In Search of Courage

Finding the courage within you.

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By: John McCain
Photographs by: Frank W. Ockenfels 3

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Over the past 30 years, American culture has defined courage down. We have attributed courage to all manner of actions that may indeed be admirable but hardly compare to the conscious self-sacrifice on behalf of something greater than one's own self-interest. Today, in our excessively psychoanalyzed society, sharing one's secret fears with others takes courage. So does escaping a failing marriage. These are absurd examples of our profligate misidentification of the virtue of courage. There are many other closer calls. Is the athlete's prowess and guts on the playing field an example of courage? Is suffering illness or injury without complaint courageous? Not always. They may be everyday behavior typical of courageous people. They may be evidence of virtuousness. But of themselves, these acts, admirable though they are, are not sufficient proof of courage.

Courage is like a muscle. The more we exercise it, the stronger it gets. I sometimes worry that our collective courage is growing weaker from disuse. We don't demand it from our leaders, and our leaders don't demand it from us. The courage deficit is both our problem and our fault. As a result, too many leaders in the public and private sectors lack the courage necessary to honor their obligations to others and to uphold the essential values of leadership. Often, they display a startling lack of accountability for their mistakes and a desire to put their own self-interest above the common good.

That means trouble for us all, because courage is the enforcing virtue, the one that makes possible all the other virtues common to exceptional leaders: honesty, integrity, confidence, compassion, and humility. In short, leaders who lack courage aren't leaders.

Lack of courage is not the exclusive failing of political leaders, but our failings as well as our virtues set a national example. We may have learned important lessons from the intelligence failures that preceded the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But I'm not sure we set a reassuring example to the rest of the country by declining to punish anyone involved in those failures. Not one person was fired or was moved by his or her conscience to resign. Similarly, the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib has occasioned much soul-searching but little in the way of personal accountability. The enlisted people responsible for the abuses are facing courts-martial, as they should. But others higher in the chain of command have yet to face serious disciplinary action or offer their resignations. No one has had the courage to stand up and say, "It's my fault, I'm going to resign."

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When no one takes responsibility for failure, or when responsibility is so broadly shared that individual accountability is ignored, then failure in public office becomes acceptable. It's hard to see how that serves the country.

The same holds true for the business world. Corporate America has taken significant blows to its reputation, because too many executives don’t have the courage to stand up for what they know is right. The perception among many is that corporate leaders are committed only to their own self-enrichment. In 2002, Leo Mullin, the former CEO of Delta Air Lines, received a bonus of $1.4 million plus $2 million in free stock, even as the airline laid off thousands of employees. He left Delta with a huge severance package that was in no way justified by his performance. More recently, we've learned how Enron's traders bragged about gouging California ratepayers during that state’s energy crisis. Those traders weren't executives, but they were inspired to behave the way they did by the "me first" climate of self-aggrandizement that Enron’s leaders had created. When there’s an absence of courage, greed and selfishness take over. And it’s not without consequences. There’s a growing disdain -- if not contempt -- for much of corporate America. And that’s not healthy for the country’s future.

If courage is in scarce supply, then demand is down as well. We are a strong, mostly lawful, prosperous country. We don’t have as much to fear as we did in the past -- despite the events of September 11 and despite the ongoing war in Iraq. Approximately 200,000 Americans went to Iraq to destroy the regime of Saddam Hussein. From a country of 270 million people, that’s less than 1% of the population. Very few of us are called upon to test our courage in the crucible of fear and hard moral choices. And yet, courage still matters -- more than we think.

Without courage, all virtue is fragile: admired, sought after, professed, but held cheaply and surrendered without a fight. Winston Churchill called courage "the first of human qualities ... because it guarantees all the others." That’s what we mean by the courage of our convictions. If we lack the courage to hold on to our beliefs in the moment of their testing, not just when they accord with those of others but also when they go against threatening opposition, then they're superficial, vain things that add nothing to our self-respect or our society’s respect for the virtues we profess. We can admire virtue and abhor corruption sincerely, but without courage we are corruptible.

