

Courage: My Neighboring Ally

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October, 11th 2019

The virtue of Courage has truly served me well throughout my life. It has given me the necessary push to keep moving forward no matter how hard life may get at times because there's always the chance that things can turn around for the better. Last month on September 9th, I turned 30 years old. In the midst of celebrating, I took some time to self-reflect and I started to cry tears of joy realizing how far I have come. If I am being honest, it did not hit me until recently just how much the virtue of courage impacted my life. From birth, I was diagnosed with a disability called Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita (AMC), a condition in which multiple joint contractures develop in multiple limbs of the body and can impact their function and range of motion. One of the causes is due to a lack of fetal movement in the womb which can cause the contractures to appear and develop (Kalampokas et.al, pg. 1). Due to this condition, I am unable to walk and therefore my primary means of traveling and getting around is utilizing a motorized wheelchair.

If you were to ask me "Was there a time in your life where you felt your courage was truly tested"? Honestly, it has been tested many times to the point that I could probably write a novel about it. Nevertheless, two moments immediately come to mind. The first moment was back in junior high at I.S.211. In society, some individuals view having a disability as something to be embarrassed about or to be ashamed of. It was during this time in junior high where I encountered some of those individuals.

At I.S. 211, I came across kids who rejected having me as a friend because of my wheelchair. It was really hard to comprehend at the time because in elementary school I didn't have this problem. I was polite to everyone and most, if not everyone was friendly to me and showed me respect. During my senior year of junior high was the worst because I had some classmates who didn't care much about my feelings, but instead were more concerned looking

cool in front of their friends. I can still remember the countless jokes and insults that were hurled my way being in a wheelchair and that I couldn't walk. They would even go as far as making insults about how my mother was to blame for it. I would throw insults back hoping they would leave me alone, but that didn't work and instead made it that much worse.

I would be lying right now if I said that it didn't get to me at all. Moreover, it would be an even bigger lie if I said I didn't cry about it at times. Honestly, there were moments where I wanted to see if I can transfer out of that class or better yet that school entirely, I was miserable at that point. My family was incredibly supportive and would have looked into those options for me if I really wanted them to. But something inside me didn't want to give in and let them win with me hiding or going away. My family definitely had their concerns, but ultimately trusted and respected my decision to finish out the school year.

When I saw them again, I decided to try something new where I wouldn't respond to them or give any reaction to it. It was easier said than done, but I did just that and eventually they stopped. Granted, it doesn't always work out that way so I felt very fortunate that it came to end.

This is where having courage was vital because having to face those kids day in and day out was one of the hardest obstacles I've had to overcome. It was when I realized that not everyone is looking to be your friend. In life, you are going to encounter people who would rather see you fail than seeing you become the best version of yourself (Potgieter). That was definitely a harsh reality to discover at age 13. However, reality at the same time can be a great teacher. It can help us learn, although gradually and at times painfully some of life's valuable lessons (Urban, p.9).

As I got older, I realized that courage isn't always about making the decision to stand up to someone. Sometimes, it is about making a tough decision that will inevitably affect the rest of your life. It doesn't matter whether or not you have a disability because in those situations we are all the same. It can be scary when having to make those kinds of choices. That's where having the courage to make that tough choice becomes essential. For those reading this, you might be thinking, "He must be talking about college, right?" Surprisingly I'm not, but I will get around to college. The decision I'm talking about in this moment was whether or not to pursue further surgery.

I was scheduled to have surgery on my left leg back in 2007. The intent of the surgery was to help increase the mobility in my legs so that I can develop a greater sense of independence throughout my life. The plan was to start with one leg and then do the other afterwards. Prior to the surgery, I kept thinking "Is this really the best thing for me?" "Will my life really improve for the better after having this surgery?" I also thought "Will I regret not having this surgery later on in life?" Ultimately, I decided that I didn't want to wonder "what if" and to proceed with the surgery as planned. I had to wear what was called an External Fixator, a device designed to repair one's bone fractures for at least two to three months. Truthfully speaking, it was the most physical and excruciating experience of my life.

After having it removed, I wore a cast for about a month and then began physical therapy shortly after which lasted almost two years. However, decision time was approaching regarding surgery for my other leg. My left leg had gotten stronger where I could stand on it but what I noticed was that it could no longer bend anymore and I didn't have much movement through my toes. I had to weigh the circumstances of being able to stand on both legs, but no longer potentially having the flexibility of movement within them. I also thought about the idea of

putting both myself and my family through this again. In the end, I decided not to go through with further surgery. It was not an easy choice to make, but I needed to have the courage to make it because no one else could. I knew that no matter what decision I made, my disability was not going to go away and that I would still need the use of my motorized wheelchair.

I enrolled at Brooklyn College in 2010 and pursued my B.A in Psychology. During that period I realized that as a student with a disability, I needed to become my own self-advocate when seeking reasonable accommodations for my classes. It is no longer my parent's responsibility. This pushes myself and other students with disabilities to become our own self-advocates. Making that transition can seem daunting at first, but change is inevitable and being able to adapt is crucial (Potgieter). It is imperative that we find our voices as individuals and that we are not afraid to use it.

Today, I use my voice to serve in several leadership roles in CUNY. For instance, I proudly serve as the Chairperson for the CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities (CCSD), the Vice Chair of Disability Affairs for CUNY's University Student Senate (USS), and as a Co-Chair for CUNY SPS' Abilities and Resources Committee. In these roles, my intent is not only to contribute throughout the CUNY Community, but also to demonstrate that people with disabilities have the ability to be productive members of society in general. However, the stigma of disability that society places on us will have to ease first (Shapiro, p.6).

The author Mary Anne Radmacher is known for the following quote: "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, I will try again tomorrow" (Forck, 34). The important thing is to keep trying regardless of the outcome. If I can inspire someone, disability or not after sharing these experiences, then that is what really matters.

It is about striving to be better each day, influencing others to do the same, and knowing your self-worth. It took time for me to discover my own worth, but because I had the courage in preventing anything or anyone define it for me, it has helped shape me into the person I am today.

Works Cited

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