

*Kathleen Fischer. The Courage. the
Heart Desires. Spiritual Strength
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Chapter Eight

The Core of Courage

There is a spirit that pervades everything, that is capable of powerful song and radiant movement, and that moves in and out of the mind. The colors of this spirit are multitudinous, a glowing, pulsing rainbow.

—PAULA GUNN ALLEN

SOME YEARS AGO, while having lunch at the nursing center where I worked, I looked up just as one of our newest residents reached the end of the cafeteria line. Balancing his lunch tray with its assorted selections, Tony stopped to survey the large dining room filled with tables of strangers. Watching him, I recalled the many recent upheavals in his life. He and his wife were longtime residents of an Italian neighborhood in New York City. Then one night she suffered a massive stroke that completely changed their lives. Tony had to sell their home of forty years and move to the West Coast to be near the couple's only daughter. Now his wife lay speechless and immobile in a nursing home, and he lived in a nearby retirement apartment. As Tony paused, I saw fear flicker briefly across his face. Then he drew back his shoulders, moved to a nearby

No single definition captures the complex reality we call *courage*. It turns out to be more like a mosaic than a single stone, with diverse elements contributing to its composition. It is a diamond whose multiple facets become visible only when examined from many angles. Courage involves vulnerability, faith, love, honesty, empathy, wisdom, endurance, and trust. Taken together, these components reveal the core meaning of *courage*. Contemplating them can renew our own courage and expand its place in our spiritual lives.

Awareness of Our Vulnerability

It may seem strange to begin a discussion of courage with a term like *vulnerability*, which calls to mind weakness rather than strength. But courage is not the absence of fear, or the pretense that we are totally adequate and impervious to threat. I remember a friend, a survivor of domestic violence herself, who was asked to give a talk on violence against women. She agreed to do it and then found herself filled with dread. What was this resistance? She went to a place of quiet and let the fear come in, asking what it looked like and what it said to her. She discovered that what fed the fear was her sense that she was too emotional, unhealed, and lacking in professional credentials to dare address the issue. After praying about it, she decided to deal with these insecurities head on and go forward with the talk.

Creative action always includes the risk of failure. If we are unwilling to fail, we will have to avoid many precarious things: marriage, having children, settling conflict, working for justice. Courage is often stitched together from

table, and asked to join the group for lunch. Tony's quiet courage moved me deeply.

During more than two decades as a therapist and spiritual director, I have often witnessed the courage of ordinary people. A recently widowed woman forces herself to get out of bed in the morning, although she dreads the waves of emptiness and longing she knows will sweep over her. An adult son initiates a conversation with his father whose anger terrified him as a child, and he finds that he can now hold his own.

People change careers, speak up in class, stand up for causes, get married, raise children, and walk with dying friends even though they are scared. Grace upholds them in ways they could not envision, and in the process they discover spiritual resources they do not believe they possess.

Courage enables us to brave dangers and move through obstacles, endure suffering or lift ourselves out of it. It may benefit self, or save another from peril or even death.

Although we admire physical courage—extreme sports, athletic feats, daring adventures—what we most want for ourselves is that quality of spirit called *moral courage*, the virtue by which we act with integrity in spite of fear. Moral courage reveals us at our best, and it calls to those depths in us desirous of such graced humanity.

What we most want for ourselves is moral courage, the virtue by which we act with integrity in spite of fear.

those moments when we wish we had possessed it and instead found ourselves wanting. We know well the fragility of all we love and hold dear, including life itself. Courage does not demand that we deny this awareness.

Paradoxically, fear and courage coexist. In fact, the people who are most vulnerable—the sick or poor, citizens of a war-torn region, those living under a dictator—often exhibit the most extraordinary courage. Courage manifests the gospel paradox of finding strength in weakness, and life in death: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). New Testament images of jewels hidden in clay pots, marvelous plants emerging from buried seeds, and ordinary faces harboring glory suggest that acknowledging fear, grief, and death simultaneously nurtures hope and courage. Faith is a way to grapple with vulnerability.

