

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
6 November, 2022

## **Spiritual Courage**

It takes some work to find good news these days. Our fear can be debilitating. So let's talk about courage.

I read a beautiful piece about courage this week — just three sentences that caught my eye. They say, in essence:

There are two kinds of courage in this world.  
One demands that we armor up  
and leap into action.  
The other demands that we strip naked  
and surrender.

The word “courage” comes from the French word for heart — spirit, temperament, bravery. That's really the essence of it, isn't it? Moral courage, emotional courage, and, yes, raw, physical courage all come from the heart.

I want to speak about spiritual courage today — not the courage of conviction, but the courage to live in free-fall, unhooking ourselves from where we're hung up and seeing clearly, with unclouded vision, seeing with an open heart. Spiritual courage is subtle but very, very powerful.

The Buddha taught that there are eight worldly concerns that drive us and threaten to run our lives. He presented them in four pairs of opposites: pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame. We're hooked by the former and gutted by the latter ... until it dawns on us that there's more to life than pursuing temporary relief and avoiding discomfort — that there's something in embracing what Zorba the Greek famously called “the full catastrophe” and getting — really getting — that life is always all of everything.

Many years ago, a member of the congregation stopped in at the church, wildly agitated. Although he was an elementary school teacher with a matching salary and no training in investing, he'd been up for nights in a row, putting

together a wildly complicated real estate deal. He was, he said, a millionaire. He was ecstatic.

Deeply concerned, I slept on it for a night and then stopped by his house the next morning on the way to work. He didn't answer the door, but it was unlocked and I let myself in. The kitchen looked like he'd given a big dinner party and neglected to clean up. The ransacked living room looked like he'd been robbed. I found him in his bedroom, utterly despondent — almost catatonic. He was crashing from the mania. It was heartbreaking. He managed to tell me that the deal — “everything” — had fallen apart. He also mentioned, almost casually, that he had stopped taking his lithium. Concerned that he was a danger to himself, I called an ambulance.

When he was released from the hospital, I sat with him as he pieced together what had happened. And something he said has stayed with me ever since. “You know,” he said, “I'm okay with my financial situation, just as it is. I wasn't unhappy to begin with, and I'm not unhappy now. It was the madness for *more* that made me miserable.”

This is precious insight into the eight worldly concerns — pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame. We don't have to be suffering from mental illness to be carried away by them. Tibetan Buddhism lama Dzigar Kongtrül Rinpoche<sup>1</sup> calls it our “split personality:” We can walk a spiritual path and still be enslaved by the eight worldlies. The trick is to commit to clear vision: Can we see clearly where we're hooked? Can we summon spiritual courage and wholeheartedness and lean into the spiritual practices that free us? The goal is to live in the center, unswayed by the pull of either extreme.

On the afternoon of the day I got my license, my mother asked me to take her car and fill it up. I was ecstatic: my first time alone in the car!

I drove to the gas station and hopped out. The gentleman at the next pump suddenly dropped the hose and fell to the ground.

My Girl Scout troop had just completed our annual First Aid course renewal. We had practiced mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Resusci Annie, a life-size manikin, though chest compressions hadn't yet come into vogue with our trainers. If someone wasn't breathing, you rolled them onto their back, cleared

---

<sup>1</sup> Dzigar Kongtrül Rinpoche is the title of a tulku lineage of Tibetan Buddhist lamas

their airway, tipped their chin into the air, pinched their nose, sealed your mouth over theirs, and breathed for them. And so I knelt down next to the unresponsive man, took a big gulp of air, and began.

I was vaguely aware of the gas station owner rushing out and then back inside to call the fire department. Unfortunately, he called the fire department in the wrong town. I remember feeling absolutely focused, and tiring; it was more than twenty minutes before the sirens approached. I remember the gentleman suddenly moving a little, coughing just a little. The fire trucks and ambulance arrived and it was suddenly noisy; they moved around me to set up their equipment. I looked up and one of them told me sternly to just keep going.

“Okay, stop now!” someone said, and I sat back, stood slowly, and got out of the way. Someone else said, “He’s alive.” Dazed, I walked inside the gas station. The owner gave me a Coke.

When I finally returned home, my mother was furious. Where had I been? Skeptical of my story, she called the hospital. Yes, the doctor was alive and being treated in the emergency room right now. The doctor? It turned out he was the local physician from the next town.

That night, I overheard my mother call the hospital again, to check on him. He had suffered a second heart attack and died.

I went from elation to utter devastation. I lay awake, awash in terrible sadness, alone with my first intimacy with death and the worst failure of my life.

In the morning, the phone rang. It was for me. Numbly, I took the phone from my mother.

