

Bob Wyborn

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To be Strong or should I engage Courage?

We are very often told to be “strong” when in times of great emotional challenge and in particular when grief is that challenge. It has always struck me as a very easy piece of meaningless advice and it invariably comes from those who have never been in the current predicament we are experiencing. I have often pondered the use of that word and its intended meaning by the user. Is it chosen and then totally misinterpreted because the English language often lacks specificity? After all on a hot Queensland summer day almost all of us would “love” to have a cool, refreshing ice cream.

On the other hand do our mostly well intended advisors choose a clichéd word without understanding its significance and power to have exactly the opposite affect to that which it was intended?

It became apparent to me some time ago that part of a successful resolution to our grief required the use and engagement of another word and we needed to bring it into play much earlier than we often felt inclined. That word is “**Courage**”. Observation confirms that it comes as an almost obligatory action in our grief journey and not, most often, as a welcome visitor. We are “forced” to display it firstly at the funeral, then many times thereafter for many different reasons; - because other family members rely upon us for their daily welfare, at the workplace from which we cannot hide, the shops, the neighbours, our spouse, the very act of leaving the cocoon of our bed and entering the shower is often a monumental task requiring great pain. The list goes on and on. I think perhaps the toughest task which requires our utmost courage is to be able to face and accept ourselves for what we are in that “eternal moment” of truth and absolute exposure.

Perhaps a quick look at what is meant by the two words in question may allow us to understand and hopefully influence others to choose their words with more deliberation and thereby cause less pain than they continue to do.

1. We are strong if we have the muscular capacity to lift heavy weights – we are courageous if those weights are emotional pain and its many visitors.
2. We are strong if we can exert great physical or mechanical power – we are courageous when we use that power to face reality.
3. We can have a strong voice which can be heard at a distance – we are courageous when we listen to the still, quiet voice.
4. The economy is strong when it is stable and thriving – we are courageous when our emotional bank shows a healthy balance of deposits and withdrawals.
5. A sporting crowd can be 50,000 strong – we are courageous when we can stand as the sole participant and can cheer our own on field achievements.
6. We can have a strong likeness to a family member – we are courageous when that likeness resembles who we really are.
7. The oceans have very strong currents – we are courageous when the tides of our injured emotions are allowed to wash over our Soul.

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There are many more examples that could be made to highlight this belief. It seems to me that the word “strong” is often used to denote an instruction given by a non-participant in the communal action that is grief. Someone for whom the advice is not relevant or needed and indeed it is given as a tacit order. It therefore must be obeyed as it has some omniscient prerequisite to moral character and courage. The insidious component of the use of the word “strong” in the context of grief is its glaring comparative and polar nature. ‘If you are not **strong** you must therefore be **weak**.’ It is a very tough call under which to rally.

“Be strong” can also mean some of the following:-

1. “I do not know how to handle this situation but surely you can get **over** it as it has been 8 weeks now”
2. “I have no real understanding of your situation but as **I** currently feel this **is** the solution”
3. “I am uncomfortable with this and my words of advice have fulfilled my moral obligations to you, so get over it!”
4. “I am very genuine in my belief that this is the best for you”

The desire to offer help to those in grief is most genuine for nearly all people however those who often hurt us the most are those who are the closest to us. Is this because of our nearly non-existent training on the subject and our poor understanding of death? How much does our Western dominated thinking of permanence and procrastination contribute to this circumstance? Do we simply not have any idea what to say? Do we need to develop a grief specific language?

I would suggest that when we look at offering advice to those in grief that we learn to understand that grief is an active and participatory process. Whilst it is very true that it is also a learning experience and probably **the** ultimate learning experience it does not need a series of “Professors” instructing those who know their pain. If grief is anything it surely can be well described as **the absolute pain**. Grief comes to us because we have had someone, most loved, die. The attached love and its myriad of memories stay whilst their physical presence leaves. There has never been a situation like this before and we have no reference point to help us make sense of the apparent senselessness.

We are then catapulted onto a one way road with no clear sign post or road map. Amongst the mixture of all the emotional feelings and total uncertainty comes the companion of the unknown – fear. The secret to overcoming grief is not obedience to a command to be strong but rather to have the state of mind, body and spirit that will allow you to face the pain, feel its force and thus strip fear of its power. We need to encourage such a course of action as it brings into play the healing energy of courage.

I suspect those that mourn do not often acknowledge their own courage as they do not feel very brave most of the time. However I would suggest that we must take time out to recognise and

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become “aware” of what it is that we are experiencing and what actions we are undertaking ; those by deliberation or rote.

Courage is a doing thing not engendered by obedience to a cliché or command. The courage that is shown in grief is an essential part of the journey towards resolution and acceptance of what has occurred. As Mary Anne Radmacher has said; “Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is a little voice at the end of the day that says I’ll try again tomorrow”

The significant role that courage plays can not be overstated. Perhaps before we offer the “be strong” advice we should place ourselves in the shoes of the grieved person and recognise that the emotional turmoil that is their unwelcomed lot is already extracting its long term pain. The day to day course of their life is requiring courage whether it is volitional or not. We need to acknowledge their current achievements and encourage their progress. Just like a long distance road sign they need to see that this sign has the destinations of Imagination, Hope and Resolution upon it.

The danger of quelling courage is that it leads to another road which is sign marked with such destinations as Snagged, Hopelessness, Bitterness and Clinical Depression.

Courage should not be misinterpreted as an action requiring super human feats but rather be seen and understood for what it is – the act of facing your fears. Fears are generated by the mind. They do not exist but they are nethertheless very powerful. The same source that generates fear produces hope and in equal amounts. Courage is the converting catalyst. We need to gently and lovingly encourage this wonderful and essential quality.

I have included a few quotations that may help expand this subject.

“Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear. Except a creature be part coward it is not a compliment to say it is brave” ~ Mark Twain

“For without belittling the courage with which men have died, we should not forget those acts of courage with which men have lived.” ~ John F. Kennedy

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage” ~ Anais Nin

“Courage is doing what you’re afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you’re scared” ~ Eddie Rickenbacker

“Courage is the art of being the only person who knows you’re scared to death” ~ Harold Wilson

“Courage and perseverance have a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish into air” ~ John Quincy Adams

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