In *Fear and Other Uninvited Guests*, Harriet Lerner describes how this spiritual truth about acknowledging insecurity makes psychological sense. She names an essential aspect of bravery: “You have to keep showing up!” Lerner uses her own fear of flying as an example. No amount of information could convince her that when she flew the plane would not crash and leave her children orphans. What finally helped her was taking action. She bought airline tickets and flew. Finally, she says, she had to fly so often that her fear disappeared: “Experience gave me comfort where reasoning had failed.” If we have a real phobia or panic disorder, it is important to get treatment. Otherwise, what we need, Lerner believes, is more experience with the

activity we dread. Avoiding an activity such as public speaking, a dinner party, or a family gathering simply increases the conviction that the threat is real. The fears we evade shrink our heart and mind.

In contrast, recognizing our vulnerability without succumbing to it results in inner peace and a sense of personal integrity. In *Strength in Weakness*, her collection of writings by eighteenth-century Quaker women, Gil Skidmore notes that choices for courage pervade their lives in small, quiet ways—and the gift of peace follows. Skidmore relates how a Quaker woman named Mary Alexander had a strong call to speak at a prayer meeting but failed to do so. This failure left her in great distress of mind, and she prayed for another chance to remedy it. It came at the next meeting, after a friend spoke: “As soon as he sat down, I stood up and began with the before-mentioned petition: ‘Thou hast given me a south land; give me also springs of water; and after commenting a little upon it, I sat down full of peace.’”

It is hard to face our own fragility, and the limits of existence itself, without falling into discouragement or despair. These limits take us into dark corners of the heart. The twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich recognized this dilemma, defining faith as the courage to accept acceptance. In *The Courage to Be*, Tillich says that courage becomes possible once we make the final act of trust. We accept the fact that God loves us, and this enables us to be ourselves even when faced with the threat of emptiness, condemnation, or death. The gift of being accepted by God, just as we are, frees us from anxiety. In fact, he considers the very

possibility of courage to be rooted in this grace of ultimate trust in God.

Knowing What We Love and Value

Tucked inside the word *courage* lies *cor*, the Latin designation for heart. Courage involves honoring commitment and living from conviction, even if we are afraid. In fact, the only thing powerful enough to overcome fear is a goal fed by the heart's desires. Since courage draws upon the heart's resources, it matters what shape our heart is in. What will we discover in that deepest core of the self when we are frightened and still must do the right thing? Will the center hold? The answer lies

not so much in trying to pump up our moral muscles as in becoming clear about what we love and believe and integrating those values more fully into our lives. Whom and what do I love?

What does that love ask of me? Courage follows from this sense of what really matters and in turn reinforces it.

A story of bravery on behalf of nature illustrates how such habitual honoring of one's truth stands up when tested. In 1962 Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, one of the most influential and controversial books on the environment ever written. In it she documented the alarming consequences of widespread and indiscriminate pesticide use. Drawing on her fourteen years in the Fish and Wildlife

Service, Carson exposed loopholes in federal environmental regulation and efforts to cover up pesticide hazards. Her meticulous research revealed widespread wildlife death, fish kills, the looming threat of cancer, collusion between academic science and industry, and the silence of the medical profession. Carson selected only the most substantiated examples and painstakingly checked the accuracy of her findings. She knew the book's foundation had to be unshakable to withstand the storm it would engender.

The pesticide industry immediately waged war against Carson and her book, first trying to prevent publication and then withdrawing financial support from media outlets that reviewed it positively. Corporate scientists ridiculed and undermined the book, even claiming it would bring about famine and death. Though Carson was a technically trained scientist writing with scientific rigor, critics charged that *Silent Spring* was too poetic and called it soft science.

In spite of the aggressive crusade waged against it, *Silent Spring* stirred the world. Subsequent hearings on the environment led to formation of the Environmental Protection Agency and development of legal grounds for banning DDT. Every country in which it was widely read held hearings on environmental legislation. In April 1970, Earth Day was celebrated. Even cartoons portrayed the book's impact; a grasshopper prays, "God bless Momma and Poppa . . . and Rachel Carson."

