

## What Courage Consists of

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### Gleanings from Ancient and Modern Sources

#### From the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21

**A**nd when they drew near to Jerusalem ... Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If any one says anything to you, you shall say, ‘the Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately....”

And so the disciples went and did as Jesus directed them; they brought the ass and the colt and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord....”

And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds around him said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought at the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he said to them, “It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers....”

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority...?” But when they tried to arrest him, they feared the multitudes, because they held him to be a prophet.

#### From Louise Diamond, *The Courage for Peace*

The former Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzchak Rabin ... did not start out as a peace maker in the traditional sense. He was a warrior.... When one has walked the war path, as he did, but then crosses over to the peace path, much effort is involved. Rabin entered the peace path reluctantly at first, but once convinced that it was the best and only way for his people, he stayed the course. And he was assassinated with the Hebrew word for peace—*shalom*—on his lips.

Rabin left this life in a moment of high energy, surrounded by tens of thousands of people expressing their love and support for him and his march toward peace. He went out after publicly embracing his longtime political rival, turned peace-partner, Shimon Peres. Earlier, he had shaken hands with his avowed “enemy” Yasser Arafat. He went out shortly after singing a song of peace. All this in a man who, we are told, did not easily display or receive affection, who never sang, whose own difficult journey toward peace was personal and harshly political.

Rabin, like Anwar Sadat before him, exemplified the courage for peace ... not because they both were killed for their actions ... but because they went through their own transformation process, and brought forth the results as an offering to humanity. They did what needed to be done to ... begin the bridging of a deep chasm in the Middle East. They did it first within themselves to lead their people through an unknown and terrifying wilderness toward peace, a journey that would require many deaths and rebirths, inner and outer, at the individual and collective levels....

To be a peace builder ... is to embark upon and embrace a heroic journey. It is a journey of transformation ... by which we discover the whole and holy nature of our own humanity. On our quest we are tested; we meet the monster on the road. That monster is crafted by our own minds, stuffed with our loss and suffering, our fear and bitterness, our intolerance and prejudice ... our illusion of separation.... But each time we open our heart a little more or take just a little more personal responsibility for the consequences of how we treat ourselves and each other, we take another courageous step on that journey.

### Reflections

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**A**lthough there are many points on which the Gospels disagree, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all report that at some point late in his ministry Jesus—a rude, country preacher and prophet—entered Jerusalem and proceeded to raise a ruckus at Judaism’s most sacred shrine. This episode is the focal point of Palm Sunday, and it was undoubtedly a watershed in Jesus’s career. Indeed, this brash endeavor probably cost him his life.

The story has been repeated so many times, and has been so often seen as part of a grand, meta-physical master plan, that the historical context for these events is no longer readily apparent. Bruce Chilton, a respected New Testament scholar, provides a glimpse of what may have transpired on that fateful occasion.

According to Chilton, Jesus would have come to the gates of Jerusalem at the head of a rag-tag army of followers who believed him to be the true and legitimate heir of King David. Jesus probably saw himself as the object of a scriptural prophecy made by Zechariah, who said that someday a just and gentle king, riding an ass, would come to liberate Israel. He would triumph over usurpers and oppressors—in Jesus’s view the Roman occupiers and the high priests who profited handsomely from sacrifices made at the Great Temple. This is how Chilton imagines the scene:

Whole families would have been marching with Jesus, a bedraggled caravan, singing psalms, asking for food in villages, sleeping around fires at night.... But Jesus was playing a risky game ... for these zealots could easily turn violent as he led them to proclaim the Kingdom of God in the holy city....

Violence and upheaval, Chilton speculates, probably ensued. Jesus wasn’t the only one who overturned tables and released pigeons from their cages. Quite likely he “provoked the rabble behind him into a raid on the Temple ... a rioting mob fueled by prophetic zeal.” This challenge to their authority convinced the priests that they were dealing with a determined agitator bent on radical spiritual, social, and economic reform. This was not someone who could be appeased, placated, or co-opted. He would have to be eliminated.

Was this audacious effort to alter the status quo, to shift the balance of power, courageous? Was Jesus a man of exceptional daring? If we accept Chilton’s account of these events, it is hard to argue otherwise. By any rational calculation the odds against him were overwhelming. He had confronted a powerful, well-organized opposition with little more than a mob.

