



Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

–Anais Nin

IF COURAGE FALLS IN THE FOREST

A few years ago a friend invited me to speak at a service for the local Universal Unitarian Church. Each month they invite a guest to deliver a meditation on a particular virtue. They call this presentation a sermon. And yes, one stands behind a podium on a Sunday morning, flanked by a chorus, a minister, burning candles, the works. I imagined myself going up in flames. It had been many years since I had attended church, and the very idea of delivering a sermon, on the subject of courage, no less, had set my impostor syndrome on high alert. This was a venue in which I couldn't just blithely dispense with the podium and engage casually with an audience. It was the word *sermon* that had set me on edge. I'd delivered my share of sermons throughout my life, but those were spontaneous effusions, generally regretted. In the end I decided I was incapable of writing a sermon, but I was capable of exploration, deconstruction, free association, and compiling bits and pieces on the subject, from a variety of sources. In other words, rambling with intention. What follows is a modified version of that intentional rambling, otherwise known as a sermon.

I DEDICATE THESE WORDS

to all the beautiful lovers
whose gentle fingers turned
to claw at one another.

I have left these notes
for the ordinary Joe
who forked the other road

only to find his father.
I have sung for the woman
stubborn as a pile of bricks

who in her zeal to live
has forgotten to water the fields.
I am sister to those

half broken and half whole,
given to the mead,
sweating in the sheets,

or raking in the leaves
of joyousness, and sorrow.
I am counting on those

for whom the bell tolls,
who've settled near the river,
having failed to walk on water.

The root of the word courage is *cor*, the Latin word for heart. Take heart, we say, have courage, we mean. The word is distantly related to the word, *cardiac*, of the heart. In one of its earliest forms the word meant: "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." Today, this understanding persists when we refer to someone brave as *having a lot of heart*. This makes sense. It's only when the heart is involved that the stakes grow so high they dwarf the sky.

The American Heritage Dictionary is quick to point out however, this particular definition is obsolete.

Note: not just archaic, but obsolete. It defines courage as *the quality of mind or spirit that enables* a person to face difficulty, danger, or pain, without fear. But that doesn't seem quite right. Mark Twain tells us, courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the resistance to fear. Ambrose Redmoon goes a step further: Courage, he tells us, is not the absence of fear, but rather *the judgment that something else is more important than one's fear*. Emily Dickinson advised, "If your nerve deny you, go above your nerve, which seems to me similar to the modern adage, fake it till you feel it." Hemingway famously defined courage as grace under pressure. From Churchill we get: *Courage* is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

I DON'T BUY IT

says
the scientist.

Replies
the frail
and beating heart,

it's not for sale.

The ancient Greeks counted courage, or fortitude, among the four cardinal virtues, along with prudence, justice and temperance. Plato believed courage to be a sort of perseverance through suffering, fear, or despair. And

it seems it was Aristotle who laid down our notions of courage being associated with risking one's life, ideally, in battle.

Indeed, when asked to recall moments of courage, the average person declines, saying they've never been in life or death situations which call for courage. I find that terribly discouraging. Salman Rushdie, in an article in the *New York Times* called, "Whither Moral Courage," explains:

We find it easier to admire physical bravery than moral courage — the courage of the life of the mind, or of public figures. A man in a cowboy hat vaults a fence to help Boston bomb victims while others flee the scene: we salute his bravery, as we do that of servicemen and women returning from the battlefield, or men and women struggling to overcome debilitating illnesses or injuries. We no longer easily agree on what it means to be good, or principled, or brave. When political leaders do take courageous steps — there are as many who doubt as approve. Political courage, nowadays, is almost always ambiguous.

Conversely, courage and patience appear as the first two of ten characteristics of dharma in the Hindu Manusmriti. For Catholics, courage is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. And Islamic faith pairs courage with self-control as crucial virtues.

A LIZARD DOES NOT MAKE A SOUND,

it has no song,
it does not share my love affairs
with flannel sheets,
glass beads, interlocking
silver rings, the moon,
the sea, or ink.

But sitting here the afternoon,
I've come to believe
we do share a love affair
and a belief—
in wink, blink, stone,
and heat.

Also, air.

This is not a fable,
nor is it bliss.

Impatience,
remember this.

The symbol of courage in the plant world is the borage flower. Celtic warriors added ground borage to their wine before heading into battle, Roman soldiers ingested the leaves before going to war and medieval knights are said to have worn scarves sewn with borage flowers. The word, borage is thought to have derived from the phrase *carago*, which roughly translates to *I bring courage*. It's said that