

Redefining Courage

By Barbara Bonner, author of *Inspiring Courage* (Wisdom, April 2017) and *Inspiring Generosity* (February, 2014)

One of the great privileges of writing my new book, *Inspiring Courage*, was having the opportunity to meet, interview and read about hundreds of people whose lives have been defined by remarkable courage. And one of the greatest challenges of writing this book was narrowing these stories down to the very best 14 to share with my readers.

It takes courage to live a human life. We all have varying degrees of courage. For some, it is buried deep in their hearts and psyches; for others, it is a bright light that guides every step. As Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön teaches: “Deep down in the human spirit, there is a reservoir of courage. It is always available, always waiting to be discovered.”

Courage can be a choice we make every day—often in very surprising ways. While we are used to equating courage with a dramatic, life-defining event, for many, simply getting up every day and putting one foot in front of the other is an immense act of courage.

Throughout my life, I have been drawn to courageous individuals, to people who stand up to be counted, who speak truth to power, who take risks and feel joy in living boldly. One of the more fascinating aspects of courageous lives is that they are invariably quite different from the common stereotype of fearlessness, bluster and bravado.

The truly courageous live in alignment with their truest values—leading lives marked by commitment, authenticity, determination and a willingness to take on tremendous risk for what really matters to them. And they are invariably humble in the face of their courageous acts, nearly always saying, “There is nothing special about what I did. Anybody would have done it. I was just doing what was put in my path.”

As befits the Latin derivation of the word (“cor” meaning “heart,” later “coeur” in French and “cuore” in Italian), courage is an activity of the heart, not the head, which is probably why the courageous are so often unable to explain their acts of courage. These acts don’t seem logical or linear. They have a sense of pouring forth from deep inside.

To be courageous is not, as is often thought, to be fearless. In fact, quite often the opposite is true. The courageous are usually intimately acquainted with fear. They have simply walked through it to the other side, are not swamped or sidelined by it. The great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh encourages us to “invite in our fears, for if we look at them deeply we discover that our fear cannot control us.” Or, as Georgia O’Keefe wrote: “I have been absolutely terrified every moment of my life—and I’ve never let it keep me from a single thing I wanted to do.”

For many of us, nothing increases our courage more than understanding just how much it enhances life. As Anaïs Nin wrote: “Life shrinks and expands in proportion to one’s courage.” And Annie Dillard: “You can’t test courage cautiously.”

I believe that, of its many qualities, it is love that is the most defining core of courage. Without love, courage is simply not possible. Acts of bravado, yes—but true courage is the natural outgrowth of our love of all that we hold dear, of the preciousness of each human life and a deeply held belief that what we love matters. Without love, there is nothing at stake, nothing to fight for.

While I was in the process of writing this book, I had no idea that we would now be living in this unimaginable national catastrophe, in which the courage of each and every one of us matters every single day, in ever-unfolding ways. In this toxic atmosphere of hate and anger, it can help us all to take a new look at what defines true courage. Authenticity, humility, determination, love, a deep altruism and care for others are qualities we can all embrace and cultivate. And, if we are lucky, we can then step into deeply enriched lives of greater and greater personal courage, at a time when the world seems to cry out for it.