Courage is not always certain, and it is not always comprehensible. As courage demands great sacrifice, so does it demand great economy in its definition. General William Tecumseh Sherman defined courage as a "perfect sensibility of the measure of danger and a mental willingness to endure it." That seems to me as apt a definition as any. Courage is that rare moment of unity between conscience, fear, and action, when something deep within us strikes the flint of love, of honor, of duty, to make the spark that fires our resolve. Courage is the highest quality of life attainable by human beings. It's the moment -- however brief or singular -- when we are our complete, best self, when we know with an almost metaphysical certainty that we are right.

One thing we can claim with complete confidence is that fear is indispensable to courage, that it must always be present for courage to exist. You must be afraid to have courage. Suffering is not, by itself, courage; choosing to suffer what we fear is. And yet, too great a distinction is made between moral courage and physical courage. They are in many instances the same. For either to be authentic, it must encounter fear and prove itself superior to that fear. By fear, I mean the kind that entails serious harm to ourselves, physical or otherwise, the kind that wars with our need to take action but which we overcome because we value something or someone more than our own well-being. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the capacity to act despite our fears.

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In the past, I’ve been able to overcome my own fears because of an acute sense of an even greater fear -- that of feeling remorse. You can live with pain. You can live with embarrassment. Remorse is an awful companion. And whatever the unwelcome consequences of courage, they are unlikely to be worse than the discovery that you are less than you pretend to be. I can recall all too well those times I’ve avoided the risk of injury or
disappointment by overruling the demands of my conscience.

One such time came during the 2000 campaign for president, when I failed to say that the Confederate flag that flew over the state capitol of South Carolina should be taken down. I rationalized, in a moment of cowardice, that that decision should be left to the people of South Carolina. After the campaign, I returned to South Carolina and apologized, which didn't mean much since the apology came after the fact. The lesson that I took from that experience was this: In the long run, you're far better off taking the courageous path. I don't know if I would have won South Carolina, but taking the position I did, I lost. Maybe I would have lost by more if I had spoken out -- so what? At least my conscience wouldn't have bothered me long after the disappointment of a lost election had worn off.

If fear is a condition of courage, so too is love. It is love that makes us willing to sacrifice, love that gives us courage. And it was love that helped me endure five years of captivity in a Hanoi prisoner-of-war camp, the love and compassion that came from my comrades. Whenever I was down, my fellow prisoners picked me up, many times at risk to themselves. I learned what I didn't want to learn: that I had failings that required the assistance of others. The great privilege of my life is to be associated with men of courage who tried to impart their own courage to me.

"Don't let fear convince you that you're too weak to have courage. Fear is the opportunity for courage, not proof of cowardice."

Love makes courage necessary. And it's love that makes courage possible for all of us to possess. You get courage by loving something more than your own well-being. When you love virtue, when you love freedom, when you love other people, you find the strength to demand courage of yourself and of those who aspire to lead you. Only then will you find the courage, as Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "to do the thing you think you cannot do."

If you do the thing you think you cannot do, you'll feel your resistance, your hope, your dignity, and your courage grow stronger. You will someday face harder choices that very well might require more courage. And when those moments come and you choose well, your courage will be recognized by those who matter most to you. When your children see you choose, without hesitation, without remark, to value virtue more than security, to love more than you fear, they will learn what courage looks like and what love serves, and they will dread its absence.

We're all afraid of something. The one fear we must all guard against is the fear of ourselves. Don't let the sensation of fear convince you that you're too weak to have courage. Fear is the opportunity for courage, not proof of cowardice. No one is born a coward. We were meant to love. And we were meant to have the courage for it.

U.S. Senator John McCain is the author, along with Mark Salter, of Faith of My Fathers, Worth the Fighting For, and Why Courage Matters, from which portions of this essay were adapted.

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