It was Mrs. Rose Ruze, my Scout leader — the one who taught me First Aid. She told me she knew I must be very disappointed, but that it wasn’t my fault; Doc’s heart was bad. I tried and failed to hold back tears. Listen, she said, with no one to help, he would have died at the gas pump. You gave his family the time to get to the hospital — they were able to see him. They could tell each other, I love you. You’re too young to understand this now, but that’s a lot.

I’m still trying to understand, still learning from having ricocheted from exulted to shattered and the ways the kindness of Mrs. Ruze steadied a tender teenager and brought me back to center. I was sad, but not undone; no longer

suffering under the tyranny of would have been, could have been, should have been, but taking my place in the tender, broken-hearted present. This is what it means to live right in the center of the eight worldly concerns — pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame — not at the outer edges. To live in the eye of the storm demands spiritual courage.

American Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön writes, “When you look at what gets to you, it will undoubtedly have something to do with what you want or do not want. Whenever you realize you’re caught, right then, right on the spot, *with kindness for yourself*, you can acknowledge that you’re hooked. And then you can ask yourself, Which of the eight worldly concerns has me in its grip? Fear of loss? Hope of gain? The pain of being blamed? The desire to be praised? And who’s in control here — me or the eight [worldlies]?”

“... [They] are, at bottom, just an outdated mechanism for survival. In that sense, we’re still functioning at a very primitive level, completely at the mercy of hope and fear. The mechanism of avoiding pain and seeking pleasure [once] kept us from, [say], being eaten.... [It] worked well for our ancestors, but it isn’t working very well for us now. In fact, we continually overreact when it’s hardly a life-or-death matter.... We’re like ping-pong balls being bounced back and forth by our aversions and desires, and we’re way overdue for ... a fresh alternative.”<sup>2</sup>

Among Native peoples, the Hopi Nation is considered to be the earth protectors, the ones with the deepest knowledge about the survival of our planet. On June 8th, 2000, the Hopi elders made a prediction using this metaphor: We are in a fast-flowing river, they said. Many of us will be afraid and will try to cling to the shore. But those who cling “will suffer greatly.” Let go of the shore, they said. Push off into the middle of the river. Look around to see who is there with you. “And celebrate.”<sup>3</sup>

“... If we don’t act on our craving for pleasure or our fear of pain, we’re left in the wide-open, unpredictable middle. The instruction is to rest in that vulnerable place, ... that in-between state ... [which is where we always are; we’re] always in process, [never fully arriving]. And so we summon the courage] not to

---

<sup>2</sup> Pema Chödrön, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, pp. 58-60

<sup>3</sup> They also said, “Banish the word ‘struggle’ from your attitude and your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.” That’s another sermon!

act in the same old ways ... to take a chance.... It builds confidence in our ability to live without a game plan, to live unfettered by hope and fear.”<sup>4</sup>

Courage. Courage.

In the 1960s, Zen student Ed Brown was the head cook at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California. Being head cook is a really hard job, made harder, I'm sure, by having to work with an unending parade of volunteers who know nothing about commercial kitchens and are constantly threatening to ruin whole meals. Kem and I were two of those volunteers; we know.

Ed, despite being a really great guy, was infamous for his terrible temper. Once, in a fury, he went to his teacher, the famed Suzuki Roshi, with bitter complaints: People were talking when the kitchen should be silent; they were distracted and downright dangerous with the knives; they didn't clean up properly. Suzuki Roshi said, simply, “Ed, if you want a calm kitchen, calm your mind.”

When you think of courage, what comes to mind? First thought, best thought. Here's mine: For almost two months in 1989,<sup>5</sup> students in China protested for democracy. At the height of the protests, about a million people were assembled in Tiananmen Square. The military responded with assault rifles and tanks. Estimates of the death toll vary from several hundred to several thousand; thousands were wounded.

On June 5th, a lone man stood in front of a column of tanks leaving the square. As the lead tank driver tried to steer around him, he moved into the tank's path, peacefully holding his ground. He then climbed up onto the turret of the lead tank to speak to the soldiers inside. When he returned to his position in front of the tanks, a group of people pulled him aside.

His identity is still unknown; he has come to be known as Tank Man. The grainy photo is iconic and *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.

I have so many unanswered questions about him. Was he just fed up — suddenly, carelessly stepping up to sacrifice his life for the freedom of those who would come after him? Or were his actions the culmination of years of spiritual

---

<sup>4</sup> Pema Chödrön, *op cit*, p. 61

<sup>5</sup> April 15 - June 4, 1989

practice: letting go of outcomes, at peace in that very moment? Can you imagine the courage?

Beloved spiritual companions,

There are two kinds of courage in this world.

One demands that we armor up  
and leap into action.

The other demands that we strip naked  
and surrender.

Pleasure and pain, gain and loss,  
fame and disgrace, praise and blame:  
May we seek to cultivate spiritual courage,  
look with unclouded vision,  
live with wholeheartedness.

May we let go of the shore,  
push off into the middle of the river,  
look around to see who is there with us,  
and celebrate.