



# COURAGE



by Carolyn Spring

Courage. It's the stuff of heroes, right? Frodo with the Ring in Mordor, William Wallace and the uprising, Henry V once more into the breach, 'Sully Sullenberger' parking his broken plane on the Hudson.

'Courage' isn't necessarily a word we think is all that relevant to therapy, to recovering from trauma.

But I think it's literally at the heart of everything we do.

'Courage' comes from the Latin word 'cor' meaning 'heart'. To 'encourage' means to put the heart into someone, to give them courage. It really is the heart of the matter.

Our problem with courage is that we judge it by external, objective standards. We think we have to dive into a burning building for it to count as courage. But that's not how I view it. I've met many

trauma survivors and I'd say they are largely characterised by courage – and by a struggle with recognising their own courage.

I remember the days when for me it took courage just to get out of bed. People say to me when I'm delivering a training day, 'Oh you're so brave!', 'This is a very courageous thing to do' and I look at them blankly, because to me it doesn't require courage. Getting out of bed on days when all I wanted to do was to die – that took courage. Going to therapy and being willing to be deeply vulnerable, to feel feelings I had only ever previously dissociated, to remember things that had always been too overwhelming to remember – *that* was courage.

Courage emanates from *both* the head and the heart. Courage isn't foolhardiness. If someone rushes into a burning building which is empty, that's not courage. It's



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stupid. If someone runs in to rescue a trapped baby, then obviously that takes courage. But if there is a fully-equipped firefighter ready to go in with both expertise and the right gear, then it's still foolhardy.

Courage isn't courage when it's stupid.

And that's what we often fear when we're facing trauma work: is this a case of courage, or is it just plain stupid?

Sometimes we want to wade right in and get it all 'dealt with' in one go – we splurge out our story, throw caution to the wind, and think we're being courageous. But we're being stupid. We're walking into a burning building holding a can of petrol. That approach to therapy will only ever make things worse. We need to sidle up to our trauma carefully, treating it with respect. We need to progress in phases – safety first, stabilisation, kitting up with protective clothing and equipment, having a plan in place. Otherwise we *will* get burned.

Other people take the opposite approach. They flee the burning building. They do everything at all times to avoid their trauma. In the most extreme cases, these people don't come anywhere near therapy, because their avoidance is too complete. They would rather live an emotionally shut-down life, drunk or drugged or in some other way numb, rather than tackling the conflagration of trauma in their life.

That's not courage.

Courage sits on the interface between avoidance and foolhardiness. It's the crossover between our feelings and our thoughts: we need to assess the risk, formulate a plan, and be prepared before we act. And then we need to be able to overcome our fear. But it's not a blind leap into the dark. It's a careful, considered step towards a specific goal.

So with courage we use our front brains to assess the risk and formulate a plan. And then we gird up our loins to take action – we feel our fear but we do it anyway, because we've assessed that the cost of not taking action is greater than the risk of the action itself.

Very often the night before therapy I would lie awake, a disturbing dread enveloping my body. If I slept, I usually had nightmares or upsetting dreams, as my brain tried to figure out solutions in advance. I would wake, my guts quivering with terror. I just wanted to pull the duvet over my head and disappear into oblivion for a few hours, until it was over.

But I never went back to sleep. In 9.5 years of therapy, I never missed a single session. That's courage.

Courage doesn't just arise naturally within us. Why would it? It's counter-intuitive. Our bodies and brains are warning us of danger, the smoke alarm is sounding, and so our natural instinct is to run away. It's entirely counter-intuitive



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to do the opposite and run towards the session. So there's an act of the will, an engagement of our *choice*. We feel the fear and do it anyway.

Why? For me, I believed in what we were doing in therapy. It hurt. It was at times pure agony. But I believed that by going through it, by doing the work, things would get better. The trauma would be resolved. The symptoms would abate. Like in the *Bear Hunt* story, I'd often say to myself, 'We can't go over it, we can't go under it it – oh no, we'll have to go *through* it!' At the very least it made me smile.

And I would also talk my courage up: literally, I would *encourage* myself. 'It's only a therapy session. You're sitting in a room with a human being. That's all it is. You're in control of it. You can leave at any time. You don't need to say or do anything you don't want to. It *feels* scary, but it's not actually scary. The feelings that come up make you feel vulnerable, but it's just a feeling. The therapist won't hurt you. So you're not *actually* vulnerable. She won't reject you. She won't hate you. She won't hurt you. She's there to help you. Nothing really bad will happen.'