But Jesus believed himself to be a descendent of King David—a man who had waged a successful battle against the giant, Goliath. Convinced that Zechariah’s hopeful prophecy pointed to him, he felt that the God of the patriarchs and the prophets was on his side. Perhaps this faith made Jesus courageous. But is courage possible *without* profound faith in one’s values and objectives?

Personally, I find Bruce Chilton’s recounting of the Palm Sunday story far more inspiring than the standard, orthodox one. Orthodoxy grants Jesus clear knowledge of his destiny; he knows his death is inevitable, after which he will be restored to full divinity. The orthodox Jesus had foreknowledge, was always in control, and therefore risked nothing by his provocative actions. Indeed, he *intended* to do something outrageous in order to be apprehended and executed.

This isn’t a human drama at all. Here Jesus conducts a cosmic set-piece in which everyone from Joseph to Judas plays a pre-assigned role. If we accept him as an incarnate deity, it’s hard to see how Jesus could be truly courageous. Accepted an inspired teacher and prophet, on the other hand, he clearly was. But if we look a little closer we realize that even in the latter instance Jesus models for us a very *conventional*, a very orthodox, form of courage. This is not to say that his human boldness wasn’t impressive, just that it conforms to popular, preconceived notions of what courage consists of.

As the charismatic leader of a revolt against powerful individuals and institutions, Jesus exhibits what is called “martial” courage—the courage of the warrior. Throughout history, Linda Colley writes, “cultures have viewed the battlefield as the best ... testing ground for what Theodore Roosevelt called ‘the iron qualities that must go with true manhood....’

When we hear the word “courage” this is what we typically think of: fearlessness under fire, bravery in the face of physical threat, valor and gallantry in combat. Courage of this kind is hardly restricted to soldiers. It pertains to those who fight fires, and to doctors who treat virulent diseases. Likewise, athletes who pursue extreme or punishing sports are said to be courageous. Ask the average person about courage and more than likely they will respond with examples like these.

But martial courage hardly exhausts our possibilities. With a little digging, we find less obvious but equally valid instances of courage in the Gospels—ones that may be more relevant to our own lives. One thinks for instance of three disciples Jesus first recruited—Peter, James, and John. Happily plying a comfortable, uncomplicated trade as fishermen, these men are assisted in their work by a stranger who then invites them to put down their nets and become “fishers of men.” The Gospels report that almost without hesitation they left everything behind to follow this strangely compelling, itinerant teacher.

Although the courage to reconfigure one's life in accordance with a new standard may entail some material deprivation and physical hardship, it isn't the same as martial courage. The struggle here takes place internally and what is at stake is personal transformation. Jesus's words caused a major shift in his listeners' perception and their self-understanding. Now, would they act in accordance with that inner shift or would they stay in place? Would they be timid or courageous?

David O'Keefe's story is similar. A software expert who developed computer war simulations, O'Keefe worked at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a nuclear weapons research lab in Berkeley. He enjoyed what he did, and he also liked attending silent meetings on Sunday with his Quaker girlfriend. One Sunday, however, he was asked to join a protest at Livermore Lab. Without revealing his own vocation and workplace, O'Keefe declined.

Shortly thereafter the first Gulf War started, and the military began using one of O'Keefe's computer simulations to calculate probabilities of hits and kills. Suddenly, he said, "the simulations were no longer so abstract. Thousands of people were dying."

Although he wanted to join those who were protesting the war, O'Keefe didn't feel he could do so as long as he worked at the lab. Finally, he announced to his colleagues that because he no longer believed in what they were doing he had to leave. He wanted to find work he could feel good about. He then invited anyone who wished to talk to him privately about his decision to come see him.

One by one, three military officers assigned to his project dropped by O'Keefe's office. Each said he was doing the right thing.

The English word for courage derives from the French word for "heart." According to Louise Diamond courage is what happens "when love and action meet in the heart." Like James, John, and Peter, Dave O'Keefe had resolved to bring his life into alignment with his core beliefs. At any time and in any culture, following the "heart-path" requires exceptional courage.

