

**Courage**  
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*If you were king, you wouldn't be afraid of anything?*  
Not nobody, not no how!  
*Not even a rhinoceros?*  
Imposseros!  
*What about a hippopotamus?*  
Why, I'd trash him from top to bottomus!  
*Supposin' you met an elephant?*  
I'd wrap him up in cellaphant!  
*What if it were a brontosaurus?*  
I'd show him who's king of the forest!  
*How?*

How?  
Courage.  
What makes a king out of a slave? Courage.  
What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage.  
What makes the elephant charge his tusk  
in the misty mist, or the dusky dusk?  
What makes the muskrat guard his musk?  
Courage.  
What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder? Courage.  
What makes the dawn come up like thunder? Courage.  
What makes the hottentot so hot?  
What puts the ape in ape-ricot?  
What do they got that I ain't got?  
*Courage?*  
You can say that again.

*-The Wizard of Oz*

The way the Lion talks about it, it sounds like courage is the opposite of fear. A person who is courageous isn't afraid, and a person who is afraid is not courageous.

That's how we usually think about it, too.

But the Lion was wrong, and so are we. Courage and fear are not opposites.

I learned this from my friend. He's the CEO of an insurance company, and courage is one of their corporate values. We were just talking about it a few weeks ago.

He said, "Courage isn't the absence of fear or caution; it's about taking an action that you believe is right or necessary, *even though* you're afraid."

I had no idea insurance executives could be so profound!

But he's right.

To be courageous doesn't mean you're not scared, or that you don't stay up nights stressing over the what-ifs.

When we're facing a decision that carries risk; when there could be serious consequences for us, or our business, or the people we care about, it's normal – *rational*, even – to be afraid.

But contrary to what we usually say, courage isn't about *overcoming* our fear.

It's about choosing to live *despite* our fear.

It's about finding the will not to crater, or panic and run away<sup>1</sup>, but to make thoughtful, reasoned decisions and act on conviction, *even though* we are terrified of what that might mean.

Courage is a choice.

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So, now is the time to take stock. How did we do this past year in showing courage?

I'm thinking about four kinds of courage, four areas of life where we are tested constantly.

One is *moral* courage. What do we do when our beliefs about right and wrong are put to the test?

The second is *emotional* courage. Are we willing to put ourselves out there and be vulnerable in painful or scary emotional situations?

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<sup>1</sup> See Abraham ibn Ezra's comment to Deut. 20:3, on the warning: "Do not let your heart become timid."

Three, *professional* courage. Do we take risks to try new things or change course to improve our work or our quality of life?

And finally, *spiritual* courage. Are we willing to look inward and ask hard questions about the meaning of our life, and risk having to admit that we might be on the wrong path?

I suspect that we've come up short – not because we don't have the *ability* to show courage, but only because we have lacked the *will* to choose it.

\* \* \*

First: moral courage.

More often than we'd like or expect, our beliefs about right and wrong, ethical and unethical, moral and immoral are put to the test.

And we have to decide: are we going to stand on principle and speak up for what we know is right? Or are we going to keep quiet and let it slide?

My friend's company did a study on courage.<sup>2</sup>

They found that when people are faced with a situation where they know something immoral or illegal is going on at work, or in their community, or at school, most people choose not to do or say *anything* about it, even anonymously.

Maybe that's not surprising. Moral courage is hard.

There's a lot of risk in speaking up. The situation is complex, and who knows what might happen if we get involved? Better to mind our own business.

These are excuses we make all the time, when values we *say* we really care about are on the line.

There are, of course, the big, defining issues in history and in our own day that call for moral courage.

Things like equality for everyone, religious freedom, the right to vote, the right to a good education and a safe neighborhood.

Some people risk their careers, their freedom, and even their lives to stand up for these values.

What have *we* done about the values we say *we* believe in?

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<sup>2</sup> Forbes/Hiscox, *American Courage Index Outline* (internal document), July 2015

Posting political diatribes on Facebook from the safety of our own home is fine, but what *risks* have we taken to help make this world a better place?

And it's not just the big, historic issues that demand courage.

We have the opportunity to show moral courage in the ordinary, everyday things, too – which can also be pretty risky, and pretty terrifying.

--Like speaking up for someone who's being bullied or ridiculed or excluded.

This isn't only a child's problem. We all know it happens every day, all the time with adults, too.

What do we do when someone gossips to us about another person? Do we just sit there and listen? Do we join in?

Have you ever tried saying to a friend, "You know, I really don't like to listen to gossip, so would you mind stopping right there?"

It's hard to do that. We know it's not right to gossip, but we don't want to come off as holier-than-thou.

--Or what about speaking up to our boss when he wants us to work longer hours or take on more, and it means we'll have less time at home with our family?

We say we believe in having boundaries, but we don't want to seem lazy or incapable of doing the job. Are we willing to draw the line?

--And what about standing up to our children, and telling them they can't do just anything they want;

or they can't get a cell phone even though all the other kids have one;

or they can't go out dressed totally inappropriately, even when all their friends dress that way?

