

“On the Road with *Inspiring Courage*”

by Barbara Bonner

Some of the great pleasures of publishing a new book are the conversations with readers that occur on a book tour. My new book, *Inspiring Courage*, came out in mid-April, and I spent a good part of the following two months giving talks at some of this country’s great independent bookstores, having many such conversations.

Book tours are often portrayed as sorry affairs consisting of long flight delays, uncomfortable motels and either spotty or unappreciative audiences. Since there is little to do and less to say about the flights and motels, let me focus on the audiences. In all the venues in which I spoke, the audiences were, without exception, completely engaged by the subject and eager to enter into fascinating conversational explorations.

I wrote *Inspiring Courage* as a companion to my first book, *Inspiring Generosity*, which came out three years earlier. Using the same format, I set out to interweave poetry, inspiring quotations and original stories in a design that would draw readers in for a fresh look at this quality. With both books, my hope was to redefine each quality in ways that speak to our everyday lives.

While I was in the process of writing the new book, I had no idea that we would all be living in the rather unimaginable national catastrophe that now confronts us, in which the courage of each and every one of us matters every single day, in ever-unfolding ways. The book is not political, and the response was not generally focused on the political arena. But our political chaos seemed to embolden audiences to explore and develop their own individual courage. And, too, there is something quite powerful about a group of strangers coming together in the rather intimate yet anonymous setting of a small bookstore with a common interest in exploring courage. I often witness what I call a “lightning-bolt moment,” in which the subject matter strikes a very personal and highly resonant chord for someone and leaves them standing in a new place.

When I was speaking at the wonderful Elliot Bay Books in Seattle this spring, a young woman stood up during the Q&A and shared with the audience a revelation that she had just experienced. She had suffered from severe OCD most of her adult life, a fact that she had kept completely secret from friends, colleagues and acquaintances—in fact, everyone except her husband. But that night she stood up and shared her secret with a room full of strangers, in an attempt to tap into a deep inner courage that she had only just realized she possessed. She left the evening determined to be increasingly open about her condition.

On another occasion, a young woman who had enjoyed my first book came to my talk about courage at the legendary Northshire Bookstore in Manchester, Vermont the night before she was to undergo a frightening surgery. I’m sure that her hope was to find inspiration not only in the new book but also in the camaraderie of the audience.

I learned of the story of a young female physician on an airplane who noticed that her seatmate was engrossed in the book, and found herself reading over his shoulder. Soon they started up a conversation, and she revealed that, as the sole female member of a hospital emergency department, she found herself continually dismissed, overlooked, talked down to and actively discriminated against by her male colleagues. She had struggled for years to find ways to ignite her personal courage to take on her colleagues in effective ways without caving or backing down. She left that flight determined to buy the book and chart a new course for herself.

A distinguished dean of a major university wrote to me the week before the book's publication, asking if there were a way that she could obtain an early copy of the book in order to take it with her to Boston, where she was about to run the Marathon. She wrote me later that it was the only book she took, reading sections over and over as she prepared for what would be a dramatically difficult but ultimately successful race.

Audience members on other occasions have talked about searching for courage as they confront illness, pain, loss of loved ones, unemployment, fear of financial insecurity, complicated relationships. While far from being the fount of wisdom for which they yearn, I am often able to point to particularly inspiring stories, poems or quotations that might speak to them personally.

I wrote both of these books as offerings to the public, in service to the power of the subjects on which I was writing. Coming in close contact with those whose lives have been so profoundly touched by my very modest words is an enormous gift, for which I will always be grateful.