

Everyday Heroes

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The word “courage” is taken from Latin *cor* (heart) and *age* (action). Courage is putting one’s heart into action in circumstances that involve risk or danger. Courage is inner strength. When children are asked to define courage, they typically say something like, “Courage is not being afraid.” This association of fearlessness with courage is unfortunate. Courage can coexist with fear or any other strong emotion that might prevent us from taking action.

Quiet acts of courage can occur around us without fanfare, even by very young children. A three-year-old who wakes up in the middle of the night in the dark with her heart racing and then calms her fears and returns to sleep shows courage. Descending into a dark basement to retrieve a toy shows courage if a child is terrified of the dark. Climbing to the top of a slide can take great courage for a child the first time the climb was made.

Heroism is finding the courage to take a significant risk or make a great sacrifice to achieve a noble goal honorably. Not all courage is heroic. Making a bungee jump from a bridge or climbing a steep mountain may take courage. Are these actions heroic? If you discovered that the mountaineer was making the difficult climb to rescue someone trapped near the summit, would that make a difference in your evaluation? The rescue is both courageous and heroic. Heroism is courage elevated to nobility.

Facing Fear

All truly courageous behavior includes an element of fear. Heroic individuals feel afraid because they know the real or

potential cost of their action. The firefighters who rushed up the steps in the World Trade Center must have been afraid. Their hearts must have been beating fast from more than the physical exertion. Yet, up the steps they went. Heroes recognize risk, feel afraid, and manage their fear.

Fear is a natural, healthy response to a threat. Fear can be a good emotion. It warns us of danger and enables us to protect ourselves more effectively. Fear gives us energy and is an important part of courage because it serves as a warning system and protective shield. The danger of fear is that it can spin out of control and cause panic. When this happens, fear interferes with thinking and causes poor decision-making.

Fear can, however, be controlled and integrated into a courageous act. The most important battleground is in the hero’s heart and mind. Fear can enable us to perform extraordinary physical feats outside of the normal range of our ability. Fear can counsel us, if we listen without making it the master of our action. Fear is not the enemy.

Listening to fear can help us make good decisions. People who act courageously move forward to a worthy goal despite fear. Good firefighters feel afraid. Controlled, the fear can help them stay as safe as possible. Yes, their hearts are beating fast and their blood pressure is up. But, instead of running away, they use this fear to provide the energy and strength that enables them to perform at a higher level. Courage is the controlled use of fear, not the absence of fear.

Everyday Heroism

Everyday Heroism is what we do when we face a risk, refuse the instruction to run away, and act to achieve something more important than safety. A parent who wakes up every night to care for a child with a chronic, life-threatening disease is an everyday hero. So is the parent who stands up to a belligerent teenager by setting fair and appropriate limits and ensures that reasonable consequences are in place.

True heroism is often built systematically — one small act of courage after another. The pressure to give up, pull back, and flee from the potential risk or real sacrifice can feel overwhelming. Yet these and other heroic parents carry on. They will never see their pictures in the paper or on posters, but their courage serves as an inspiration to those who know them.

Heroic behaviors are universally admired, but are all admirable acts heroic? Consider each of the following examples:

- A famous basketball player whose natural talent, combined with practice and good coaching, has propelled him to stardom in the NBA. Is this accomplishment heroic?
- A young cadet studying to be a police officer in a major metropolitan city joins a conversation with other cadets during a class break. When they begin making racist comments about one of the cadets in their class, he tells the group their comments are unfair and improper. He turns and leaves. Later, he calls his father to discuss what happened. He is worried. Did his action put him at risk? What if he gets in trouble on the street, puts in a call for help, and someone in that group is in a position to assist? They might not rush to his aid. Even so, he does not regret what he did. Was his confrontation heroic?

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- A wealthy philanthropist donates to a worthy charity. Is this a heroic act?
- A woman takes leave from her job to care for her mother who is dying from cancer. For two months she drives 120 miles a day to be with her at the hospital and brings her back home. After six months, she loses her job permanently. Eighteen months later, her mother dies in her care, a full two years following the original detection of cancer. Is the caregiver an example of heroism?

Heroism always involves a significant real or potential cost to the heroic person. Do all of the above examples meet this standard? Our definition of heroism suggests

five sets of skills that contribute to heroic behavior: (1) awareness of the adversity, the danger or the threat to oneself or others and enduring the consequences; (2) managing fear; (3) caring about oneself and the lives of others; (4) making a smart decision about how to respond; and (5) committing oneself fully to achieving a noble goal.

Although there is no strict, commonly-accepted textbook definition, those who have made the sacrifice, or taken the risk to “do the right thing” deserve to be honored by our careful use of the word “hero.”

