

# Courage and Humility

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith  
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Hundreds of times I have mentally rehearsed the subway scene from our reading this morning. As a New Yorker who commuted to college each day via three different subway lines, I have occasionally felt too close to the edge of the station's platform as the approaching light of the train was moving briskly towards the awaiting passengers. And I've noticed that others were even more perilously close to the edge than I, and I could almost anticipate that one day someone would fall off the platform, get hurt, become immobilized and...what am I supposed to do then?

I've often stared at the third rail while waiting for the subway, and scouted for nooks and crannies by the tracks that may shield a person from an oncoming train. I've always wondered if I was capable of such courage, acting as a human shield. Frankly, before jumping I would first have gone through a mental checklist: How old was the person who fell; had it been a child, I tell myself, I would probably have been more likely to risk my life. What if I were a father with small children? Would I show such courage? Probably not, at least not if the kids were actually with me. I'd think about what my life meant to me, and all those I'd leave behind who were counting on me for something. Of course, by the time I made my way through the checklist, the train would have long pulled into the station and deciding to act courageously would have been a moot point. Mr. Autrey, the subway hero, insisted he did nothing out of the ordinary. He was just doing what anyone in that situation would have done. It was like a reflex. Hmnn. It's as though he didn't weigh any choices. His courage was an automatic response to a dire situation.

I sometimes feel as indecisive as J. Alfred Prufrock, when T.S. Eliot wrote:  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

I guess my courage would fail me along the subway tracks of New York. But what about another scenario, like during the nazi occupation of Denmark. King Christian X noticed a nazi flag flying over a Danish public building. The king immediately called the German commandant, demanding that the flag be taken down at once. The commandant refused. "Then a soldier will go and take it down," said the King.

"He will be shot," threatened the commandant. "I think not," replied the King, "for I shall be the soldier." Within five minutes the flag was taken down. The king was courageous in upholding his deep moral conviction over against the threat to his life. It turned out well. It doesn't always. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who with great courage returned to Germany despite his safety in the United States, a student at Union Theological Seminary under the tutelage of Reinhold Niebuhr, joined the resistance movement to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was executed in April 1945

What is courage, be it on front lines in battle, acting on one's convictions, jumping in front of moving trains, surrendering personal safety to become extremely vulnerable? Plato included courage among the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage. Well yes, we all admire courage in others and probably wish we had more of it ourselves, but what is it? We most likely feel that being called a coward is one of the worst reproaches in the world – and I feel actual nausea when I label myself as cowardly for failing to act as I should have. Often in life when we find ourselves facing dilemmas, we choose the path of least resistance. When we need to be most decisive, we go passive. When we ought to be loyal to what we know is a higher principle, we often look to our own safety because the cost of exercising that principle can bring potential harm.

Our nation today faces the aftermath of a cowardly Democratic Party that failed to vote on the budget while they had a majority, and instead deferred to the fear of Tea Party retaliation and histrionics, and took the path of least resistance that would help their own re-election. The president may have signed a short-term budget compromise, but still the horrendous cuts in human services to the poor, health care, protecting the environment, could have been avoided were it not for a failure of nerve among House democrats in October of 2010. None of our House Democrats during the mid-term elections had the courage of a Danish King or a construction worker in New York who risked their lives to do what was right. House Democrats were filled with a hundred indecisions and hundreds of visions and revisions before their morning tea.

So what is courage? Who has it and who doesn't and why? Researchers are trying to unravel the question. One neuroscience study scanned the brain of subjects as they struggled to overcome their terror of snakes, identifying regions of the brain that may be key to our everyday heroics. (That is one study I am glad I did not participate). Researchers in the Netherlands are exploring courage among children, to see when the urge for courage first arises, and what children mean when they call themselves brave. Some researchers out of Princeton University claim that courage is no mere optional trait. We all have it within us...the trick is when do we exercise it and the person who does, defines "an excellent person."

My favorite study took place at the University of British Columbia where they studied the behavior of paratroopers as they prepared for their first parachute jump. (Im glad I was not a part of that study as well).

The research basically revealed three different groupings. Try to identify which one would fit you.

- 1- The fearless group who displayed scant signs of the racing heart, sweaty palms, nor spike in blood pressure.
- 2- The handwringers. (Do we have any handwringers among us?) Their fear response was so powerful that it actually kept them from jumping.

- 3- A group very similar to the handwringers with all the same physiological signs of fear, but who found something deep within, thus acting like fearless leapers, and they jumped out.

The conclusion is interesting: Courage is defined as acting in spite of the experience of fear. This concurs with the findings from the children in the Netherlands who equated courage with conquering one's fears like biking home through the woods at night or rescuing a cat from atop a tree.

Simply put, courage is doing something you are afraid to do. The word "courage" derives from the French term "corage" meaning "heart and spirit."

