

On the Virtue of Courage

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The notion of virtue seems to have fallen by the wayside in modern American society. When people are confronted about their moral beliefs, about what kinds of things make a person a good person, they often respond with popular platitudes instead of any considered position of their own. This degeneration of thinking about the virtuous leads us down a road of existential confusion, where there are no clear guides to how to approach one's encounters with the world and others, as well as how to interpret people with any level of moral sophistication. The plight of the aimless individual is captured nicely by Emile Durkheim, the sociologist, when he writes, "One does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or -- which is the same thing -- when his goal is infinity." Personally, I've struggled tremendously in this regard, and this has manifested itself in a lack of a willingness to confront the world with conviction, which in turn has made me both morally untethered and lacking in the courage to stand for much of anything.

Courage is a meta-virtue. What this means is that courage allows us to exercise other virtues. Maya Angelou said, "Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently". One can believe in justice, charity, and love, but without the courage to make these virtues manifest in one's behavior, they remain mere abstractions living within the confines of your mind and doing no good for the world.

I've had a quite bumpy relationship with courage. Having lost faith in the religion I was raised with a couple of years ago, I found myself with no clear guide as to what to do with myself. I

lacked the courage and guidance that belief imbues one with, and this led to me spending an inordinate amount of time wallowing in self pity, and considerations of ending my life. After a time, I began to notice how many of my friends were also, while not stuck in the melancholy I was, unmoored to anything that told them how to act as they went through life. Even for the few things I did believe, I wasn't able to muster up the strength to stand in defense of them. When I was witness to the abuse of others, I didn't have the strength of character to stand up in defense of what I, at least in my mind, knew to be right. Backing down became a way of life. It took a recognition of the need for courage to move me out of that mental space, and to begin to stand in defense of the well being of my fellow human beings.

With courage, one can stand in defense of the good. Without courage, one can only be a helpless bystander to the evil of the world. I've been working on developing courage this past year or so, and, for me, this came through staring down my inner demons. I became attentive to the times I would back down from a situation, and I made myself a rule. Every time I backed down, I had to admit to myself that what I had done was wrong. This made it harder and harder for me to give excuses for my behavior. And with time, I began to back down less. In the beginning, this was difficult, but with time it came easier and easier. And in the process I learned a lot about myself and social pressure. My life has been enriched tremendously because of it. I no longer hide behind other people's beliefs and thoughts. I no longer dance around what I think and why I think it. And I no longer allow myself to, at least not close to as much as I used to, witness injustice without doing what I can to prevent it.

Many people believe in good things, and if they had the courage to show it, many problems would be mitigated. When you see someone mistreating someone else, do you just watch in disapproval or do you stand alongside the person being mistreated? Do you merely condemn bad things from behind a keyboard or are you willing to do so in person as well? Standing up to the things that need to be stood up against requires courage, and often a lot of it. I've lost friends over the past year due to my shift in this regard, but I've made friends too, and these new friends aren't the type to cower when they see an injustice. Such people are societies bulwark against evil, as Edmund Burke put it, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing". A lack of courage stifles ones development, and it certainly stifled mine.

The reason a lack of courage hinders development is that when one does not have courage, they are not able to honestly explore their interests. They develop all sorts of excuses for backing down, and do not have the power to face down their challenges. The world is better when people have courage, and it is not only better for others, it is also better for oneself. My own life has expanded due to courage, because so many doors are open that weren't before. My relationships are richer, and my inner life is less fragmented. This has not made me less afraid though, for courage is what we do in the face of fear, not the elimination of fear. Or, as Nelson Mandela said, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." Nelson Mandela is a paragon of someone with courage, and serves as an example of the good that courage can bring about.

Unfortunately, there often appears to be an uncomfortable aura hovering around talking openly about moral virtue. Virtues are often difficult to speak about without coming off as sanctimonious. This is because once an ideal is postulated, we appraise ourselves in relation to it. So, in a very real sense, discussion of virtues indicate the many ways in which we could improve, and this can seem to be moralistic because it judges us. But we do care about virtue, and we must be able to speak openly about it. John Steinbeck pointed out that “We value virtue but do not discuss it. The honest bookkeeper, the faithful wife, the earnest scholar get little of our attention compared to the embezzler, the tramp, the cheat.” Perhaps a way to encourage open discussion of virtue is to be more attentive and encouraging of those who act virtuously.

Thanks to the incorporation of courage into my life, I’ve learned a number of things. I’ve learned that everything is a little less scary when you look it in the eye. I’ve learned that others, and I, are better off when I stand for what’s right. And I’ve learned that hiding from my calling is just a way to ensure personal stagnation and emotional disintegration.

References

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