for courage. You will also find ideas for encouraging others.

As implied above, perhaps it's difficult to realize your capacity because you compare your behavior to what others have done. Instead, understanding *how* a range of worthwhile acts unfold, the choices, struggles and experiences that lead to what seems instantaneous, can have greater use. These very processes of daily life provide bridges to becoming courageous. Examples are:

- starting and sustaining something ambitious and worthwhile
- caring for others under demanding circumstances
- dealing with personal and professional problems
- learning new ways to see and do things

### **Look behind the act to what occurs within.**

Whatever your age, perhaps this 52-year-old woman sounds somewhat familiar. "I had to learn who I was. You have to go through the pain I've discovered too. You have to fail, you have to make mistakes to learn and grow and have a better appreciation of what life is all about."

Here is a man of 34: "I recently discovered I have a singing voice, a hidden talent which I never dreamed. Not in a million years. And there it is. I joined this group because someone in the congregation encouraged me to, someone who heard me sing."

In other words, becoming true to yourself is a never-ending process. It includes developing intuition, judgment and insight from trial and error. It also involves seeking assistance and applying good guidance.

As the two vignettes above show, you can start to learn about the process of becoming courageous by listening to people's descriptions of how they deal with challenging situations, whether their actions seem conventionally heroic or not. With this in mind:

- Be alert to stories about how individuals work through conflict with loved ones and people in power.
- Hunt for other processes of personal and professional development in novels, autobiographies and biographies.
- Watch movies and television programs that deal with internal and external struggles that inspire authentic and worthwhile acts.
- Talk to friends, relatives and colleagues about their challenges and how they dealt with them.

To come closer to home, catch the echoes of courage in your own daily choices. Revisit the seemingly ordinary, sometimes tortuous steps you took to work through something difficult. And notice how you address situations that threaten your security and stability. Then you will probably find out how you have already gone about demonstrating your capacity for courage — or postponed doing so.

### **Insights from the past.**

This accessible way of seeing courage as a process of becoming is based on original research with unexceptional men and women from 40 to 60 years old. For centuries before my small study, however, many recognized thinkers have shown that being courageous is both more complex and available to you than dramatic, heroic acts captured in newspaper headlines, Internet and television stories.

Students of the past believe that myths of the hero actually teach about the struggle within individuals to be true to themselves. Greek philosophers pointed to the ethical, conscious nature of courage: the means must be reasoned out and executed thoughtfully. A Christian theologian noted the importance of fortitude or the capacity to endure adversity or pain.

Even an expert on war thought that expressions of physical courage were not as important as "the courage before responsibility, whether it is before the judgment seat of external authority or of the inner power, conscience." To him, courage was "the feeling of one's power."

Yet it is the derivation of the word itself that tells more clearly what to cultivate in order to develop your capacity for courage. The Latin *cor* means heart. In medieval English, corage was the heart as the seat of feeling. A current dictionary continues this theme; the center of courage is heart, "the vital center of one's being, emotions and sensibilities."

In today's use, heart is often associated with the capacity for sympathy, compassion or generosity. People with heart have inner strength. A person considered lovable or loyal is a dear heart. Heartfelt comes from the very center of oneself. And hearty means complete, open, exuberant, unequivocal and vigorous.

Keeping all these considerations in mind, the deeper significance of courage and the clues to your process of becoming courageous lie in a web of seemingly paradoxical ideas. The rich fabric includes:

- emotional vulnerability
- character development
- responsibility
- compassion
- vitality
- openness
- wholeness
- inner strength

The process therefore involves being aware of your inner self and probing your powers. To do this, practice placing yourself at the vital center of courage by being open to your own possibilities and experiences. This can be something as mundane as asking yourself and then telling people you trust what you truly think, feel and want.

### **Cultivate openness.**

An authentic, satisfying life will be fostered by the willingness to remain open and be vulnerable. "Hang in there" can be a useful mantra to gird yourself.

