

Chapter 6

Courage

Introduction:

I fall within the Baby Boomer Generation category—those who were born between 1946 and 1964. Just recently this generational bloc in the United States has been overtaken, in raw numbers, by the next sociologically identified group, the Millennials. Their numbers will be overtaken by the next group, the Gen Xers in several years.

These generations can be identified not only by the brackets of birth years, but also by characteristics they tend to project, particularly with regard to social issues and relational matters, whether group or individual. Generally, and with a quite broad stroke, we Baby Boomers reflect a work ethic—meaning devoting ourselves to a job, a vocation, sometimes in an almost manic approach.

As well, these people often are marked by a strong level of competitiveness—think seeking promotions in a corporation, or in congregational life, looking for ways to get to a “significant” church, or even better, an office in the denominational headquarters. With the competitive trait embedded comes also, usually, a goal-oriented approach to life, the writing of mission statements, stating objectives for lesson plans or sermons or the organization.

Now, the influences on these respective generations should be considered, too. The generation born immediately before the Boomers is the Silent Generation. These people, born between 1928 and 1945 were the children of the Depression, and World War 2, and because of those global crises and lower birth rates are a smaller and often overlooked generation.

They are those, though, who were for many of the Boomers the educators, the ministers, the close-up formative influencers. They tended to be quieter in the earlier years of their influential times (thus, the Silent Generation) in regard to social dynamics, like politics and the economy—which cover about everything. The stretch after World War 2 had economic expansion—so why address what was looming as laissez faire capitalism but was the source of great wealth for some? There was the search for Communists among us (McCarthyism). If one raised one’s head or hand to counter McCarthyism in those days they would be met by the venom of Joseph McCarthy or his followers, who seemed to pop up nearby and were the expression of bullyism.

Ironically those born toward the end of the Silent Generation era began to turn some of the “silence” into vocal calls for social change. For instance, this generation’s representatives made divorce less the ultimate sin than the generations preceding them. The Civil Rights movement was a process/product of those who became less silent about social relationships, voting rights, job rights, gender equality, and so forth.

For me, the generations who preceded me, birthed me, or provided the genetic disposition I’ve inherited were those identified as the Greatest Generation. My parents each fell toward the end of the birth range of that generation which was 1901-1924. Their parents, my grandparents, were part of the strangely named “Lost Generation,” birth years between 1883 and 1900. In the cumulative stretch of 1883 to 1924, one should note those people experienced the development of motor vehicles, the end of prohibition, the Robber Baron era, the right to vote for women, World War 1, the ongoing aftermath of the American Civil War. I knew two sets of great-grand

parents, one on my father's side and one on my mother's side of our family. Those persons and their parents, for whom the Civil War was an up-close experience, were also known as the Missionary Generation. Again, broad strokes are used here in a stereotypical, and for some a caricatured way; but, the era after the Civil War was one of attacking the Victorian values approach, social protest movements were on the rise, though not representing a majority of respective communities.

Each of the generations preceding me enculturated me on a variety of matters. The idea of courage was one of those that the input was probably more by implication than outright directives. The context in which I was reared was still close to that state's days of the western frontier. So, cowboy narratives, especially western movies, were a part of my entertainment. My father, for instance, came up in the time when the thing to do on Saturdays was to "go to town" and catch up on the latest movie in the serials of the time. Those movies starred Tom Mix, Bob Steel, Gene Autry, William Boyd and too many others to mention.

There was a growing movie industry from the silent movie era into speakies of particularly westerns. Those consistently had white male leads who could be noticed from a distance because of the white hats those "heroes" wore as compared to the black hats always worn by the villains. Native Americans were always projected as savages who had to be stamped out. The white women, barely cast as lead actresses too often, portrayed a damsel in distress.

The daring-do exploits of the white hats gave the images that filled the imaginations of boys like me as I came along and watched the movies on television my father had first seen in theaters, as to what acts of courage looked like.

As this formula for a western movie developed, one of the high points, for this paradigm, was "High Noon." The movie was filmed in black and white, interestingly. There was plenty, and still is, room for speculation on where the acts of courage were expressed in the movie. Perhaps that could be its best legacy, beginning conversation about what, when, and how courage can be identified, and especially employed. It certainly has done that for me, though it has taken all these years since I first watched "High Noon" to dissect, tease out, the elements that went into the making of the movie.

