

# Fear, Fidelity and Fortitude

## Virtue: Fortitude

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People tend to think that being courageous is synonymous with outward displays of heroics. When they think of fortitude and courage, they envision a firefighter or soldier. Rarely does a person think of a recovering alcoholic or an abused woman, and even less so a 20 year old girl with post traumatic stress disorder.

Giovanni da Legnano pondered fortitude, questioning whether it was a moral or cardinal virtue. His idea was that it is, “courage which makes us behave aright in the face of fear and bravery in the dangers of war.” According to Jasonne M. Grabher in his article about Legnano, “By ‘war’ here, Giovanni refers not only to armed conflict, but also to the ‘war’ fought internally in every individual soul.”<sup>1</sup> Fortitude isn’t just what a person does in public, but is also who they are and the struggles they face mentally. To me fortitude is a combination of what Legnano wrote and how Photographer James Nachtwey described the Nepalese in an article by Nancy Gibbs in which he said, “The Nepalese true character was revealed—their strength and fortitude, their equanimity and unshakable resilience, their innate sense of acceptance and, even with everything gone, their spirit of hospitality.”<sup>2</sup> Nachtwey had been photographing the Nepalese after a severe earthquake that had destroyed a majority of their homes where he has the opportunity to witness their strength. Fortitude is the courage to fight internal battles while having the strength to let it change you for the better, not the worse.

Fortitude is a virtue I try to incorporate into my life every day, though it can be difficult. I’ll lie in bed, the tiny voice in my head whispering “You’ll never amount to anything, why even get up? No one will miss you. They all hate you anyway.” Other times it’s a panic that something is wrong, I don’t know what, but there is something and it’s going to get me and nothing and no

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<sup>1</sup> Grabher, Jasonne M. "Making Practicality A Virtue: Morality, Law, And Fortitude In Giovanni Da Legnano's De Bello." *Journal Of Religious History* 37.4 (2013): 517. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Oct. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbs, Nancy. "Strength And Fortitude." *Time* 185.19 (2015): 4. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 Oct. 2016.

one can stop it. I'll be afraid to unlock the door, terrified of the danger lurking on the other side. I'll walk halfway to the bus stop, then turn back to jiggle the doorknob 20 more times to make sure it won't open. Most people will say that they can't remember when their depression started, or that they've always been anxious. While that holds true, I can pin point moments in my life that increased my symptoms.

My mom married an abusive man. She didn't know it at the time, but eventually this man would beat her in front of her own child. My father wasn't a good man, he cheated on her with my uncle's wife and effectively destroyed two marriages in one family. If that wasn't enough, he projected his guilt onto my mother and accused her of seeing other people. I remember him chasing us around the house, throwing furniture against the walls of our tiny apartment. When we had finally escaped and locked ourselves in my mother's room, he would unscrew the doorknob and yell at us through the hole. The climax of it all was on a night when I was five years old, my mother was sitting with me in the bath trying to get my fever down. He grabbed her by the hair, and swung her face first into the sink while screaming "I know you're cheating on me, admit it." He dragged her into the kitchen, and after hearing my mother scream, "Just do it already!" I followed. Dripping wet, not stopping to get a towel, I watched as my father held my mother against the wall by her neck with one hand, wielding a knife in the other. I remember the panic I felt, understanding that this was not something a loving couple would do and yelling "Daddy, don't!" Instead of stopping, he picked me up as he continued to threaten my mother. He held the knife in a tight fist, his knuckles white from anger, pointing it directly at her chest. She just repeated, "Get it over with." I cried, and reached out for my mom to hold me, and she did. As soon as I was in her arms, he dropped the knife and we walked away.

In a sense, I've taken after my mother more than I would like to admit. My first boyfriend was an abuser, not physically, but mentally. He convinced me I was worthless, lowered my self esteem to a fraction of what it had been, and cut me off from my friends and family. For four years all I really had was him. I became obedient, and did everything he wanted without him ever having to tell me. I fed him as he played video games so he didn't have to stop, and I bought him presents when he didn't think I was worth a penny. He started to cheat on me to prove that he didn't need me, but I needed him. No one else would love me anyway, he told me, so I might as well deal with it. I don't know when it happened, but a part of me broke. I lost the hope that he'd change, or the absurd idea I needed him to be happy and I ended it. I knew that I had better things to do than to live my life for someone who didn't think I deserved a life of my own. I've even written an article about it for the campus paper, to hopefully raise awareness about domestic abuse and its lingering effects.

In an article titled "Fortitude in the Face of Adversity," Ashton E. Munoz and Michelle E. Pence write that "various factors underlying resilience, such as 'finding meaning and purpose in conflict and change'" help to form better problem solving skills, while other factors inhibit resilience.<sup>3</sup> This means that fortitude is not always the result of living a tumultuous existence. Some people turn into the people that abused them and become the villain in someone else's story, while others just end their torment or try to numb the pain. Sue Grand spoke about one case in particular where a woman who had been abused couldn't accept empathetic reactions because to her they were a "poison cookie." She had schizoid and manic responses to caring, and

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<sup>3</sup> Munoz, Ashton, and Michelle Pence. "Fortitude In The Face Of Adversity: Resilience As A Moderator Of The Developmental Pathway From Childhood Exposure To Violence To Dating Violence Perpetration." *Journal Of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 9.2 (2016): 167-177. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 25 Oct. 2016.

as a result could not form intimate relationships.<sup>4</sup> This proves that fortitude represents itself in varying degrees depending on the individual. While she had the strength to realize she needed help, she was also trying to defend herself from a perceived threat.

I see fortitude in my mother, who not only spent 15 years raising me as a single mother living paycheck to paycheck, but in the face of death, dared it to take her. My mother wasn't afraid to die, she was afraid of what would happen to me. Out of all the negative traits I've inherited from both sides, her courage is the one positive that makes up for the rest. It's important to me, because without it I wouldn't be sitting here today. I'd still be in a relationship with someone who made me feel like I was less than dirt, a person who ruined me on a mental level. I would have given into the urge to walk off the Verrazano, the nagging voice that creeps in during quiet moments while I'm standing on a train platform, sitting on a beach or just crossing the street. Without my mother's fortitude I would have killed myself 100 times over but because of it, whenever my brain says "You're suffering, just end it," I have the strength to say "Yes, but I can do better." It's a constant hurdle. I'm not going to lie and say that I always win my battles. There are mornings I call in sick because I can't bare the thought of being fully alive, or have panic attacks in the middle of campus because I saw someone who looked similar to the ex boyfriend. But I keep moving, and as far as I'm concerned that's enough. The best way to describe it may be what the writer Emil Dorian said, "Strong people alone know how to organize their suffering so as to bear only the most necessary pain."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Grand, Sue. "On Love And Fortitude: A Relational Discussion Of "Poison Cookies"." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 23.5 (2013): 608-612. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 Oct. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Dorian, Emil, and Marguerite Dorian. *The Quality of Witness: A Romanian Diary, 1937-1944*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982. Print.

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