

# The Courage of Love

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I was watching an old movie the other day, one of those great black and white films, set during World War Two, a movie like Schindler's List, where some heroic soul makes a great heroic sacrifice to do a great heroic deed against great heroic odds.... I don't know about you, but sometimes when I watch films like that, I wonder what's happened to heroes. I mean, there were so many heroes during the Second World War, and we don't seem to hear stories like theirs anymore. Have all the heroes died out? I've often caught myself, watching or reading about one of these heroes, wondering why there are no more heroes of the French Underground, with the Nazis hot on the trail....

Films or books often make the heroes' path seem to be an easy decision, because the story may be set up to make the best answers obvious. In many true stories, we can see that in the end both the cowards and the heroes are both gunned down by the Gestapo anyway -- and the cautious approach never seems to pay off at the end, either. It's easy to see that it's better to die a hero than a coward -- that it's a better feeling when it's time to shrug off this mortal coil to have saved a few lives than to have sold them up-river. But sometimes when I watch those old movies -- especially the ones based on true stories -- I can't help but wonder how I would have acted. Would I have done the right thing in real life... when I didn't know how it was going to end... when the stakes were high and real lives were on the line?



My question is whether the age of heroes is really over, or does it just feel different when the stories are still being written? How would we act if, for example, we were young military officers, and our commander ordered us to arrest a Jew because his very existence formed a crime? History shows most of us would have made the arrest, rather than risk severe punishment ourselves. Yet many stories came out of the Second World War of people who did risk *everything* to do *the right thing*.

Take away the foreknowledge that Germany lost World War II. Imagine we are living in the most powerful country in the world in, say, Germany in 1941. We're German officers, and we have every reason to believe our country will be victorious in the current war. Furthermore, it's quite dangerous to disagree with our superiors. Add to that the fact that we've grown up loving our country, and everyone holds out a certain amount of blind faith that their leaders are guided by noble intentions.

No, wait. Let's move ahead fifty years in time. Take away the foreknowledge that gays would soon be granted equal rights. Imagine we're living in the most powerful country in the world in, say, America in 1991. We're Air Force officers, and we know it's quite dangerous to disagree with our superiors. Add to that the fact that we've grown up loving our country, and everyone holds out a certain amount of blind faith that their leaders are guided by noble intentions. Now, let's say we've just been ordered to arrest a fellow officer because he's gay, because the very fact of who he is forms a crime....

I make the comparison not to argue that Americans are Nazis, but rather that all injustices follow particular patterns. Bigotry requires blind obedience to our political or spiritual leaders – or at the very least it requires we turn a blind eye to it. Often, the only thing we need to do to condone injustice is nothing. By means of our silence we tacitly promote it.

Still think the age of heroes is long gone? Do you still think we no longer get opportunities to stand up for what's right, against all the odds? And in case you're wondering, I was the Air Force officer, arrested in 1991 – not for acting gay, but rather for *being* gay. The Air Force argued that I should be imprisoned for nine years, but the jury, perhaps finding some hero within themselves, decided to let me go.

You may be saying, "Wow, I don't know if I'm ready to be a modern day hero." And when you look at it that way, most of us probably aren't. I mean, how many people... really... are going to put their own safety or security on the line to stand up for someone being mistreated?

In 1964, a young woman by the name of Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in New York while neighbors looked on. Her death became a notorious example of apathy and crowd mentality, prompting psychological research that discovered, ironically, that the more people who see an injustice, the less likely anyone will step forward to stop it. The phenomenon came to be known as "the bystander effect," or "diffusion of responsibility." It seems that the more of us there are, the more we all assume someone else is safeguarding justice. We all simply expect someone else will fix it. In Kitty's case, it was sad enough that no one came to her rescue during her thirty minute assault and rape ordeal, but even sadder, no one even wanted to call the police. When the police were finally called, after the final attack had ended, the caller failed to convey any urgency. Police therefore had no way of knowing Kitty had even been stabbed until they arrived on the scene. She died in the ambulance enroute to the hospital.