How did Carson summon the courage to take on so many formidable opponents? She did not set out to be a heroine. In fact when she first became aware of the

problems created by the new kinds of pesticides, Carson tried to get others to write about them. A private, modest person, she did not seek the spotlight. Nor did she intend to start an ecological revolution. In her acknowledgments for *Silent Spring*, she says she knew she had to write the book when a friend's letter pulled her attention back to issues that had long concerned her. Troubled by the threat to the web of life, she refused to turn away from the truth. Instead, she dedicated her talents to making the message known. As

she completed her book,

Carson wrote to her friend Dorothy Freeman that she would be unable to happily listen to the song of a thrush if she had not done all she could to prevent this assault on all the birds and other creatures, all the loveliness of nature.

We cannot know with certainty if our

courage will hold up as Carson's did when it was tested. But we can take the small steps that gradually make us courageous. Each time we refuse to betray our most important values, each time we face down a fear that tells us we cannot do what we must, strength grows. Unlimited opportunities for courage occur every day. The person who can bring herself to undertake a nonviolent protest for peace may struggle to confront difficult issues with a roommate. No

matter. We walk the path of courage we can manage at any given time, a journey with God's Spirit, largely hidden from others' view.

The Capacity for Empathy

The major religious traditions—Indigenous, Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic—all agree on the importance of compassion. Though described in different ways, the ability to empathize with the other, to enter into that person's experience, is a key sign of spiritual life. We are to walk in another person's moccasins for a time, to realize the oneness of all beings, to recognize the similarity of all fears, suffering, and needs. Confucius summed up this golden rule in about 500 B.C.E.: "Do not do unto others what you would not have others do unto you." He taught his disciples to practice *shu*, "likening to oneself." This meant recognizing what gives us pain, and then refraining from inflicting similar suffering on others. Jesus makes such empathic love part of his greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

Empathy inspires the courage to act on behalf of others. In *The Hand of Compassion*, Kristen Renwick Monroe profiles women and men who risked their lives to save Jews during World War II. She concentrates on only five among the many survivors and rescuers she interviewed: Margot, the daughter of a wealthy German, who moved to Holland, where she worked to save Jews in spite of being arrested several times; Otto, a German living in Czechoslovakia who joined the Austrian resistance movement and saved more than a hundred Jews before ending up in a

concentration camp himself; John, a Dutchman who organized an escape network that took Jews to safety in Switzerland and Spain; Irene, a Polish nursing student who hid eighteen Jews in a home where she worked; and Knud, an inventor who helped with the rescue of 85 percent of the Jews in Denmark.

As Monroe listens to their stories, searching for insight into what drove them to engage in such acts of courage, she discovers that what most deeply motivated them was their sense that "we are all human beings." The value of caring for others was so deeply integrated that it became the underlying structure of their identity. They did not simply notice the suffering of the Jews; it became a moral imperative that required them to act. Margot describes the empathy that enabled her to cherish the humanity in others: "You don't walk away. You don't walk away from somebody who needs real help." In Otto's words: "The hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason." Their actions seemed to them to be the natural and automatic thing to do, even though they knew there were others who did in fact turn away. As Irene says: "I must take the right path, or I would no longer be myself."

Studies other than Monroe's reveal some of the same characteristics she found in people we would call heroes or heroines. Those who rush to aid someone trapped in a burning car, plunge into freezing waters, or scale mountains to rescue the injured cannot imagine acting otherwise. They do not think they are doing anything unusual. Anybody would do the same, they say. Asked where they

found the courage to do what they did, they reply that it was the right thing to do, that they were raised to help someone who needs help, that what matters more than any material possessions is love of others. A young woman who saved a friend from drowning puts it this way: "For a second I was like, 'I gotta get out of here.' Then I thought, 'No, I can't leave my best friend out there to die.'" As with Monroe's subjects, these women and men extend their care beyond personal acquaintances to all human beings. One rescuer comments: "I have a sister; I have a mom who lives in that area. Even so, I would have done it for anybody." Another says: "If I didn't try to stop her and she killed somebody, I might as well have been driving that car."

