

Courage is Being Committed to Something Bigger than your Fears

By Robert Porter Lynch

I've studied courage a lot, more than the average guy. Maybe I've been courageous a few times myself. Let me put forth a few thoughts:

Courage is different from bravery

Courage (from the French "coeur" meaning "heart") is the belief or commitment to something larger than your fear. Bravery is the absence of fear or just overcoming fear. This is an important distinction, because if you are committed to nothing, you can have no courage, regardless of your bravery.

Courage & Commitment

Thus a lack of courage implies a lack of commitment, and this is the crux of our problem today. For example, I now know you are committed to your highest destiny, and that mean two things for me: I trust you more because of that commitment because you are more likely to stand for that commitment rather than buckle under pressure. So trust is closely connected to courage.

Fear versus Courage

At the core of any civilization's failure will be found two forces in opposition to each other: Fear and Courage. Aristotle said the latter was the most important quality one can have. When Rome finally fell, the leaders of Rome had no more will to fight the evil barbarians at their gate; instead they made a Faustian bargain, and ultimately sold whatever semblance of their souls to an evil even greater than they. Kenneth Clark observed in his book on Civilization remarks:

A world of fear and darkness [is] ready to inflict horrible punishment for the smallest infringement of a taboo.

Thinking about the almost incredible epoch of the Roman Empire tells one something about the nature of civilization. It shows that however complex and solid it seems, it is actually quite fragile.

It can be destroyed. What are its enemies?

First of all fear – fear of war, fear of invasion, fear of plague and famine, [I might add fear of cruelty and injustice] that make it simply not worthwhile constructing things or planting trees or even planning next year's crops

Fear Destroys Trust

Fear is the greatest destroyer of trust. Understanding how to create trust in a world of fear will be one of the great achievements of this next generation. Kenneth Clark again remarks:

It is the lack of confidence [distrust], more than anything else that kills civilization.

Confidence [trust] in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and confidence in one's own mental powers...

a vigorous belief in law and discipline. Vigor, energy, vitality:

All the great civilizations .. have had a weight of energy behind them.

People sometimes think that civilization consists of fine sensibilities and good conversation and all that.

These can be among the agreeable results of civilization,

but they are not what make a civilization,

and a society can have these amenities and yet be dead and rigid.

We can destroy ourselves with cynicism and disillusion, just as effectively as bombs.

Where is the Center?

Yes, we can beat the odds of chance, if we so choose. But destiny requires clarity of mission and purpose. Kenneth Clark, in closing his work on Civilization quoted the prophetic words of William Butler Yeats (who Clark referred to as one of the great geniuses he had met in his lifetime):

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,

And everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction,

While the worst are full of passionate intensity.

The Thrill & Passion of Fear

People want to be passionate, filled with intensity, we then know we are fully alive. What is so attractive about fear, and its derivatives such as vengeance and anger, is that fear *is filled with passion*. We know we are alive when filled with fear; it's exciting. That's why so many people love roller coaster rides or horror movies. War and fighting give a person this same rush of adrenaline that, in its own perverse way, makes us excited.

Fear creates its own self-regenerative, self-propelling although negative, synergy. Fear then drives us to formulate our own crazed view of the world, which, of course, results in erratic or demonic behavior, that, in turn generates more fears; "and the beat goes on....."

Sadly, Yeats words are just as true today as when he wrote them 80 years ago, but need not prophesize. Fear brings with it a passion that is exciting. If we are use the Greek idea/ideal of *metanoia* and a *meta quest*, in our lives we must *replace* the fear with a *commitment to a higher value or destiny*. (We can never really release the fear – the physiology of the brain causes the fear to be seared into the memory structure of our brains)

Heraclitus said five hundred years ago that “character is destiny.” In that simple phrase he embodied the nature of the solution – those that have can create real trust in their world have the potential to design a powerful destiny based on real vision.

Our Society’s Lack of Commitment:

Yeats refers to “the best lack conviction.” Today our finest schools turn out thousands of the most highly competent students the world has ever seen. What is troubling about Yeats’ observation is the best people of our times, those who best and brightest who graduate from our universities lack real conviction of purpose, and the worst, our terrorists, for example are passionately intense. In between lies a muddy middle made up of people tuned out on drugs or depressed. Today depression is one of the greatest illnesses in our society.

Everyone of those educated graduates, when interviewed, can be expected to state they “want to make a difference.” Yet most don’t know what that difference is; they hope their career will reveal it, and by the time they hit mid-life they have the crisis that their lives are not very meaningful; “is that all there is my friend, then let’s keep dancing.....”

Making a difference means dealing with the *differential* between what is our *current reality* and what we *want it to be*. We all need something more than material aggrandizement to have that fulfillment. The Greeks were *enlightened realists*, whereas the Romans were *material realists*. That difference changed the course of human destiny.

Finding One’s Purpose

Robert Ulich, head of Harvard’s School of Education in the 1950s observed that it is the school’s responsibility to aid an individual in discovering a purpose in life – without which it’s impossible to align on a progressive trajectory the Greeks foresaw but the Romans either rejected or could not see.

*If our schools fail to help a person discover his purpose,
they fail in almost everything that really matters.*

In his final passage of *Civilization*, Clark continued with his final thoughts:

The trouble [with our world today] is there is still no centre.

The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism [that had so passionately and fanatically overtaken the world in the middle of the 20th century] has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism, and that isn't enough.

One may be optimistic, but one can't exactly be joyful at the prospect before us.

If we want more courage, we need more commitment to something bigger and more important than our self interest: A belief in a vision and a set of values that makes our commitment larger than our fear.

*Courage enlarges, cowardice diminishes resources.
In dangerous straits, the fears of the timid
aggravate the dangers that imperil the brave.*

– Christian Neville Bouvee (1820-1904)