To develop this willingness, leave space in your mind, heart and life, space for ideas and feelings, exploring and experimenting, space to get clear about who you are now and who you want to be. This aspect of becoming courageous involves *not* always taking action, *not* filling every minute of life with activity. In other words, just as you begin to feel uncomfortable in a situation and want to flee probably is when you need to stay put, listen and say what you mean.

Yet when you allow space for introspection, you may also sense a void looming. You could disappear down a rabbit hole or discover something unpleasant. The lack of clarity or feeling of disorientation produces anxiety.

You're not sure of what to do. Or you don't know how to do something or what will happen. The ambiguity feels disquieting, even oppressive. You may even feel scared or

immobilized.

If you have the patience to go through this discomfort by moving toward appropriate, responsible action, your true voice and preferences can begin to emerge from what seems dark and empty. To support your momentum, reach for faith that the unknown will give way to clarity about your real capacities and preferences in life.

Support yourself in this process by acknowledging and developing further your authentic strengths. As you do this, demonstrating your tangible skills and abilities will foster intangibles such as vitality, imagination and hope. You'll see your capacity for courage emerge and grow.

### **Courage defined.**

Integrating the ideas above into a definition, you can see now that the *process of becoming courageous involves the willingness to realize your true capacities by going through fear, anxiety or suffering and taking wholehearted, responsible action*. It has emotional, intellectual, spiritual and ethical aspects.

Use this process as a catalyst. It will give you access to your actual and potential strengths, the skills and capacities that you need to create a meaningful, rich life. Whether you have generations, decades or years ahead of you, what better time than now to renew your appreciation of yourself?

You have choices. You can let things happen to you. Or you can try to influence what is going on in your life. You can take the initiative, however modestly. As you immerse yourself in the process, you'll select who you want to be and what you want to do. Daily life will provide a range of opportunities from modest to dramatic, opportunities to moderate or let go of habits that thwart progress and to show dormant strengths.

By expressing yourself accurately and optimistically, you are likely to serve your own needs better as well as make contributions to others. With that can come joy and unexpected pleasures.

### **How to start?**

Besides listening to the lessons in your own and other's stories and your voice within, what can you do to start to realize your capacity for courage? The good news is that there are as many ways to proceed as there are unique rhythms, skills and values, possibilities, preferences and passions. Take what you already know about yourself and open doors to new information; then explore ways to synthesize the rich complexity of it all.

You can start at either or both ends of a spectrum. Begin with what you love and/or with what you fear. Whatever you decide, though, start gently and recognize that initial experiences might have to be repeated several times before they yield their value — and you and others become comfortable with what develops.

- Identify your unique values, skills, passions and interests; imagine how they can connect and be integrated.
- Engage in activities or start to follow dreams that you have always pined to experience.
- Ask individuals who know something about you to provide concrete descriptions of your unique capacities and accomplishments.
- Read about people who have followed paths related to your interests in periodicals, books and online.
- Join groups and organizations whose members share your interests, preferably where you'll be appreciated for who you are and what you offer.
- Take short courses and workshops that allow you to practice something you like rather than sit passively.

Over time, integrate information and intuition about your rich complexity into accurate descriptions of who you are and what you want; test and modify them until they fit you well and become viable. Then take some reasonable, enjoyable steps to start to transform this mosaic of your true self into a vision for your future worthy of your potential and powers.

Or maybe you don't yet have clear ideas or focus about what truly engages you. Begin, then, by scanning what's around you, noting the patterns and themes that attract you.

- Read a few in-depth articles that are languishing on a pile or in a file you never seem to get to.
- Ask several people whom you respect about their interests.
- Take a range of short workshops and attend talks and demonstrations on varying and engaging topics.
- Go to different sections of bookstore and library shelves; if you are generally comfortable with mysteries or World War II books, try psychology, health or historical novels.
- Choose one or two books or articles to read that take you into new, intriguing worlds.
- Do something that stretches you a bit or that you would not ordinarily consider.
- Ask people with empathy, insight and imagination about what they could see you doing, not in terms of job titles, but a few sentences of description.
- Attend to themes in newspaper headlines and Internet sources you would read if you had time.
- Identify patterns in how you use discretionary time or would like to use it.