In the New Testament we read that to lay down your life for a friend is the greatest gift. But to do it for a stranger is even greater. Without always giving a religious name to it, these courageous people exemplify the universal spiritual principle of compassion for all beings. Such acts have power to expand a community's spiritual horizons. Even those not called to the same risks find in these larger acts of compassion inspiration for their own daily courage.

Sometimes an act of mercy on behalf of others exacts the full price of discipleship. There are those in every age who offer their lives out of love for the poor and oppressed, who die trying to bring about justice and dignity. On December 2, 1980, North American churchwomen Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazez, and Jean Donovan were murdered in El Salvador. A small plaque marks the country road where they are buried: "Receive them Lord

into your Kingdom.”

These women died like Jesus because they struggled as he did for others. They were willing to relinquish all they held dear, to share in his cross, if it meant that others could live with greater abundance. They did not seek death but met it with immense faith and courage. Their witness, like that of many others, lights the way for others who walk much less risky paths of courage.

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The Spirit's Gifts of Wisdom and Endurance

Courage drinks from the gifts of the Spirit that flow freely through creation. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo/Sioux scholar, names this creative spirit who enabled her Native American people to endure into the present in spite of assaults on their being, and to thrive beyond bitterness and rage: “She is the Old Woman who tends the fires of life. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection.” These titles evoke the transcendent power, the intelligence, that pervades the earth and blesses and challenges all peoples.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, this divine Spirit is called *Sophia*, or Wisdom. Sophia pervades the cosmos, dwelling with all beings and ordering all things. She brings about a powerful connectedness and teaches the ways of justice and courage:

*And if anyone loves righteousness,
her labors are virtues;
for she teaches self-control and prudence,
justice and courage;
nothing is more profitable for mortals than these.*

— WISDOM OF SOLOMON 8:7

Sophia offers us the strength to hope against hope, to endure in spite of pain and struggle, to reshape the present configuration into a better one.

The New Testament reminds us repeatedly of the gifts poured forth by the Spirit. These graces come in such abundance that they tumble over one another in Paul's letter to the Galatians: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). When we find ourselves jaded or discouraged, cynical or depleted, it is to this torrent of the Spirit's refreshing waters that we turn. It nourishes many kinds of daily courage: caring for a loved one with a long-term illness, holding on day after day though we are tired of our obligations and commitments, hanging in there with the demands of raising a child, refusing to let ourselves plummet when we feel empty or down, calling for help when we are tempted to take the drink that will blot it all out again. The Spirit supports courage for the long haul.

In the thirteenth century, the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas included courage, or fortitude, among the four cardinal virtues (the other three being prudence, justice, and temperance). The word *cardinal* comes from the Latin term for *hinge*; these virtues form the axis on

which the moral life turns. Viewing courage as a cardinal virtue names something we instinctively sense: we simply cannot get through life without it. It is not just an isolated spiritual quality; we need it to successfully cope with all the situations we confront. For this reason, the fourth-to-fifth-century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo called courage "love readily enduring all for the sake of what is loved."

In their studies of grassroots whistleblowers and activists in the United States, Israel, and the former Czechoslovakia, Myron and Penina Glazer laud the courage of ordinary people who expend themselves in various causes. Though the subjects of their research do not usually face a life-threatening situation, their battles require a long-term investment of time and energy. When these courageous people proclaim the dangers of serious occupational and community situations such as hazardous waste sites or unsafe automobile designs, they must be ready to face criticism of their competence and integrity, isolation from one-time neighbors and coworkers, and even division within their own family. How do they overcome fear and intimidation? They turn their anger into an emotional resource, using its energy to fuel their action. They draw on faith in the justice of their cause, convinced that the price of inaction is greater than that of action. For some, religious beliefs become an explicit factor in their protest. A psychiatrist who exposed conditions at a county mental health facility in California explained that the requirements of Torah, for him the essence of true Judaism, left him no choice:

"There is a saying in the Talmud that 'He who saves one life saves the whole world.'" This belief sustained the psychiatrist's actions, since he believed there was a strong likelihood that other people would die from the conditions he was protesting.

