

Invisible Courage

by Rev. Michelle Collins

delivered September 15, 2013

How are you doing, we often say. I'm fine. Any of y'all heard that? Any of y'all said it?

Alright, I'm asking a rhetorical question. I'd estimate that "fine" is my answer to that question 50 to 75 percent of the time. I'm just doing fine.

Now, sometimes fine really is the best answer. Nothing remarkable going on. Nothing interesting happening, fortunately. Or maybe the context doesn't really allow for much conversation. Or maybe it's what's gotta be said, like when my daughter's school calls, and the first thing they say is "everything's fine." But usually, I think, that's not what an answer of "fine" is really doing. Instead "fine" means I don't wanna talk about it. It means I don't want to think about it. It means I'm not sure if you'll be willing to listen or able to understand. I'm not quite willing to take the risk. "I'm Fine" ends up being a wall, a nice safe-feeling comfortable-feeling wall, but a wall between what we're portraying and where we're feeling vulnerable. It's a mask – we might be soft and vulnerable behind the mask, but the mask is safer for the world to see rather than showing what's behind it.

There's a poem about masks; its author is unknown:

Always a mask
Held in the slim hand
Always she had a mask before her face...

Truly the wrist, holding it lightly
Fitted the task:
Sometimes however
Was there a shiver,
A fingertip quiver,
Ever so slightly... while holding the mask?

For years and years and years I wondered
But dared not ask
And then – I blundered,
and looked behind the mask,
To find
Nothing – she had no face.

She had become merely a hand, holding a mask
With grace.¹

She had no face. She had become merely a hand, holding a mask, with grace.

What masks are each of us holding? And what's behind them? How much of a risk would it be to put those masks down, letting our vulnerable sides be seen? Now that risk, that risk of vulnerability, that takes courage.

As I've started exploring the theme of courage this month, I've run into a number of different types of courage, more than I expected! There are physical acts of self-less courage, the kinds for which purple hearts are awarded in our military. There are acts of moral courage, both great acts like many in the civil rights movement and small ones that happen every day. Then there are also moments of courage that are less visible and less obvious, moments of invisible courage within each of us that are just as significant and also just as challenging.

As a hospital chaplain, I witnessed many acts of courage, decisions that were weighted with emotions and consequences and with care for folks' loved ones. One weekend when I was serving a twenty-four hour shift, I got a call that a physician had requested the presence of a chaplain for a family meeting. Now, this was something to note because it was usually the nurses who made requests. Little did I know it, but the doctor was one that I had worked with a good bit before. She was a palliative care doctor who specialized in difficult family meetings and she designed simulated family meetings for medical students and nursing students, and chaplain residents! In these simulations we would each take on rolls, being the medical team, family members, and of course the chaplain, which for some reason none of the medical or nursing students ever wanted to be. Afterwards this doctor would critique what had happened in the meeting and give us guidance and strategies. On this on-call day, I was sitting in the hospital room talking with the family when she poked her head around the corner. I admit that I was excited to get to see for real how she would run the family meeting. Now she said this was the largest that she had EVER done – something like twenty people all in the room, struggling with choices for their family's matriarch, who was sometimes able to be conscious but couldn't really communicate any longer. And their decisions were excruciating. Which treatments to pursue. Surgery, or not. How much physical therapy and rehab, and how much comfort and family time. They weighed the energy costs of each one. Then the doctor said she'd need them to think about the surgery and to let her know soon. The next moment took true courage. We don't need to wait. We're ready to make that decision now. No surgery. Family is important to her, and we think she'd want her energy for that instead, if that's how much it would take.

¹ Reproduced in *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall B. Rosenberg, page 36.

This is courage. They were reeling from it afterwards, as I continued to sit with them. Did we do the best thing for her? What does it mean? Either decision would have taken courage to make, resolve to come together as a family – more than twenty people remember, with many different ideas about what to do – and courage to face the unknown consequences in the future.

These are moments of invisible courage – moments of risk, of uncertainty, and what they have in common is that they all touch on vulnerability. This is invisible courage – moments when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and we don't run from it.