We often mistake bravado for courage. An awful lot of what society calls "courage" is little more than exhibitionism, the pursuit of high-risk, potentially destructive behavior for its own sake. Bravado is typically detached from any higher purpose or transformative principle, and seldom issues from deep wellsprings of love, idealism, and conviction. In Philip Pullman's fantasy novel *The Amber*

*Spyglass* his young heroine, Lyra, makes an interesting observation:

Maybe sometimes we don't do the right thing because the wrong thing looks more dangerous; we don't want to look scared, so we go and do the wrong thing just *because* it's dangerous. We're more concerned with not looking scared than with judging right.

Lyra hits the nail on the head. Many of us would rather do something wrong if it makes us look brave, than do the right thing and appear weak. This is precisely what the politics of the "war on terror" boils down to. No matter how little sense it makes, no matter how much harm it causes in the long run, no matter how many more terrorists it inspires, our current Iraq policy must be maintained. It may not be the "right" thing to do, but if we don't "stay the course" others will think us weak. A carefully considered, expeditious withdrawal from Iraq is *not* the same as "cutting and running," but those who believe in and practice bravado don't see any difference.

It could also be argued that in an instance like this, *martial* courage has been allowed to outflank *moral* courage. The clear failure of our policies in the Middle East offers a real opportunity for reassessment, for the transformation of our thinking and our approach to foreign affairs. Do we have the courage, as a culture, to make a major shift toward non-military problem solving? Or will we continue to violate our professed values in order to posture as a hegemonic, 21st century Goliath?

Women display a third kind of courage in the Gospel narrative. In the case of both Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene we find individuals breaking decisively with established gender norms. Both women dare to act as independent, choice-making agents, repudiating their status as second-class citizens. Despite criticism and skepticism, they quietly demand to be taken seriously as spiritual searchers and active apostles.

The kind of behavior the two Marys exhibit is what Curtis White calls "revolutionary disobedience"—a refusal to submit to "radical evil." Evil of this kind does not adhere to individuals and is not recognizably malicious. It simply describes the unjust and inequitable system into which we all are born. Most of us simply accept the "system" as given and inevitable. "There's no use fighting city hall," we say, or "the system is too well-entrenched, so what difference can one person make?"

As Marilynne Robinson observes, it often takes a great deal of courage simply to confront the world's sheer pettiness, the "system's" demand that we suspend judgment, toe the line, follow the crowd, not create a scene. "A minor and insidious fear ... coaxes us toward conforming our lives, and even our thoughts, to norms that are effective markers of group identity," Robinson complains. Here she echoes sentiments expressed 160 years earlier by Henry David Thoreau. In the opening pages of *Walden* he writes:

the greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely my own good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?

Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany didn't overthrow patriarchy by their refusal to accept their assigned, subservient role—although the early Christian Church of their successors *did* feature more gender equality than other institutions in the ancient world. Sometimes small sparks of resistance, refusal, or defiance *do* ignite a conflagration—Rosa Parks is a contemporary case in point. But even if it doesn't have a profound impact on the system, courageous resistance to "radical evil" permits an individual to live with integrity and greater peace of mind.

Courage, then, is a much richer concept than what one typically encounters in the popular imagination. The braggadocio of a Bill O'Reilly or a Rush Limbaugh is counterfeit courage. So are the reck-

lessness of a professional skier like Bode Miller and the swagger of rappers and hip-hop artists. Anyone, as the late Susan Sontag wrote, can be brave—even vicious scoundrels and terrorists. It is the "*content* of the courage that determines its merit, its moral necessity."

"A courageous person," Aristotle wrote, is one who faces fearful things as he ought, and as reason directs, for the sake of what is noble."

Courage does not imply absence of fear, for fear is what prompts us to search our hearts and to exercise sound judgment before leaping into action. Fear protects us from rashness, from "doing the wrong thing just *because* it's dangerous," as Lyra pointed out. To have courage means staying in touch with the heart, welcoming fear as a counselor rather than as a cause for shame.

In his book *Going Public*, community organizer Michael Gecan recalls meeting a young, confident African American woman—Icie Johnson—who worked in a rather rough part of East Brooklyn. "Aren't you afraid to walk alone in such a dangerous environment?" Gecan asked.

"Of course I'm afraid," Johnson replied. "But I'm not fearful ... I'm not *full* of fear."

As long as we do not permit ourselves to be *full* of fear, we can exercise courage—courage to confront the powers that be, courage to follow a path with heart, courage to bring a child into this problematic world. If we would leave a legacy of virtue, nobility, and faith, we have no choice but to be courageous.