

The Virtue of Courage

Wednesday, May 30, 2007

Last week I was in the nation's capital and was able to visit the new World War II memorial at the start of the Memorial Day weekend. The words of Harry Truman are inscribed on one wall, "Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifices." Courage is the virtue of heroes. The courage of citizens who served in the military is one of the things we honored this week on Memorial Day. However, virtue is a difficult virtue to understand.

Along with moderation, practical wisdom and justice, courage is one of the four traditional, cardinal virtues. While courage is universally praised, and cowardice despised, some argue that it's morally neutral. On the surface, it does not appear to be a moral trait or quality. For example, the 18th Century, French thinker, Voltaire wrote that "courage is not a virtue but a quality shared by blackguards and great men alike." Since courage involves mastering one's fear to accomplish some goal, perhaps bank robbers, thrill seekers and soldiers all might be called courageous. But this interpretation misunderstands courage, and the virtues.

Mastering one's fears is necessary to be courageous, but it's not sufficient. The virtues work together as a whole. Courage cannot stand alone. Moral courage requires moderation, practical wisdom and justice. In these few comments I will briefly look at these relationships in an effort to better understand courage.

Courage requires moderation, self restraint. Fear is a good. It puts the breaks on action when things are getting too dangerous. To be afraid in the face of danger means you value your life. The fearless daredevil is crazy, not brave. In other words: no fear, no courage. The courageous person learns to control his or her fears. I recall several years ago rock climbing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. While I was sitting on a ledge about 300 feet up on a vertical face, holding the rope for my partner, an older guy with a grey beard climbed onto the ledge without a rope. I asked him if that wasn't a bit hazardous. He replied that fear kept him safe, then climbed on, in perfect control. Through years of practice he had learned to moderate his fears and stay in control.

On the one hand, the person with no fear is foolhardy. On the other, the person who is immobilized by fear is a coward. The courageous person has just the right amount of fear, not too much and not too little. One element of courage is to hit the balance between too much fear and too little. The courageous person is able to moderate the innate reaction to flee danger, and move forward when the situation calls for it.

Courage also requires good judgment, or practical wisdom. Courage is a decision, an act of the will to press on or endure in dangerous situations. We need it when there are goals worth pursuing that put us at risk. One philosopher says that courage is facing danger as reason dictates “for the sake of what is noble (Aristotle).” The coward puts the goal of self-preservation above all others, even when more important things are at stake. The foolhardy daredevil is unconcerned with his life and puts it at risk for trivial feats. Both lack good judgment about what is valuable. Courage needs practical wisdom to judge what is worth taking great risks for, and what is not.

Courage is only a virtue when it serves good ends. The virtue of justice helps us determine good ends. Justice is the boundary that defines the other virtues (Comte-Sponville). It provides the moral character to what would otherwise be just qualities. One philosopher writes: “Courage... always presupposes some form of selflessness, altruism, or generosity (Comte-Sponville).” People who risk their lives for personal glory are bold, but not morally courageous. People who take great risks for personal wealth are daring, but not courageous. Courage becomes a virtue only when it serves others and the ends of justice. The clearest examples of courage are when people put themselves at person risk to defend the powerless, to correct inequalities, to fight injustices.

The World War II memorial clearly honors courageous men and women. They put their lives at risk for a just cause. For example, the Nazis’ final solution defined injustice; they violated all standards of equality and sanctity of human life. Many of the women and men we honored on Monday were courageous. They controlled their fears and put their lives at risk for this cause.

Memorial Day provides the opportunity to think about courage and the virtues. Courage does not stand alone. To be courageous one must moderate one’s fears and exercise wisdom and good judgment to determine the just causes that are worth risking one’s life.

André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*