I like the phrase "having the courage of one's convictions." Trying to place myself in the shoes of the Danish King whose convictions would not allow the nazi flag with its swastika to fly on a public building, would I have summoned the courage to act rather than find the time for a hundred indecisions?

Here's the odd part, or at least what I hope we seriously consider this morning. I'm not trying to turn everyone into heroes, although I have this internal dialogue all the time about meeting my fears with a display of courage...maybe not in jumping off subway platforms in front of an oncoming train, but in taking difficult and sometimes controversial positions in our very conservative climate. I sometimes think about the safety provided by not getting into issues too deeply. I like to think that heart and spirit prevent any cowardice from coloring my decisions.

Here's what I hope you consider...it's kind of a puzzle. Ordinarily we would be inclined to think that courage represents a time when you assert your ego – here I am doing a brave thing. Notice me – and humility required us to do the exact opposite, namely to set aside our own ego. But the more I ponder the courageous acts of Mr. Autrey or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I come to think of humility as another form of courage. They acted as though they were as egoless as the Buddha, compelled by heart and spirit to humbly proceed along the path of what is right.

Humility is expressed in our actions, not our words. One of my favorite stories is about a guy who was a member of a nationwide, professional association of leaders in the workforce. He was voted the most humble leader in the entire association for leaders. They had an awards ceremony and presented him with a medal that said, "The most humble leader in America." Then they took it away from him at their next meeting because he wore it.

I guess the lesson is not being prideful about one's humility. I fell into that trap myself when I went to a Tibetan Buddhist retreat in Vermont to learn meditation in the early 90's. I worked my sitting practice up to eight hours a day and when I returned to Salt Lake I would tell everyone who would listen that I meditated for eight hours a day. Yep, I was egoless for 8 hours a day –admire my work.

Finding humility may prove more difficult a task than finding courage. I think I admire Mr. Autrey more for his humility after saving a man's life. He maintained that he just acted according to how human beings are wired: Responding to the need to help one's neighbor. But is this truly how we are wired? Safe living is so seductive.

From a religious perspective we need to ask how best to affirm the blessing of life? Paul Tillich in his foundational book, *The Courage to Be*, expresses that it is through acts of courage that we affirm life in spite of fear. But humility plays a huge part in finding the courage. In much Eastern thought where "centering" looms as the conduit to a meaningful life, the lynchpin is the belief that from one's center flow moral perception and moral behavior. Thus we act upon what we have always known, namely that life demands of us not safety or shelter from fear, but compassion and generosity and fairness towards all sentient beings. To act upon this with any consistency takes courage, but the source lies in humility where we set aside our own ego.

David Brooks, whom I admire more as a cultural observer than a political pundit, has researched a lot these past few months into the topic of humility. It's really fascinating stuff; setting aside one's ego is far from the American norm. He cites research that indicates that ninety-four percent of American college professors believe they have above average teaching skills. A survey of high school students found that 70 percent of them feel they have above average leadership skills while only 2 percent are below average.

A frightening statistic is that twice as many men than women are victims of unintentional drowning because of their overinflated sense of their own swimming abilities. (It sounds like a bit of humility could have saved their lives).

American students no longer perform well in global math tests yet Americans have the greatest faith in their math skills. American health care delivery is the poorest among developed nations and yet Americans believe they have the world's best health care system. I personally translate this as a lack of courage to admit our own failings and shortcomings. What we are lacking is the humility to recognize that we are not all that special but are, instead, just another nation of human beings struggling to keep up with the economic and social and political changes throughout the world community of nations.

What we're experiencing in our nation today can be categorized, I think, as an enlargement of the self whereby the self is entitled to more goods and privileges than others. We are not all wired like Mr. Autrey, in fact far from it. In our crises surrounding the national budget, eliminating human services for the poor in order to cut taxes for the wealthiest 2% among us shows that we are not particularly wired for helping our neighbor; we stuff our ears rather than hear the Golden rule.

I cannot stress enough my belief that humility teaches us the courage to live outside the confines of safety. We will find in civil disobedience, for example, the inner humility of a Gandhi or Mandela, that led them to defy the safety of their own existence because they knew what was right and what needed to be done. Their egos were cast aside, or at least absorbed by a greater good. And we honor them as courageous heroes, which they were, but courage and humility are two sides of the same coin.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer left Union Theological School to return to Germany – certainly a courageous act of stepping outside the safe confines of his life – his professor Reinhold Niebuhr said to the class: I’m giving Bonhoeffer an A in moral living. What grade do the rest of you feel you deserve?”

That may be a question for the ages. How would any of us grade ourselves in moral living? Do we have the courage to act as we morally should? Do we have the humility to acknowledge that we are not that special, and allow this recognition to inform us on how to act in the world?

Jumping off a subway platform...

Making demands on a nazi commandant...

Leaving America to join the Hitler resistance movement...

Performing civil disobedience to bring forth justice...

What courage; what humility.