

It's Not Just You

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It is 2:00am. I've only just begun to drift back to sleep after spending the last half hour of a woman's life seated at her bedside, holding her hand as she breathed her last breaths, succumbing to that common fate that awaits us all.

Then, I hear it. Faintly at first; the familiar chop-chop-chop-chop-chop sound of the Life Star helicopter in the distance. It will soon be landing on the roof not far above my small room up on the 10th floor of the hospital. I pull the covers off, sit up, slide my feet into my shoes- put my clerical collar on- and do what I can to smooth the worst wrinkles from my shirt and pants- I learned early on not to bother changing my clothes when working the overnight on-call shift.

Running a brush through my hair hoping to make its less, shall we say, "Einsteinesque", I'm aware Life Star is close now. It's only a matter of seconds before my pager goes off. Then, like clockwork it sounds. I glance at it and a series of abbreviations and numbers indicate the person arriving was involved in a motorcycle crash and is not doing well.

I put on my suit jacket and head for the elevator. Before I reach the ground floor, the on-call phone in my pocket rings. It's the social worker from the Emergency Room calling with the patient's name and family contact information. Standing before the wide locked double doors of the Emergency Room, I pause ever so briefly and take a deep breath. Scanning my badge on the sensor, the doors open and I begin what always feels like a miles long walk to the triage rooms of the E R.

I have some idea of what awaits me. Still, many questions sit at the periphery of my mind,

What condition is the patient really in?

How gory will the scene be?

Will I or others on the care team encounter things we won't be able to unsee or unhear later?

Will I be met by frantic, angry, or wailing family members or staff?

Will I need to intervene if the medical personnel exhibit insensitivity towards the patient or family in the midst of the chaos or vice-versa.

Will the family have to be called and told to come in but not told that their loved one has died until they arrive?

In a word, I'm scared.

Now for some, scared may sound too strong a word. After all, I wasn't so terrified that I couldn't do my job. Indeed, overall I did it quite well. And all those questions laced with fear that arose each time I was called to the ER? Well, all those and worse happened regularly during my time as a hospital chaplain. In retrospect it would have been odd were I not somewhat scared each time I was called to an emergency at the hospital.

And I bet I'm not the only one who was scared every time Life Star showed up or the pager went off. Certainly the patient, if conscious, would be justifiably scared. But so too would anyone involved. The specifics of what each person might be afraid of or worry could happen may be different, even so highly individualized as to be exclusive to that one person, but it seems to me, few, if anyone, could claim a complete absence of fear. Indeed, I'm not sure I would believe anyone making such a claim. For though we often deny fear and shame the fearful, fear simply reveals a basic truth: that we are alive.

While much is made of grabbing life by the...well you pick the body part. Which is to say of living fearlessly. The reality is fear is one of our emotional and spiritual vital signs. Paradoxically, life would be a lot scarier, and for many shorter, without fear.

Further, the universality of fear, the fact that it's not just you, as Jane Rzepka observes in our first reading this morning, can point us toward the "narrow gate", that entrance to new life spoken of in the Christian scriptures that turns on hinges of empathy and compassion. "When all is quiet", she writes, "and we are small and the night is dark, may we hear the tender breathing of all who lie awake with us in fear, that together we may gather strength to live with love, and kindness, and confidence."

Of course, the universality of fear can and too often does nudge us toward the wider gate, the entryway to humanity's seemingly preferred prison of self and social destruction. Sadly, we need not look to history to observe this preference. Indeed, every age thus far has found humanity both witness and promoter of fear as a means to sew division, hatred, and violence, and no less so our own age.

Fear then can lead us to new life or down the path to our own destruction. This is true whether we're talking about ordinary fears, like those Jane Rzepka names in our reading for all ages, fears concerning work, our children, our health, money, the planet, if we're lovable. Or more complex social fears around things like class, race, ethnicity, orientation and gender identity, to name just a few.

It seems to go without saying then, that if fear is to lead to new life and not our own destruction it must be met with courage.

