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FIND COURAGE IN YOUR FEARS
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“Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear...not the absence of fear,”
according to Mark Twain.

Virtues become a part of our character and represent what is good about us. Virtues guide our conduct and control our actions in life. They give us moral strength and help us conquer our adversities. Ultimately, virtues measure our human worth. Courage is an desirable virtue that may sneak into our lives when we least expect it. Some say that those who possess courage are heroes.

We all face opportunities to be courageous in our lifetimes, but that doesn't necessarily make us a hero. And, you don't have to be a hero to possess courage. But one thing is certain, in order to have courage, you must first experience fear. Some people demonstrate courage by boldly standing up for what they believe in. Some risk their own safety by putting themselves in danger to help someone else. Some beat incredible odds and amaze statisticians with their success. Each possessed fear, but didn't set out to become a “hero.” In fact, if asked, they would likely admit they didn't consider themselves a hero at all—they were just doing what their inner self urged them to do.

When we grieve deeply, most of us develop the virtue of courage. We experience the fear of the unknown and “what next?” after the death of our loved one. Our courage can take us to a higher level of inner strength than we have ever known before. Courage requires grasping the power to put insatiable fear behind us, and to trample it beneath our feet as we scurry to do something that may or may not make sense in our moment of paranoia. When this happens, the experience may be so profound that you will know everything has changed, and you will never be the person you once were. Courageously, you begin to survive in a world that pretends “life goes on” in spite of your loss.

There are two kinds of courage: public or silent; both are virtues.

Public Courage

Public courage is visible. It's public courage that causes the heart to pound and the pulse to race. It's public courage that fills the tabloids with tales of woe and

wonder. It's public courage that draws high ratings on "talk shows." Public courage excites us—and unites us.

In 2005, we witnessed courage when one disaster after another became major news headlines. Vicariously, we endured the tsunami and walked the streets after Hurricane Katrina with the rescuers. Since 9-11, the American public has not been immune to grief. We are drawn into the spectacle and feel a part of each real-life drama. Raw emotion is displayed on our television screens and expressed publicly. We watch news anchors stumble over their words distraught by what they see. We witness anger (an emotion of grief) and compassion hand-in-hand with those who are the victims as well as those who "work" the rescues. We applaud the attempts of courage for the survivors who have to pick up the pieces and begin new lives in new places...leaving all behind. We are captivated by the courage of those who grieve their losses. We become a part of their story, if only emotionally. Then we exercise our choice whether or not to turn away. Grieving deeply is the sum of all fears and is often done in silence.

Silent Courage

Silent courage is a private journey. Thousands of people suffer silently every day—and demonstrate courage far beyond our imaginations. They are the "unsung" heroes of war; those dying a slow death in hospice, institutions and hospitals; those struggling with debilitating disease; those living in a private "hell" because there is no way out, and many more. Silence is often the badge of courage the bereaved choose to wear. They face life-changing events with unclear goals, fragile emotions and shattered dreams.

To find courage in our fear, we must first confront our fear. Then "do" whatever it is we fear. To be afraid is normal, not something to be ashamed of. Fear prompts us to take action and challenges us to make things right. The bereaved face many fears and these are a few opportunities to control the fear with courage.

Courage to challenge life's assumptions

Life's assumptions include some of these:

- Our children will outlive us. As parents, we assume that our children will bury us—not that we will bury them. We also assume that if tragedy strikes once, we are reasonably safe to assume that we will be spared a similar or another tragedy.
- As children, we assume our parents will be healthy and independent until they die. We are often unprepared for the tasks that make us caregivers through illness, aging, dementia and decisions.

- Bad things don't happen to good people. Look again! Many of your friends suffer too, for different reasons. It doesn't mean the person is bad because something bad happens. It's a part of life's unexpected challenges. We discover, "It can happen to me!"
- We will never be given more than we can handle. Whoever dreamed up that expression has a lot more courage than most of us. Sometimes life's woes are overwhelming and we come to God with the question, "Why?"

Our assumptions about life are not based on any concrete evidence. They are as flimsy as "wishes" and as transparent as the sheerest silk. We hold onto positive assumptions with hope, believing that the travesties of life will pass us by. It takes courage to face the reality that assumptions are only that, a belief or a guess that life will be exactly as I want it to be.