Facing the Risk

What makes heroic behavior admirable is the decision to face the risks posed by the threat or danger. Stand up to speak in a group and one’s opinions might be ridiculed. Stand up to a bully, and your nose might be punched. There can be no guarantees. There are costs for always choosing safety, to remain quiet when an unfair decision is being made, or when a classmate is being bullied. The failure to act in response to cruelty, unfairness, or indifference erodes self-respect.

Helping children make good risk management judgments is extremely important. On February 25, 1999, a fierce blizzard struck Norton, Mass. Corey Anderson, 9 years old, was worried about Jasmine, his golden retriever mix, who had strayed from home. Corey was very close to his dog. Jasmine faithfully slept at the foot of his bed every night. Corey was worried. So he put on his Boston Bruins jacket, sweat pants, a ski mask and his mother's fur-lined boots and darted out the door in a swirl of snow to find Jasmine. Three days later searchers found Corey 400 yards from his home, dead from hypothermia¹.

Corey's heart had raced ahead of his mind and good judgment. Nine years old was too young to think through all of the risks involved. Adults have to do more than just protect children. Corey needed an adult to help him think through the circumstances.

Children need grown-ups to help them learn to think despite strong emotions. The odds that Jasmine could protect herself from the elements were much greater than those for a young boy. Corey should never have gone out into that blizzard. Remaining in his home would not have been a retreat based on fear. It would have been the smart, but more difficult action to take. Sometimes the most heroic action is to not be driven by blinding emotion.

Enduring the Sacrifice

Heroes endure the cost of sacrifice. A single mother loses sleep, leisure time, and personal comfort to work long hours at a difficult job to support her family. A father is faced with a constant struggle of heartbreak in caring for his terminally-ill child. A police officer risks his safety to help a battered woman escape from her violent spouse. An elementary school child stands up to a bully to stop him from hurting a classmate. Courage always has real

and potential costs. Heroism is not free. It has to be purchased. A child who admits to a wrongdoing, for example, knows that her honesty will lead to unpleasant consequences. Accepting such accountability often takes courage and is a demonstration of everyday heroism.

Caring About Others

Heroism is an act of caring. On July 20, 2001, 12-year-old Chris Wright and his father were enjoying a swim in a remote part of the Chowchilla River outside of Fresno, California. The father slipped on a wet rock, smashing his nose. Chris left the water to find some tissues. When he returned, he saw his father lying in the water shaking uncontrollably. "His teeth were clenched; he was foaming at the mouth," Chris recalls. "I was scared. I didn't know what to do." His panic was only momentary.

There was a house about 100 yards away, but no one responded to his calls. He knew it was up to him to get his father, who appeared to be slipping in and out of consciousness, out of the rocky ravine. The 120-pound seventh grader grabbed his 185-pound father under the arms and dragged him up the steep embankment. Then he managed to lift him into their pickup. As his father faded in and out of consciousness, Chris took the steering wheel of the truck and drove 15 miles to the rural house of his uncle. After arriving at the hospital, his father was diagnosed with epilepsy. When hearing compliments, Chris responded, "Any kid would have done the same thing. I love my dad." From his hospital bed his father recalled, "I woke up, and there Chris was on the bed next to me. He wouldn't leave."²

Chris met the requirements for being an everyday hero. He knew that his father's life was at risk. He was afraid. He felt a strong conviction of caring that obliged him to

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help his father. He managed his fear to think about the circumstances and then take decisive, thoughtful action. He did not panic. He endured through the difficulty. Exceptional circumstances revealed the strength within Chris's heart.

Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary General of the United Nations, wrote, "Life only demands from you the strength you possess; only one feat is possible — not to have run away." The child who learns to confront a bully on the playground today, displays a heroism we will depend on when that child grows up to face future difficulty. We need all the heroes we can find in an age that requires noble deeds.

What Books Can I Read About Courage?

Elizabeth Berger, *Raising Children with Character: Parents, Trust, and the Development of Personal Integrity* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999).

Kathleen A. Brehony, *Ordinary Grace: An Examination of the Roots of Compassion, Altruism, and Empathy, and the Ordinary Individuals Who Help Others in Extraordinary Ways* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999).

Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*

(New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

Samuai P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Edward P. Sarafino, *The Fears of Childhood: A Guide to Recognizing and Reducing Fearful States in Children* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986).

Benjamin B. Wolman, *Children's Fears* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978).

For more information about Everyday Heroes, including resources for use with preteens, visit the *Ring of Valor* Web site at: www.k-state.edu/wwparent/programs/hero/index.htm

1. "Mass. Boy's Body Found Beside Creek," *USA Today*, March 1, 1999.
2. People Weekly, December 10, 2001, p.106; Anne Krueger, "Boy who saved father in river gets new honor," *SignOnSanDiego.com* December 1, 2001.

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