Meditations on Courageous Biblical Figures

Faithful courage defines many familiar biblical figures. Meditating on their lives concretizes our exploration of courage; it is a helpful way to deepen our own engagement with it. One form of such prayer is to listen imaginatively, in and through the biblical accounts, to what they might say in their own words about the wellspring of their courage.

The Prophet Jeremiah (1:1-19; 31:33): "I had a monumental sense of inadequacy. Mine may be one of the most public and problematic cases of performance anxiety you will ever see. When God said to me, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations,' I thought for sure it must be a case of mistaken identity. I pleaded: 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' I had no gift for oratory, and yet I was being told to deliver a word of God that no one wanted to hear in the first place. The task had failure and ridicule written all over it. Everything in me rebelled against it. *Get someone else, I thought.*

"Yet God promised to be with me, to give me the words I needed. That made all the difference. God knew

me better than I knew myself and saw layers of desire and potential talent I did not recognize. In truth, the word burned within me, ready for release. You probably know my story. All that my people of Israel had built up lay in ruins about us. Devastation and despair gripped us. We were hopeless and afraid. I was as frightened and in as much pain as anyone else. But with God's help, I was able to offer a message to my people, a word filled with both challenge and comfort. Yes, we had to change, but this was not the end of all we cherished.

"What I learned about courage is this: the grace comes when you need it, and it creates a highway through situations that appear impassable. Looking at events from the outside and ahead of time gives no indication of the strength that will be there in the actual doing of a deed. We can plead and beg internally to be spared, but trying to ignore the call simply does not work.

"Frankly, after being pushed by the divine I soared. The poetry was there when I needed it, and at times I couldn't believe my own Spirit-filled eloquence. On my lips, God's word came to life: 'But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.' The message I delivered was clearly meant for all those in similar straits."

Mary of Nazareth (Luke 1:26-56): "Let me tell you what it is like to watch someone you love on a collision course with destruction. My son, Yeshua, walked just such a road. I saw

the twisted faces of those who hated him, heard their agitated murmurs. I knew that it was only a matter of time before he would be killed. Yet he never veered from his mission: My own faith sometimes darkened, for I did not always understand my son's ministry or the ways of his God. It was my love for Yeshua, not a clear sense of what he was about, that enabled me to stand firmly with him even to the foot of his cross.

"To stay the course and follow him in what sometimes looked like folly, I had to burrow deeply into that Wisdom I trusted from the first announcement of Yeshua's birth. My courage floated then on the wings of the Spirit of God. I turned to that place in my heart when I saw the writing on the wall about his future.

"I remember how afraid I was when it became clear I would give birth. Because my pregnancy was outside the boundaries of law and custom, I knew I could be accused of adultery and stoned to death. As a young girl, I saw that happen to a woman, and the scene terrifies me even now. What reassured me was the angel's reminder: 'With God nothing will be impossible.'

"I needed support. I spent time with my cousin Elizabeth, a woman older and wiser in God's ways. I turned to my Jewish foremothers — Sarah, Rebecca, Miriam, Judith, Ruth. I wrapped their stories of passion, courage, and devotion around me like a cloak, drawing on its warmth and safety.

"I was no stranger to the ancient cruelties people visit on one another, but in my heart I also held the divine pledge of redemption: 'His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.' Faith in this Mercy sustained me when my courage faltered. I was surprised over time to find myself turning into a bold and daring woman and disciple. I was ready to be both mother and sister to all who are urged by the same Spirit of God who strengthened me."



Chapter Nine

Courage and Fear as Contagious

We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.

—MARTIN BUBER

IN DECEMBER 2004, Wangari Maathai became the first woman from Africa to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel committee honored her conviction that peace depends on our ability to sustain the Earth. Thirty years ago, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, through which she mobilized poor African women to plant thirty million trees. Besides providing fuel, food, shelter, and income for the women's families, the trees became symbols of both the struggle for democracy in Kenya and peaceful resolution of conflict.

The trees planted by members of Maathai's Green Belt Movement witness to the way we seed courage in one another. Emboldened by her leadership, the women of Kenya brought about change tree by tree. They planted them in Nairobi's Uhuru Park, at Freedom Corner, and in other parts of the country to call for a peaceful transition to