Were themes there of the culture or themes intended to resist some of the culture themes of the time? Did the variety of functional definitions of courage find expression so the idea could be identified and applied better for generations following? I have to add that my sense of the one wearing the white hat, carrying a gun, being the model of courage has changed. My abstract, even platonic, definition of courage has changed. My sense of who exhibits courage or not has changed. My sense of whether we're born with courage, or we can learn courage has changed. My sense of when an action is courageous or not or is headed in that way or not has changed.

My working definition(s) of courage has become broader and deeper, I think, certainly putting my early formative years' definitions into perspective. And, I must add, my sense of formative years is not limited to just my early years. It seems that the possibilities of formativeness can continue into whatever years and days we are living right now.

Courage – Some Meanings, Facets

Courage is the third in the triad of values I'm putting forward. Again, each of them (accountability and forgiveness previously) forms a constellation of value constructs, identified

through their facets, definitions, synonymous terms. Each of the respective constellations together form a larger whole (constellation) which, if we could use a hologram depict how these values interface, sometimes are interchangeable depending upon where one begins in the part of the triad that expresses itself first.

More specifically, as long as there have been stories related to humans, some element of courage has been included. Those that get transmitted from generation to generation as examples of courage sometimes may exhibit more hyperbole than not. That is if the oral tradition culture does not maintain the guardrails of truthful narratives only to be passed along. Though, often the stories of courage that get repeated relate incidents on the part of individuals, especially men—in most cultures—of actions that go above and beyond most of us mortals. These didactic narratives have much to do with forming our imaginations and expectations toward what we consider to be courageous acts.

Alongside these narratives, hero stories—and sometimes heroine stories—have been linguistic labels, semantics, of what courage is. After all, words are symbols of actions in our lives. I have to say that English is a difficult language in that respect. Especially those who must read a word and have only one meaning present difficulties to educators in the transmission and reception of information, much more to convey emotional content and context.

Courage, as you have already considered, I'm sure, carries those matters close. The word courage said or written will likely ignite an image in your mind of some action or person's behavior about whom you've read or met or was in the situation when they acted courageously.

For those of us who are English speakers, courage has an interesting generational history. The English word builds directly off the French *coeur*. The ideas of core, essential, heart, are implicit. To take heart, to lose heart, these phrases move us in the direction of "I don't know how to describe it, but I know how I feel it."

One of those Romance language derivatives from the Vulgar (Common) Latin where courage was identified as *cor*, again heart, also found some rootage in the Greek transliterated as *kurayio*. It, like the others, stood for fortitude, bravery, confidence, resolution, mettle or grit.

The Greeks and Latins could be resurfaced with their intent to convey that courage is exercised without being impetuous, calculating the levels of risk and harm to one's self and especially others. I am reminded of Lewis Smedes comment several years ago providing advice toward a circumstance I and my faculty colleagues were in—"Be courageous (then a pause) with prudence!"

To continue the trail into history about history, the term rises up off the pages of the Old Testament, particularly as God directed Moses, Joshua, or David to be strong and courageous. Those instances were more than directives for the individuals, but for them to be courageous on behalf of and to motivate the people that were following them to be courageous. So, courage for the community.

With the New Testament, Jesus offered courage to the disciples. Paul, especially, gave the churches with whom he worked the directive to "en"-courage one another. Again, a community application. The forms of this mutual support would take the otherwise abstract theological concepts and incorporate them in relational ways—forgive each other, support one another, build

up one another, love one another. Undoubtedly a pursuit of the integration of these actional virtues will reveal that courage holds close as well faith and hope.

Courage for The Facing of this Hour

Of course, that phrase, “The facing of this hour” is from the hymn text of Harry Emerson Fosdick, “God of Grace and God of Glory.” The hymn was composed for the opening ceremonies of the Riverside Church in New York City in 1930. The facing of the hour at the time was the Great Depression. Fosdick was insightful enough, though, to realize, as we should, that the “facing of this hour” can be in any generation, any era, any day, any part of one of our days.

