

COURAGE WITH A SMALL “C”

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I was 17 years old that November day in 1963 when President Kennedy was shot and killed. Long into the first night and right through the funeral, our living room took on the surreal blue glow of non-stop television. It was like that across the nation. Everybody watching. Everybody numb.

When I could no longer endure endless replays of the assassination, I retreated to a corner of the bedroom I shared with my sister. I sat there for hours, a hunched figure on the floor, notebook paper balanced on my knees, writing down feelings, asking unanswerable questions, attempting to add order to chaos, to make sense of the unthinkable. Kennedy's death exposed me to a type of courage different from anything I'd known before.

I grew up experiencing courage through the heroes and anti-heroes of Saturday morning television. This is where Mighty Mouse saved the day, the Lone Ranger and his faithful friend Tonto courted danger to help others, and ordinary men risked life and limb for their country, becoming war heroes in the process. These shows romanticized a bold, Capital “C” adrenaline-based, save-the-drowning-woman kind of courage that required selfless disregard for personal safety. I was captivated by such valor, but fairly certain that, put to the test, I would fail miserably; instead of running into a burning building to save a neighbor's child, my feet would remain glued to the pavement while I shouted from the sidelines. I judged myself seriously lacking in what I imagined was a genetic bravery gene. But with the death of President Kennedy, I suddenly had another touchstone for defining courage.

A grieving world watched Jacqueline Kennedy's every move, analyzing, criticizing, admiring. How could she display so much public strength in response to such private pain? *What does it take...where does it come from?* I wanted to know. Maybe I would never run into burning buildings but, perhaps, I could watch others and learn this type of bravery, the kind that faces adversity with grace and dignity, the kind that doesn't ask *why me?* but *what now?* . . . the kind that moves forward in faith even when faith is hard to find. Quiet, sustaining courage, written with a small “c.”

The seeker in me has always wanted to be a living example of Robert Frost's *Road not Taken*. I wanted the adventure, the unexpected twists and turns. I wanted a life path that would require bravery and fortitude, one less traveled, but not completely unexplored. I never did find

that particular road. Overall, my journey has been fairly ordinary, even a bit predictable, filled with the ups and downs of a life well-lived but nothing to warrant a made-for-tv movie. There have been a few falls along the way — a couple of them major — and then mostly toe-trips. Lots and lots of toe-trips. What I've learned over the course of my life is that surviving the toe-trips can be our greatest challenge — and our greatest achievement — requiring a kind of inner bravery hardly noticed by those passing by.

One of my most courageous acts was giving away an expensive pair of truly beautiful, never-worn purple suede heels. Every autumn after the boating accident that broke my back, I would pull them out from deep inside my closet, still in their box, still nestled in tissue. I would sit on the floor mourning the lost *me* that had planned to wear them to a black-tie dinner and now could never again wear shoes this high and delicate. I wanted that person back, the one who dressed a certain way, wore cool shoes, and did whatever she wanted, never worrying about pain or limitations. But she was gone. And so I would sit and stroke the beautiful fabric, run my fingers along that sensual stiletto heel. Sometimes tears would come. Sometimes not. After a while, I would wrap the shoes in their tissue, put them in their box and tuck them back into the closet.

It took five years of this ritual before I finally gave the shoes away. Holding on was the easy part. Letting go — that's what took courage. That, and a willingness to accept a new normal, to move ahead into territory unmarked, uncharted and slightly uncomfortable. Hmm...sounds a bit like some road not taken and that adage about being careful what you wish for.

Mostly, I still wish for courage, for the courage it takes to get up each morning, accept whatever comes my way, live fully and joyfully with honor and integrity, and, at the end of the day, breathe a prayer of gratitude. It's been more than 25 years since I gave those shoes away and still I think about them. I miss what they said about me more than I miss the shoes themselves. I go shopping and find myself a bit sad, slightly depressed and cranky, settling for sensible shoes, when I still really want those beautiful slender heels that once defined who I was and now suggest who I'm not.

Still, life is good these days. I'm strong, flexible, hopeful, ready for the next turn in the road and the quiet courage it might require.

But rush into a burning building? I'm not sure about that.

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