In sum, experiment and pay attention to what arouses your curiosity or excites you. Remember anything new may seem foreign and somewhat inaccessible at first. To become more at ease, give yourself some time to dig a little deeper into whatever aspects that appeal to you. Throughout, avoid harsh self-judgment and perfectionism; applaud all progress.

Another approach is to tend your own backyard. Think about the quality of your important relationships. What might enrich them? What needs to be addressed or

changed that relates to your own behavior? Ask people you trust if nothing comes to mind immediately.

Also look at the work you do. Are you no longer surprised or challenged enough by what you do or how you do it? If so:

- Name several new subjects, skills and processes that would interest you.
- Explore a few ways you can vary your routines.
- Get assistance from a variety sources that offer new learning opportunities.
- Volunteer for a project outside your usual realm.
- Consider what can you let go to open time for yourself. There has to be at least one responsibility that can be postponed.
- Start exploring new kinds of work that build on your experience or hark back to an unfulfilled dream.

You'll no doubt notice that the common theme among all these suggestions is stretching yourself. Go beyond what you know, what's comfortable, what's predictable.

### **Enter your zone of fear and anxiety.**

Whatever makes you feel fearful or anxious is often a good cue for where to begin to develop your capacity for courage. Perhaps examples are:

- speaking to groups and audiences
- starting a new project in which you're not already expert
- addressing conflict
- meeting people who are different
- being assertive with health care professionals or other individuals on whom you depend
- preparing for possible disasters
- letting go of connections with individuals, groups, organizations and titles that no longer fit your values or goals
- connecting with a new person or entering a new situation

In each situation, explore what you can responsibly do or say to enter your zone instead of avoiding it. Imagine how you'd handle it. In other words, plan incremental action rather than take impulsive leaps.

Also, identify people you trust and respect who can help you figure out a useful course of action and support you in doing it. Find partners. Consider how you will prepare and practice before you act. What will you say and do? Often the negative fantasies around what will happen are much worse than the actual experience.

Once you allow yourself to proceed and actually go *through* whatever fear, anxiety or suffering is entailed in taking wholehearted, responsible action, you will likely start to feel exhilarated and empowered. If that doesn't happen, at least you'll be learning and

preparing yourself for future challenges and opportunities. At worst, you'll identify the barriers to action you need to address.

### **Life-Long Strategies.**

Throughout the life span, and especially in the second half of life, there are proven strategies for strengthening and enriching your capacities. Here are three that also foster good mental health and a fulfilling life.

- **Learning continuously:** This can include formal programs and informal projects, professional and personal efforts. Reading, studying, conversing, thinking and writing all contribute, as do being involved in the arts that attract you.
- **Staying socially involved:** Consider your connections with individuals, groups and organizations. How can you improve their quality and range? How representative are they of your interests and values?
- **Accepting and dealing with ambiguity:** How apt in today's world. You can feel safe within your particular situation, yet be anxious about the unknowns that affect it. One challenge and opportunity is to create and enjoy as secure an environment as possible, while being alert and preparing for the unexpected.

### **It's the journey.**

As you probably know already, understanding and appreciating yourself as well as acting to meet your goals is a life-long process. Substantial progress does not usually flow easily or directly. At times you may fly around in circles before reaching a more comfortable perch. Periods of calm and stasis occur too.

Along the way, perceptions of yourself and the environment will change. Some limitations can be tamed. New doors may open, bringing hope and variety to everyday situations. Whatever the immediate outcomes, your efforts will enhance your self-respect and confidence. And the results of incremental work related to becoming courageous will bring satisfaction and authentic success. What better way to use your most precious, nonrenewable resource, time?

To prepare, invest in yourself. Then assist others. Choose and use the keys to becoming courageous in order to discover and express the unique powers that have meaning to you — and make the life you want.

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