Heroes. A hero is someone who helps others, even at great risk to themselves. How can there still be heroes, then, when we can't seem to do the right thing even when there is no risk? How can there be heroes when a group of people won't even call the police until after it's too late to help?

And yet heroes there are. A constant flow of modern day heroes: There's Martin Luther King, who risked it all to stop injustice against people because of the color of their skin. There's Harvey Milk, the San Francisco city councilman who lost his life standing up for gay rights. There's Rosa Parks, who refused to sit at the back of the bus in spite of being arrested, fined and threatened. There are the brave firefighters who entered the World Trade Center on September 11 in order to save people trapped inside. Coming out, for gays, is an act of heroism, since it helps others and almost always involves some personal risk.

So how do we do it? How do we reconcile these hugely different pictures of our world? On the one hand, our government and churches and institutions seem to have embraced hate and prejudice, and no one wants to do anything about it. And on the other hand, we hear a steady stream of stories about how heroes are making a difference against all the odds, and at great personal risk.

There's a famous line from Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* that seems to contradict itself by saying, "They were the best of times, they were the worst of times." One way to come to grips with all of this is to simply realize we live in a contradictory world – to allow that perhaps all of these things may be true at once. At times people seem callous to the point of neglect, standing idly by while the world grows darker with injustice by the day. At other times, there's hope, it seems, in the form of singular courage in the face of overwhelming odds. The world changes, but this seems to remain true in every age – that there will always be injustice, and there will always be heroes to battle it.

I was talking to a friend of mine a few days ago – a friend whose son-in-law had committed suicide a couple of years back. He was talking about how well his daughter Meghan had adjusted to the loss, after an initially very rough patch of depression and guilt. And we talked about how tempting it would be, in a situation like that, to give up on life. The death of a spouse sends many into deep pits of despair, depression, and an early grave. So what, I asked myself, might have made Meghan different, to have rebounded from such recent despair and now be so bravely tackling the responsibilities of her career and children.

And then it hit me. Children. Maybe Meghan's courage to go bravely forward in the task of living her life was born in the love she felt for her children. What an incredible power such a love would be, to provide the motivation and drive to heal such a great wound. What a gift to her children is such love, and what a gift for herself!

Could love be the true motivation behind all heroism?

We hear countless stories from countless wars, from heroes who claim no greater motivation for their supposed heroic deeds than the simple love of their comrades. The Medal of Honor winner who went back, time after time, to pull his friends out of the line of fire claims he acted not out of some great sense of duty or because of some inspiring speech or political ideal, but simply because these men were

friends of his, and they needed help. Time and time again, our supposed heroes claim no greater motivation than love.

So maybe that's all we need to understand about a world full of injustice – that love can give us the courage to set things right. In a world where countries still do evil things. In a country where innocent people still get arrested. In a state where preachers insist on language that seems to justify all kinds of violence against us. In a region where even today, fear enforces a deafening silence that tears at the very fabric of who we are. In spite of all these things, perhaps love can give us courage to carry on – to counter the injustices – to begin the task of healing them.

If I am too afraid to speak for myself, maybe my love can give me the courage to tell this teenager that he doesn't have to commit suicide, because I understand how he feels, and because it's okay to be gay. If I'm afraid to speak for myself, then maybe love can give me the courage to say it's not okay to preach hate, or to send out hateful emails, because if I don't say something, I'm approving it by my silence. Perhaps I can stand up and be an instrument of love. The more I love, in fact, I find that the less I fear in general... the less "fear" makes sense. I begin to discover that fear was only ever an illusion... a lie told by someone who wanted to limit my freedom, to keep me and all of us under their control.

Even courage turns out to be an illusion, when you love enough, because love erases the need for courage. You get to a point where you realize that the Gestapo may have your number, and then again they may not. But after a while, you see that life isn't about what happens to you, but rather what you do with it. We've all been given an opportunity to love. We are all of us heroes in the making.



-- Troy Carlyle