Courage to get out of bed

After the loss of a loved one, it takes courage to face the day, to get out of bed, to believe that life can ever be "good" again. We are challenged by purpose. We find difficulty enjoying the things we once enjoyed. We are disoriented, wishing someone could just take us by the hand, lead us around and tell us exactly what we have to do to get through the day.

It takes courage to face the newness of a "nothing day," the kind we experience in early grief. It takes courage to realize the sun still shines; the rainbow appears after the storm, and the darkness of night gives us time to renew for another day. And each day is followed by the next—month-after-month and year-after-year, whether or not we wish it to. We cannot turn back time, nor can we keep the world from turning. So, we may just as well get out of bed and vow to work through our grief.

Courage to return to work and expect to be productive

Our society has imposed "time limits" on grief. As bereaved, we are expected to return to work after three days and expected to return to normal within three months. But grief does not conform to the limitations of society. The freedom to grieve, even at work (in an appropriate manner) is essential to healing the pain.

When we speak our loved one's name, our coworkers respect and accept our need to keep our loved one in our conversations. They explore ways to communicate with us again and re-establish the foundation of trust and camaraderie we once shared. When that occurs, we become comfortable in the workplace and can return to former (and sometimes greater) ingenuity and productivity.

Courage to rejoin the social circle

“Courage is the art of being the only one who knows you’re scared to death!” (Earl Wilson.) Social occasions for many bereaved are unthinkable, especially early in the grieving process. How soon is too soon to return to social activities? Will people ask me questions I’m afraid to answer? Will I be so emotional that I can’t speak? What will people think of me if I laugh? Do I have a right to shed my cloak of grief? These people were my friends before...will they still be my friends now?

It takes courage to take that first step...to be the “fifth wheel” in a crowd of couples. It takes courage to dine alone. It takes courage to enter conversations when others can talk about their children or their spouse and you have nothing to add. It takes courage to go where there are groups of people, especially those you know, who may ask, “How are you?” and be sincere.

Generally, people will welcome you. They will respect your grief and be willing to listen to you. Sometimes people feel helpless approaching someone whose sorrow is so intense. Seek those who help you feel secure. Show them what you need as you heal. In time, you will feel comfortable resuming new or previous social activities.

Courage to release “old dreams” and create new dreams

Thinking about new dreams feels like you are letting go of the past. Rebuilding the future hurts. It takes courage to accept that there are some things you can’t control. I realized that I could fret all I wanted to about what I had lost, but it wouldn’t change a thing. If I lived in the past, I would grow bitter. If I lived only in the present moment, without the vision of new dreams, I would feel “stuck,” “used” and “useless.” So, slowly, new dreams began evolving.

It takes courage to make ideas real. It takes courage to let go of what you wanted life to be. Small dreams won’t be shattered if the world changes in the meantime or if my dreams are altered. They give us something positive and adventurous to think about.

Courage to face our own mortality

At a funeral we went to, the son of the woman who died remained distant from the casket that held the body of his precious mother. He couldn’t approach it, nor could he say “good-bye.” Likely, the finality of death troubled him. He admittedly believed that death was the end. There was nothing beyond that moment. What a daunting thought!

When death has robbed us of someone loved, we sometimes come face-to-face with our own mortality. We recognize that we are not immune from the tragedies and the discontinuance of life. We accept that the circle of life can continue with or without us. Our thoughts turn to deep questions and decisions, and we think about our own death. We may be an only living child, the last sibling, a parent without children, single again or the next to die. With courage, we face the choices that we must make.

In John McCain's book (*Why Courage Matters*), he states: "Courage is like a muscle, the more we exercise it, the stronger it gets." At some point in our grief, we are given the choice to exercise the virtue of courage. We can resist it, master it or accept it as a gift. With courage, we pick up the pieces of our lives and, over time, gently glue them back in place. With courage, we unscramble the emotional web and find peace and understanding. With courage, we massage the pain in our heart and mend it with new beginnings. With courage, we remember the past, but we make the most of the present going forward. We are not heroes...just plain folk...using our courage to grow, heal, and survive.

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