Researcher Brené Brown, who has a couple of the most watched videos on TED talks, has spent twelve years researching shame and vulnerability. That's not how she started out though. First, she got into social work because she liked to fix things. Found out that it doesn't quite work that way, kind of the same way I figured that out as a chaplain. Then she got into research to quantify and predict results – she started to research human connection. This is clearly a woman after my own heart. But again, it didn't quite work that way. When she asked the people in her studies about when they most felt connected in their relationships, they shared about heartbreaks, about betrayals, about shame, about not feeling worthy.² They shared about moments of vulnerability and how those were the moments most precious to them.

Vulnerability isn't about weakness, Brown claims. She defines “vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”³ Uncertainty. Risk. Emotional exposure. Is that what's behind our masks? How many moments do we have each day when we are feeling vulnerable? Vulnerability contains in it the potential for hurt or disappointment; it contains risk and fear.

As a chaplain, I learned about the four quadrants of emotions; the four “emotional food groups,” as we called them. With one mispronunciation, they all rhyme too. They are sad, mad, glad, and “afraid.” (afraid) Sadness, anger, joy, and fear. Sad, mad, glad, afraid. The claim with this model is that all emotions fit into one of these four food groups. Now, I've had plenty of time arguing with that and trying to find counter-examples. But it's still a useful broad vision for seeing how emotions are connected.

I would put vulnerability into the fear quadrant. It's about feeling tenuous and uncertain – there's definitely fear in vulnerability. But here's the thing. I put courage there, too. Courage isn't the opposite of fear. I think courage means having the fear, and doing it anyways. Moments that others have told me that they saw courage in me, I was feeling nothing but fear!

² Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*, pages 7-8.

³ Brown, 34.

The fear doesn't go away, and if it does, would it really take courage in order to act? Fear goes along WITH courage. Courage is acting even with fear. Vulnerability – is – courage.

I sometimes have the privilege of witnessing some of the most beautiful courageous and vulnerable moments.

(two stories shared here)

I don't know if either of them would have named their journeys as ones of courage. I don't know if I can find a moment when I can name it for myself. It's more like just balls of fear and uncertainty and making choices in the face of that fear. Other people are who've named it as courage, not me!

One thing that we say that we do for each other is to encourage one another. But I want to challenge us to take this "encouragement" to a deeper level. Encouragement is a lot more than cheerleader or aerobics instructor "you can do it" statements. Given the risk and uncertainty and vulnerability that are norms in living, we need more than that. Let's find ways to really encourage one another. To en-courage could be to inspire the courage in each other; it could be to find ways to hold each other when we're feeling tender and vulnerable; it could be naming the courage in another that they may not name within themselves. This is EN-COURAGE-MENT!

A seminal study surveyed Americans about their own support networks and those with whom they could connect with on an intimate level, feeling safe to be their vulnerable selves. The survey was done twice, once in 1985 and then again twenty years later. For the first round, it found that 5% of those surveyed had no one with whom they could connect with on a vulnerable level, and 10% more had only their spouses or partners. The second round twenty years later is what floors me. In 2004, out of those surveyed, a quarter of those surveyed had no one they felt comfortable with on a personal level, and more than half had no one outside of their own families.⁴ More than half. This is one of the things that I hope we can create at church. If not here, then where? But this takes work. About that same time, in 2004, more than three quarters of Americans had a religious and church affiliation.

We need places here in church where we can be en-couraged, places where we can take risks and hope to find support and caring. We need places where we can go beyond just being fine, places where we don't face hard looks and expectations like in our story today.⁵ And we have to work to create those places. I hope that our small groups here can be one of those places, as many have shared with me that they are. Registration for our Connection Circles has started,

⁴ McPherson, et al, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades," *American Sociological Review*, Vol 71, No. 3 (Jun, 2006), pp 353-375.

⁵ "Hard Looks," by Bruce T. Marshall, in *What We Share: Collected Meditations, Volume Two*, edited by Patricia Frevert, pages 31-32.

and I hope that you'll consider trying out one of the circles. I hope that many groups and times were are together as a community or as individuals can be those places, too. The challenge is two-fold – not only is my challenge to create those places, but the other part of it is taking the risk to be vulnerable ourselves. This is how we'll find the invisible courage of vulnerability in others, and in ourselves. May it be so.

I want to close today with some favorite words, by George Odell.

We need one another...

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us. Blessed be.