If only available are the Old Testament directives about courage and especially the illustrations of the Judges—mostly men—or the battle engagements of David’s mighty men as the models of courageousness, one will have only a theology and ethics of courage that resembles today’s action heroes. Those scripture passages are easier to teach, preach, and illustrate with iconic, cultural images that are now labeled “superheroes.”

One can absorb those cartoonish figures into their imaginations as entertainment and never have to connect those kinds of actions into their everyday life. And, that’s how it goes, leaving many congregants unable to recognize they employ courage every day in where the cracks are, the fissures of life. Again, as there is a lack of application to peoples’ daily lives, people will continue to leave congregational life.

A place one can start is with Reinhold Niebuhr’s serenity prayer. It is known best in the following form, though there were several iterations after this one: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Surely you caught it, Lewis Smedes was familiar with this idea, too.

Notice a few things about the prayer. This prayer has the objective of preparing an individual for addressing matters that need to be changed, for the better we must assume. So, the individual has recognized some abridgements of personal and social values and senses a calling, an impression, an incentive to address the context.

Interestingly, this prayer also is an address to notice the things, the givens, that one cannot change. And, with that sense to have a serenity, a calmness, a patience, a peace about being unable to make the changes. Courage is raised as if it is in second place, not needing any priority of understanding—how much courage, for instance?

But could we think of courage as a bridge connecting serenity and wisdom? All of this is a prayer for discernment. And courage is needed at not just one point, but all the way through this little formula. Courage for everyday things, not just the “we’re going to have to save the world things”—though, that could be in here somewhere, depending upon the size and time frame scenario one faces!

Proportionality and Timing

About this point, you may be ready to say, “I’m ready to be brave! Let’s forget all this analysis, dissection, delineation of ideas and get on with courage!” The thing is the thinking about when, where, and how to act courageously takes courage to do. As one has been encultured about courage, what it looks like, what kind of accolades it’ll get, or benefits, most of those images

need rethinking, reforming, questioning, transforming. This is the substance of what Paul alluded to the Roman Christians about (Chapter 12)—by the transforming of your mind, then do these kinds of acts, these kinds of behaviors, these kinds of relationships. All of those imperatives that followed from Paul were essentially counter culture, even counter intuitive to those people.

But those actions incarnated the ways of Christ to the surrounding culture. Don't forget the Roman Empire had a scale of what was courageous that was not too different from the Old Testament Judges and the warrior culture of David. There was little about the Prince of Peace.

This transforming is a process, not a transaction like so many of those who are “wanna’ be experts” on behavioral change. Even recognizing the difference of these two terms and approaches can be identified acts of courage, for it takes courage to embrace the idea of change.

The embracing is not necessarily an inclusion without inspection, but is an opening of the window to the realization that change is always happening, in one's self and in all the contexts one is in, local to global. Too many negative consequences have fallen in on communities, cultures, when there has been ignoring a dismissal, of changes already underway that need response. Thomas Kuhn's “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” is an excellent primer for taking note of the global sized paradigm shifts that have and do have impact on the systems of economy, politics, and theology.

Thus, courage discerns the context, the players in it, where the challenges, benefits, risks, and opportunities are—and these will be all melded together—and ascertains the timing and proportionality of response.

Being and Doing Courage

Now, some suggestions toward the further delineation of what can be labeled as courageous. Broad strokes follow. You can supply with your own associative imagination circumstances of one-to-one relationships or groups to groups where these exercises have been employed or need to be employed. Perhaps another way of saying the following lines is “I know courage when I see it, when I'm in the middle of the need for it.”

- Courage listens, not just hears, but listens, encouragingly. That is easier said than done, especially with regard to those who put themselves forward as—and are—one's adversaries. Courage attempts to find common interests, benefits, reduce risks for more people. Ideology is important, but still is so abstract as to be something better left in the background.
- Courage will usually find itself supporting the minority report, opinion, group(s). For the dominant cultural majority will be thinking in terms of convenience and comfort, not any of those impacts on the others who have few, if anyone, to speak up for them.
- Courage looks for and finds its own weak spots, its limits, of argument, influence. And, those limits can be understood both as being unable to go any faster, so to speak and as there is more speed with which I'm capable.