Moral courage is hard. Teaching our children our values is hard.

We want them to fit in and have friends. We don't want to be labeled as trouble-makers. We don't want to seem prudish or unreasonable.

And anyway, we know other people feel the same way we do, so why don't *they* say something about it?

How many times have we said yes when we really wanted to say no, just because saying yes is easier?

The Cowardly Lion showed us we can talk ourselves out of anything when we're scared.

But if we're not willing to stand up for the values we say we believe in when it's risky or scary to do so – then they're not values, they're just words.

And if that's the case...

*Then what are we really doing here?  
Why do we give so much power to fear?  
What do we need to show more of this year?*  
(Courage!)

\* \* \*

Second: emotional courage.

I feel like we think of emotional courage as gritting your teeth and walking upright through the pain.

“Be strong,” we say. “I need to be strong.”

But that isn't courage.

Emotional courage is not about forcing yourself to *control* your emotions. It's not about suppressing the tears and going about your life as though things are fine.

The word “courage” comes from the French word “*couer*,” which means “heart.”

To show courage is to show *heart* –

To open yourself up to life, in all its glory and all its terror;

To let yourself *feel*, and tremble, and be vulnerable.

*That's* courage.

--It might mean reaching out to a friend or family member you haven't talked to in years to try and heal the rift, even though you're scared of being rejected yet again;

--Or standing by your child when he chooses a path that brings him happiness, even though you don't understand it, or his choice goes against everything you'd hoped for him;

--Or making the time to be present with your ailing parent, even though it's painful and terrifying to see this person who was always so strong and larger than life in your eyes, now so weak and helpless.

--Sometimes it may mean having an honest conversation with your parents or siblings or someone else close to you, to draw the boundaries you need in order to have a healthy relationship.

These things are scary. Sometimes we'd rather just hide from the world, and save ourselves the pain.

Emotional courage is about acknowledging that the *fear* is real, that the *risks* are real – and then doing what we believe deep down is the right thing to do anyway.

To be human is to be vulnerable. To feel is to truly *live*.

And if we're not willing to do that...

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\* \* \*

Third: professional courage.

Professional courage is about trying new things or changing our path, even though we're scared of leaving our comfort zone and making mistakes.

--Like deciding to pursue a career you know will bring you joy, even though you won't earn much doing it.

--Or proposing a new idea or innovation, even though you're afraid of sounding stupid or being shot down.

--Like deciding to leave your job in order to put family first.

--Or going back to work when your kids are still young, because you know you just need something more.

--Or deciding to retire.

If you've been working your whole life, the thought of retiring can be terrifying.

You're thinking:

--I've planned and saved my whole career, but do I really have enough to stop working? What if my spouse or I get sick? What if there's an emergency?

--And anyway, what am I going to do with myself? I've devoted my life to my work. Will I feel like I no longer have a purpose?

It takes courage to let go and be able to say, "I am more than what I do."

Professional courage is tough. Nearly 75 percent of the people surveyed report taking *no action at all* in this area during the past year.

So if you're seriously wrangling with these decisions you are already ahead of the curve.

And just remember...

Courage is not the absence of fear, and it's not about overcoming our fear.

It's about choosing to live *despite* our fear, and doing what we believe is right even though we're afraid.

Life is too short and too precious to panic and run away from the things that will make us happy.

We all have the *ability* and the *heart* to be courageous, but if we can't muster the will to choose it...

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\* \* \*

And finally: spiritual courage.

Spiritual courage is about looking closely at our life, and asking hard questions about whether we're living with meaning and purpose, or just running on the treadmill.

Does our idea of what our life should be about match up with the way we actually *live*?

Asking these questions is scary because, when we do, we may find that our priorities are all wrong and our lives are way off track.

We may find that what we've always thought is important is actually not important at all, and that we've been consumed by things that are illusory.

As Ecclesiastes says, "The lover of money never has his fill of money."

Spiritual courage is about taking the risk to change:

Taking the risk to make words like God, love, values, and Torah a part of our vocabulary, and live by them even when it's hard to do;

Taking the risk to re-orient our lives so that we see ourselves as part of, and accountable to, something *greater* than ourselves;

Taking the risk to engage in a serious quest to discover why it is that we're here *at all*.

If we're sincere about it, the search might provoke an existential crisis.

We may need to re-think our basic assumptions about the meaning of life and "begin again with a new template."<sup>3</sup>

And that's terrifying.

But we've got to that risk and do it anyway, because life is too great a gift to live it on the surface.

The author Richard Bach said: "Here's a test to find whether your purpose in life is finished: if you're still here, it isn't."<sup>4</sup>

We woke up today for a reason. And if we're too scared to try to discover what that reason is...

If we're unwilling to stand up for our values, and to open our hearts, and to make the changes we need to make for a better life...

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What do we need to show more of this year?  
(Courage!)*

You can say that again.

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<sup>3</sup> David Mamet, *The Wicked Son*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by the blog *Lion's Whiskers*, in the section on "Spiritual Courage"