

Grief Digest April, 2006  
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.