

Quest For Courage

The Five Things I Learned From The Cowardly Lion

By Karel Murray

Stopping a runaway train and saving all on board... that's courage.
Stepping in front of a bus to push a small child out of the way... that's courage.
Facing the world with a blemish on your face... that's courage.
Wearing a safety pin in your pants, praying it won't pop open at the worst time...
that's courage

Growing up, my primary resource for understanding the concept of courage was the Wizard of Oz on television, watching the odd foursome face peril after peril. Confront the Wicked Witch of the West? No way. The Cowardly Lion had it right... clanking knees, shaking shoulders and quivery voice and cowering in a corner. Hopefully that evil person wouldn't see him.

But then he did a strange thing. Despite his overwhelming fear, he still did the right thing. Faced the Wizard, spoke up to the Witch and battled flying monkeys. Why did he do that? If he just faced the other way, walked in a different direction, or bowed his head appropriately, he could have gone on with his life as the overlooked, insignificant being he wished to be. Instead, he stuck his neck out.

So why did they call him the Cowardly Lion when in fact he never was? He just experienced those typical human emotions that set us on a path that is ours to choose.

So what exactly defines courage?

The very word comes from the heart – Coeur is the French word for heart. It comes from the gut. Follow your heart... another way to make a brave decision.”

“What is Courage?”, Michael Useem, Fast Company Magazine, September 2004

“A strong emotional commitment. When you run up against barriers that keep you from those ideals, the stronger your commitment, the more likely you are to take action consistent with those ideals. We are where we've been.”

John Kotter – Professor, Harvard Business School

My hero, a quivering mass of fur dancing along a yellow brick road. I've discovered through the course of my life that I've learned five very important lessons from the Cowardly Lion. Perhaps sharing these with you today will help you face this ever changing, fast paced, sometimes overwhelming world.

1. You can beat up a flying monkey.

Often in our lives we are annoyed by the buzzing and interference of subtle criticism shielded as kind consideration. For example, a friend says, "You look lovely today! Maybe if you lost a couple of pounds, that outfit would drape better." This is accompanied by a squeeze on the hand or a pat on the cheek. The buzz begins to get so loud, you can't even view yourself in the mirror anymore without considering what others will say about the outfit or your "not 20 anymore" figure.

The incessant drone drowning out a positive self image. Unwelcome thoughts darting around the brain, much like flying monkeys swooping around the Lion.

Distraction, attack, restrain. A technique mastered by the flying monkeys.

However, this can be effectively countered by using candor - your willingness to speak the truth. I've learned that when someone pays me a compliment, then slaps me in the face with a well intentioned criticism, I ask them to repeat ONLY the compliment. I let them know (in a kind way) that I'm aware they have my best interests at heart, but their comments regarding the weight I'm already highly conscious of takes the joy out of the initial compliment.

Some of you are flinching right now. I can't possibly say that to a friend! Personally, I believe that if the friendship is true and sound, honest communication between individuals not only strengthens the relationships, but you can enjoy the partnership with delight - not fear the dreaded well meaning comment. Candor.

2. The person behind the Big Wizard head is human.

As a child, I stood in awe of celebrities, managers and public officials; the stern policeman addressing my sixth grade class on the values of not using drugs, a doctor probing my throat and announcing I had to have my tonsils removed, or

the Mayor of the town waving from an automobile during a festive parade. Their glamour, authority, and absolute control made them icons in my childlike perspective.

Some of us never lose this automatic fear of authority. For example, let's say you receive a letter with an attorney's name and address on the envelope. The first reaction may be "what did I do?". Your hands might actually sweat as you slice open the envelope. Then a burst of laughter erupts when you realize it is only a solicitation for a local charity event. Your thundering heart slows and you can actually hear again because the blood that rushed to your ears has receded.

This adrenaline rush, shortness of breath, blushing ears, and copious sweating are all signs of facing up to The Big Wizard Head! The Cowardly Lion experienced all of these symptoms, yet he still stepped forward to present his request. Granted he was pushed forward and then he ran down the hallway after being yelled at, but, heck, we all have our moments.

As I've aged, I've learned that I can have this affect on others without even knowing it. I'm a mother, served as a Regional Manager, currently hold a Board position for a national association, and have served as a community Chamber of Commerce Chairperson. Others treated me respectfully, and some actually experience anxiety when they speak with me.

But ...it's just me!

Once the mantle of authority is placed on our shoulders, the assumption of power over other's lives settles in. It not only takes courage to stand firm in front of an authority figure, but our own outward display of courage is absolutely critical. Lacking this element of leadership will unsettle those around you. However, you can't be something you are not. People will know that you are faking it and then your credibility plummets.

If you are a Big Wizard Head, wear a great hat, a smile, and interact with confidence. If you have to face a Big Wizard Head, communicate with style; wear a better hat and a broad grin. It may look like a snarl if your lips are clenched too tight in fear, so loosen it up, enjoy the moment and address any issue that might come up with confidence and purpose.

3. You can melt your own Wicked Witch.

The broom riding, intensely green, beady eyed Wicked Witch of the West completed terrified me. It wasn't just her hawk like appearance and focused efforts to destroy the Lion and his companions; it was her complete control over the flying monkeys and Munchkin Land inhabitants.

That is what parents can feel like. Now, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my parents, but, really, when are we allowed to grow up? As I think of my son, Ben, I flash back to when he was two years old and needing a hug after a fall from his Hot Wheels. But he is 26 years old, six foot three inches tall, and ready to take on the world. How come I still feel that my sage advice is critical to his essential well being? Why do I analyze every decision he makes and feel compelled to offer unsolicited guidance? Oh no... I've become the hawk mother equivalent of the Wicked Witch.