- Courage hears others who may ridicule your opinion, but the courageous individual does not take to heart the ridicule. The ridicule, even shame and blame, says more about the character of the one spewing verbal abuse than not.
- Courage hears others' critique when there may well be some truth to their opinions of your thoughts, actions, projects, objectives. Truth that needs to be assimilated and integrated into your plans. Those who can hold up a mirror to our behavior, our communication style, may be in the long run some of our best friends for the overall best interests of a group.
- The courageous person does not necessarily have to be the one to "speak truth to power." The implication is that the speaker holds all the truth about a matter, those with influence (power) are the ones wearing black hats, figuratively. Neither of those assumptions will be accurate.

Here the tension between the phrases "moral absolutes" and "moral relativism" comes to bear. Both are abstractions, for the idea of truth, for instance, both concepts never really get defined, much more enacted. Those to the right on a theological and political spectrum assume they know all about moral absolutes and name those to the left of them as moral relativists.

Frankly, all of these are moral relativists, within their own smaller contexts. It takes courage to articulate that to parties who are at loggerheads with one another. Any values, virtues, expressed will always be done so in partial, proportional forms as compared to whatever the ultimate form can be expressed. That ultimacy of character resides in God, a set of character traits which we cannot fully emulate after all.

- Being courageous is not necessarily "being prophetic" as often thrown about for effect. I've noticed that whether one is to the far left of an issue or the far right, they have similar methodologies to their polar-opposite proponents. There is the approach of demonizing the other, lionizing one's own approach. There will be in some instances, again figuratively speaking, squaring off of a space and throwing a verbal fit.

Those who do not kowtow to that rhetoric are declared infidels and the proclaimer of that fitful presentation usually in a narcissistic way will declare her/his position the winner. Frankly, though called being prophetic, the methodologies, the actions, the communication style are more for drawing attention to the self-identified prophet than benefiting the group. Those who can work behind the scenes, who attempt to mediate differences between groups or individuals, who provide more than platitudinous advice without functional ways to change things should be identified as prophets.

- Being courageous doesn't always look like winning, as the culture usually pictures a win. Courage will discern that no forward motion, so to speak, can be made on a matter; that if a vote is taken or has been taken, then too many negatives leave no possibility for courage to be expressed. One can regroup; take the loss of reputation, even ridicule and the little support from those you thought were colleagues, friends, even family; and as

Jesus instructed “shake the dust from your feet.” Walk away in other words. That discernment applies to relationships, contracts made, jobs.

- Courage does not listen to the complaint that its silence is complicity with the enemy. Depending upon the context one is in, there may be no room for any input. Any challenge to the powers that will eventuate in the evaporation of those articulating the challenge. Perhaps one can challenge another day from another platform.
- Courage attempts to identify fears, those that are immediate and critical. One’s instinct to fight or get away will be ignited. Timing and proportional response come to the fore. Courage also attempts to identify anxieties, which are more vague, are marked by a sense of uneasiness. But the lack of identifying and working through them leaves one in a corrosive state. The stress load of worry can eventually express itself in some physical and/or psychological malady.
- Again, “Be courageous, but with prudence!”

Courage finds connection in all of these kinds of encounters with accountability and forgiveness, its other two triad members. To tease each out separately may well be impossible depending upon the context and experiences. One may consider, though, that courage, in its combination of facets can act as a catalytic agent for discerning processes, for actions to make, for things that need to be said and done or left unsaid and undone. It could be recognized as the bonding element among all the values that necessarily pile into a circumstance, of whatever scale, toward the most just and loving way to go.

For Further Discussion—

1. Where have you seen acts of courage—single parents, health care persons, supervisors who stuck their necks out for the sake of the group?
2. Have you ever had someone thank you for an act of courage, and you were relatively surprised that you had considered you’d done something courageously?
3. What are some courageous things happening that go relatively unnoticed, but quite possibly lives are being transformed for the long term?
4. How would you define courage using biblical examples, now?
5. What does Lewis Smedes’ statement “Be courageous, with prudence,” mean to you? Do you have any examples of it being acted out?
6. How have you been educated about courage from your early years until even now?