A key to this was understanding *psychic equivalence*. This is a developmental stage of infants, but which can be incomplete in those of us who have suffered early life trauma. It's all about how we construct a sense of reality. The baby who is hungry

feels that hunger as all-encompassing. It just *is*. Therefore, there is only hunger in the world. There is no other state. There is no other reality. What the baby feels on the inside is assumed to be true on the outside.

With psychic equivalence, I assumed that if I felt vulnerable, that meant that the risk was real. The evidence for the risk being real was the fact that I felt vulnerable – it was circular, and self-reinforcing. I couldn't see my feeling as just a feeling. I saw it as a fact, a reality. I projected outwards from my feelings and imposed my internal reality on the external world. If I felt unsafe, it was because the world *was* unsafe. If I felt rejected, it was because I *was* rejected.

So I had to learn to separate out my internal feelings from external reality. They were both valid. But they didn't always correspond. I could feel rejected whilst not actually being rejected. This was a revelation.

And so courage.

Courage is when we feel unsafe on the inside, but the external reality is different, and we act according to the external. I would lie in bed on the morning of therapy, adrenaline shaking me with dread. Thoughts would race: *I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this*. And then that little chink of mentalising: *These are just feelings. I'm feeling like I can't do this. But I can do this. I just need to get up, get*



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washed, get dressed, and go. Sometimes I would lie there for an hour or more arguing in my head. *I can't. I can. I can't. I can.*

Getting out of bed, getting washed, getting dressed, and going: that was courage. I felt the fear and I did it anyway.

That's why, in comparison, it's not courageous for me to stand up in front of a room of people now and train. I don't lie in bed thinking, *I can't*. I don't feel the fear. It's part of my job. It's what I do. I lie in bed on a morning and I feel the tingle of excitement and anticipation. I'll have some nerves, for sure, but they mostly relate to things outside my control: will the traffic be clear, will there be a power cut, will the WiFi work, will the loos flush? It doesn't take courage for me to do my job (although I worry far too much about blocked toilets).

So we can't judge courage by the external. A lot of people, looking at me standing up in front of a hundred or two hundred people, assume that it requires a lot of courage, because they imagine themselves doing the same and the fear of public speaking kicks in. I look at survivors who battle to get out of bed on a morning to go to therapy, and I know that that's what true courage looks like.

So much of the time while I was in that phase of therapy and life, I felt a failure. I felt pathetic. I felt ridiculously

inadequate and undeserving of respect. After all, what kind of person lies in bed on a morning, too terrified to get up?

Now I look back and I am full of admiration that I got up and went to therapy. And equally I admire every survivor who does the same.

The important thing, looking back, is that I realise that it was those incipient steps of courage that paved the way for me to do what I'm doing now. I developed a habit of being courageous because every week, regardless of how I was feeling, I went to therapy. Every week, regardless of how I was feeling, I stayed in the session. Every week, regardless of how I was feeling, I engaged in the work.

I looked and I felt pathetic at the time. No-one congratulated me on my achievements – they probably wondered why I couldn't bring myself to do a job or go to social events or engage more fully in the rest of life. Very possibly people pitied me and thought that I was 'weak' and 'pathetic'. Someone, referring to me, once said, 'Oh, she *suffers*, doesn't she?' It felt vomitously patronising and shameful.

If only I could have seen myself at the time as I see myself now, looking back! If only survivors could credit themselves for their courage rather than discrediting themselves for their struggle! It might just change everything.



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Courage is a huge source of self-esteem. But we will only feel good about ourselves for our courageous acts if we identify that that's what they are. And if we can view them positively, then we can build on them. Once I began to grasp this, I changed my self-talk. I began to say to myself, 'Well done for going to therapy today' rather than the usual litany of self-abuse and condemnation: 'Get a grip! You're so pathetic! You're being ridiculous. You need to get over yourself. Idiot!'

That *en-courage-ment* then helped build my courage: that's what encouragement does. No-one ever scaled mountains because someone was shouting at them, telling them how pathetic they are and how they'll never reach the top. We need to take this seriously.

Can you give yourself credit for your courage? Can you *en-courage* yourself? Can you separate out internal feelings from external feelings, feel the fear and do it anyway? •