Ah, courage. A word the poet-philosopher David Whyte observes, “tempts us to think outwardly, to run bravely against opposing fire, to do something under besieging circumstance, and perhaps, above all, to be seen to do it in public, to show courage; to be celebrated in story, rewarded with medals, given the accolade...”

We know that as the Hollywood image of courage: big, showy, entertaining perhaps, and often with a generous helping of ego piled on top. Surely there are real life moments that by chance or circumstance invite or look like this very outward oriented image of courage. But David Whyte reminds us, if we look at origin of the word courage, we will find that it in fact points us inward. Indeed, as Whyte notes, courage comes from, “the old Norman French *Coeur*, or heart.”

A few years ago I picked up a curious painting at an auction. Dating to the 18th C., it depicts two figures and a large book press in a landscape. One figure, an angel is operating the press, while the other figure, who is crouched down on the ground, observes an object being squeezed on the press which is not a book, but a heart.

The painting is rather large, it takes up most of the wall it’s hanging on, so the effect is quite dramatic. After spending considerable time researching the subject, I learned it is meant to represent a spiritual concept: *Cordis Humiliatio*, or the humbling of the heart. A process or practice essential to courage. Now, we might not ordinarily associate humility with courage, but listen again to David Whyte’s understanding of courage, “Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life, with another, with a community, a work, a future.” To which he adds, “To be courageous, is not necessarily to go anywhere or do anything except to make conscious those things we already feel deeply and then to live through the unending vulnerabilities of those consequences. To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply in the body and in the world: to live up to and into the necessities of relationships that often already exist, with things we find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on and always has begged us on.”

Whyte speaks not of stereotypical heroic action in which one mocks or brushes aside fear, but of an authentic embrace of life, cognizant of all its vulnerabilities and consequences. Courage then concerns living into our vulnerability as human beings, fully aware, as Jane Rzepka writes, “We aren’t the giants we’d like so much to be.” In other words, courage calls for humility concerning the human condition.

Whyte offers the experience of parenthood to make this point, noting, “The first courageous step may be firmly into complete bewilderment and a fine state of not knowing.” And I have to admit the sense of stepping, “firmly into complete bewilderment and a fine state of not knowing,” accurately describes many an experience in my life, including walking into the ER each time when I worked as a hospital chaplain.

Too often however we mistake our bewilderment and states of not knowing as evidence of an absence of courage and vulnerability as an obstacle that must first be overcome in order to act or live in a way that we might understand as courageous.

Several years ago an article appeared in “The Guardian” titled, “Top Five Regrets of the Dying”. According to the article, Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse, who worked with terminally ill patients for eight years, noted people routinely voiced the same five regrets over and over in sharing their life stories with her. Two of the five regrets named repeatedly mention the word courage, including the number one regret, “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.” The other is “I wish I had had the courage to speak my mind and express my feelings.”

Knowing the first and most common regret to be, “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.” we’d do well to remember Albert Camus’ advice to himself to “live to the point of tears” which inspires David Whyte’s assertion, “We become courageous whenever we live closely to the point of tears with any new possibility made known inside us, whenever we demonstrate a faith in the interior annunciations and align ourselves with the new and surprising and heartfelt necessities of even the average existence.”

For what is living true to oneself if not a struggle, willingly engaged, to demonstrate faith in our interior annunciations? And of course, like the courage to be oneself, the courage to speak one’s mind and express one’s feelings not only requires, but guarantees vulnerability.

In the end, there’s no getting around it. “To be courageous is to stay close to how we are made,” says Whyte. And we are not made invincible, we are made vulnerable.

The world is a scary place. Life is scary. Cliches perhaps, but nonetheless true. And so, if you are scared, remember, it’s not just you. Indeed, fear is one of the ways we know we’re alive physically and spiritually. It isn’t going to go away but we need not be afraid of fear. We can and are called, in fact, to live courageously. Which is one of the essential teachings of most religions, although it may be phrased differently. To live courageously is nothing more than to live life on its terms, mindful, as David Whyte notes, “that courage is what love looks like when tested by the simple everyday necessities of being alive.”

And so, let us courageously live and live courageously.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be