Focus on the childling. Regurgitate substance for life enhancement. Shove him out of the nest, but fly underneath him, ready to catch if he falters in his flight.

My husband learned how to melt my Wicked Witch tendencies. It's called restraint. A quick kick under the table, a hand squeezed urgently in my lap, or "Karel... let's get desert", to cut off the conversation. I receive these signals and I melt - right on the spot. I recognize that he is preventing me from stepping over the boundaries and forcing me to allow our son to grow up.

But it's so darn hard! Now all I need to do is practice what I preach with my own parent. That is where courage comes in.

"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."

"Faith of My Fathers, Worth the Fighting For and Why Courage Matters", U.S. Senator John McCain and Mark Salter

Melt your own Wicked Witch with love. Dorothy did it, so can you.

4. No forest can overwhelm you unless you let it.

Reading “The Upright Man” by Michael Marshall made me consider our lives among the masses. We each feel like we are unique, but then discover, we, along with many others, accumulate property, pay debts, fulfill obligations, and then watch while our replacements take on the role in society that we can no longer retain due to advancing age. A life cycle that keeps repeating itself, generation after generation.

Creeping through the dark forest on the way to stop the Wicked Witch, the Cowardly Lion and companions are attacked by aggressive, groping trees. Fighting back gallantly, they manage to disengage themselves and continue on with their mission. Our lives can be like those trees. Consider the television programming designed to reach out and make you “addicted” to watching it night after night. Don’t read, play board games, sew, or other creative endeavors, just relax and let us entertain you. It is enticing and unrelenting.

Limiting our view on the world is relatively easy. Just put blinders on, read news from only one source and keep focused on your daily duties and responsibilities. This is the right thing to do in society! But don’t you want more? Getting involved with others and the community is a way to elude the grasp of the trees. It doesn’t involve money, just heart and courage. Establishing your own direction because you can...

“Courage is a function of feeling part of a social fabric, of a network that’s going to do something that has never been done before. When Caesar spoke, people marched. Getting people to march behind your ideas takes courage.”

Warren Bennis

5. The Lollypop kids are really frightening – run – run fast!

Strange, unexpected things occur in our lives all the time. Dorothy, accosted by those dancing, singing triplets called the Lollypop Kids, appeared frozen in place while their perfect shrill harmony pierced the air. You know how it happens...life is moving along smoothly, and then BAM, in prances a situation you least expected.

You aren’t sure whether you should laugh, cry, or get angry. Sure, we’ve perfected the art of “ventilating” to our closest friends... “You wouldn’t BELIEVE

what happened to me today!” But our ability to control our lives is slipping away more every day. It’s addressing these times in our lives which requires strength of character, action plans, and support systems.

My husband Rick was using his cell phone voice mail system to learn of a movie location and time in Cedar Rapids. The automated voice was female and quite pleasant to listen to. Here is how the dialog went:

Voice Mail: Please say a command.
Rick: Dial movies
Voice Mail: That is not a recognized command, please say a command.
Rick: List commands
Voice Mail: What commands do you want?
Rick: Any dialing commands
Voice Mail: Do you want us to dial something for you?
Rick: YES!
Voice Mail: What would you like for us to dial?
Rick: Dial movie theatres
Voice Mail: What city?
Rick: Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Voice Mail: Did you say Cedar Falls, Iowa?
Rick: No!
Voice Mail: What city?
Rick: Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Voice Mail: Did you say Cedar Rapids, Iowa?
Rick: YES!
Voice Mail: Which theatre do you wish to dial?
Rick: List theatres
Voice Mail: Which theatres?
Rick: I don’t know!
Voice Mail: Would you like to hear a list of movies and times?
Rick: Yes!
Voice Mail: List movie you would like to see.
Rick: Constantine
Voice Mail: Constant in the Theme?
Rick: NO! Constantine.
Voice Mail: Connie Stands and Sings?
Rick: NO! Constantine! Constantine!
Voice Mail: Please hang up and dial again.

I had already dialed the theatre line, retrieved the movie information and locations by the time Rick almost screamed from frustration. I however, was laughing so hard, I was doubled over. So proud of his gadget, yet the results were unexpected. Technology is supposed to make our lives easier. I don't believe Rick really used the service again.

To this day, the Cowardly Lion remains an icon for me. It reminds me that our own acts of courage create the texture of our existence.

- ▶ Rosa Parks refused to sit at the back of the bus, altering race relations nationally.
- ▶ Christopher Reeves inspired the world trapped within the confines of a wheel chair.
- ▶ Mandela confronted an African nation on abuses and inequities.
- ▶ Norma Rae blew the whistle.
- ▶ A teenage girl births a child and gives it up for adoption.
- ▶ Parents send their children off to school for the first time.
- ▶ 300 pound woman has a gastric by-pass and loses 150 pounds.
- ▶ My father learns to dance so he can share a moment with his daughter at her wedding.
- ▶ 125 days without an alcoholic drink and the woman smiles...
- ▶ A man and woman say "I Do!" and mean "Until death do us part..."
- ▶ 29 year old young man endures chemotherapy - determined to live a quality life.
- ▶ Dying, a person in hospice says "That's enough" and says goodbye to those they love.
- ▶ A hug of forgiveness

Courage is the capacity to wait until you've learned as much as you can and then take action. You have to take gambles and learn more. There is no such thing as a safe risk. All courage is risk!"

Warren Bennis

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