

On Teaching, Learning, and Courage
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Teachers and students must overcome the same problem. In order to grow, and to learn, they must be courageous. The virtue of courage is one that easily appeals to our sentiments, but it is certainly harder to be courageous than to think it is valuable, desirable, or honorable. In this short essay, I suggest that learning is an act of courage and that teachers must nurture their own as well as students' ability to be courageous.

Defining courage is not a simple matter, but it often implies a readiness to make the greatest sacrifice. According to Nepo (2007), "the word courage comes from the Latin *cor*, which literally means heart. The original use of the word courage means to stand by one's core" (p. 10). There are other ways to think about the term. For Aristotle, the courageous person "acts for the sake of what is noble." The Greeks, in particular, equated courage with strength of mind, "capable of conquering whatever threatens the attainment of the highest good." Often, courage means overcoming some kind of fear. As Comte-Sponville (2001) explained, courage "is the ability to confront, master, and overcome fear" (p. 51). For Ernest Hemingway, courage is "grace under pressure." In short, courage is a virtue we admire. But, can it be an intrinsic part of growth and learning?

To answer this question, our definition of courage needs to evolve. To do so, I draw on multiple sources. A first example comes from Friedrich Nietzsche. As always he puts it strongly: "Every acquisition, every step forward in knowledge is the *result* of courage, of severity toward oneself" (p. 5). Elsewhere, he defines courage as "the self which surpasses itself." Nietzsche's point reminds me of a passage in Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that I will quote at length:

I want to talk about another kind of high country now in the world of thought, which in some ways, for me at least, seems to parallel or produce feelings similar to this, and call it the high country of the mind.

If all human knowledge, everything that's known, is believed to be an enormous hierarchic structure, then the high country of the mind is found at the uppermost reaches of this structure in the most general, the most abstract considerations of all.

Few people travel here. There's no real profit to be made from wandering through it, yet like this high country of the material world around us, it has its own austere beauty that to some people make the hardships of traveling through it seem worthwhile.

In the high country of the mind one has to become adjusted to the thinner air of uncertainty, and to the enormous magnitude of questions asked, and to the answers proposed to these questions. The sweep goes on and on and on so obviously much further than the mind can grasp on hesitates even to go near for fear of getting lost in them and never finding one's way out.

The high country of the mind is what university life is about. Learning new knowledge can change what people see and understand in the world. A course in psychology can reveal a student's own personality disorder or the scapegoat of her family. In sociology, one may learn to be caught in a social status that cannot be easily overcome and that choices about how to live often just reflect where one comes from. In interpersonal communication, my students often discover that they're creating the very problems they face or that they are affecting their own children's sense of self. Learning something new can, as we often believe, open a world of possibilities, but it also can open a can of worms. Learning and growing never gets easier, it gets harder. As cued above, a student can lose himself in the high country of the mind, which is why it demands the learner to be courageous.

If learning means diving into, and studying, what one is as a human being, it will necessarily shake our core: our most personal beliefs, values, ways of thinking and behaving, our hopes and our dreams. In the novel, *How I Became Stupid*, Martin Page warns the reader: "Intelligence make you unhappy, lonely, and poor" (p. 1). Later, he says it again: "Intelligence is a double curse: it makes you suffer, and no one thinks of it as an illness" (p. 10). I believe learning can be rewarding, but forgetting that it comes at many costs is bloody murder.

Brookfield (2006), in the book "The Skillful Teacher," explains that learning is an emotional experience for students. Sometimes, they commit what he calls *cultural suicide*: "Students are punished by their families, peers, and communities for what appears to be an act of betrayal" (p. 84). As students learn, they might become more and more *abnormal*. Courage is needed to transcend culture or family values, to confront racism, or to tell the truth. As the philosopher Comte-Sponville (2001) put it, "Courage is needed to persist

and endure, to withstand the tension within us, the agonizing struggle between past and future, between memory and will, that is life itself and the effort of living” (p. 54). To see reality as it is, whether it is in a course in astronomy, paleontology, philosophy, or politics, students need to be able to handle the fear of knowing and of not knowing. I quote Comte-Sponville (2001) again:

And if we sometimes need courage to think, just as we need it to suffer or fight, it is because no one can think for us -- or suffer or fight for us -- and because reason, or truth, is insufficient and cannot spare us the task of overcoming whatever it is within us that wavers and resists, that would prefer a comforting illusion or a convenient lie.

Learning simply demands our best selves. To grow means stretching one’s self beyond what one already is capable of doing. The best definition of courage that I have, then, is from Paul Tillich (1952): “Courage is self-affirmation ‘in spite-of,’ that is in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself” (p. 52). Tillich’s ontological analysis shows particularly well how courage is related to anxiety. As he argues, “it is the anxiety of not being able to preserve one’s own being which underlies every fear and is the frightening element in it” (p. 38). Perhaps, this point would explain why so many of our 1st year students do not return; they need to change too much. A few paragraphs later: “Anxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met by courage” (p. 39). The point I’m trying to make is that courage is self-affirmation “in spite of” all of the things that prevent us from being what we want. To learn and grow, a person will need the courage to be.

If having courage to grow means overcoming anxiety, then, what are learners really afraid of? For this question, I turn to Maslow (1968), who developed a well-grounded theoretical perspective on the fear and evasion of knowledge. On the one hand, he says, we “tend to be afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful” (p. 60); we also “avoid becoming conscious of unpleasant and dangerous truths” (p. 60). On the other hand, we fear what we can become; our fullest potential, our dreams, our goals, our hopes. Maslow (1968) explains it so passionately:

We fear our highest possibilities (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments, under the most perfect conditions, under conditions of greatest courage. We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet, we simultaneously shiver with weakness, with awe, and fear before these very same possibilities.

Students and teachers, then, *are more similar than different: they both fear growth*. To make a step forward in the high country of the mind, they will need to overcome themselves, their fears, and the weight of the responsibilities that come with entire generations of thought. Maslow (1968) knew this well: “Growth has not only rewards and pleasures but also many intrinsic pains and always will have . . . Growth forward is *in spite of* these losses and therefore requires courage, will, choice, and strength in the individual, as well as protection, permission, and encouragement from the environment” (p. 204, emphasis in original). When we *decide* to grow, we make a step forward in the unknown, we come closer to our own vision of what we wish we could be. If learning requires courage, then teachers must continue to grow on their own and prepare students for the courage they will need to become what they hope. The spirit of my point is well-captured in two moments in a novel by Paulo Coelho (2007):

“What is a teacher? I’ll tell you: it isn’t someone who teaches something, but someone who inspires the student to give of her best in order to discover what she already knows” (p. 78)

“There is only one difference between teacher and disciple: the former is slightly less afraid than the latter [...] The true teacher gives the disciple the courage to throw his or her world off balance, even though the discipline is afraid of things already encountered and more afraid still of what might be around the corner” (p. 213).

Unfortunately, there is no rapid remedy for lack of courage, but there is something that all teachers can do to nudge students an inch closer toward their “dream” self: teachers can *en-courage*. Words of support always affect others. After all, people’s lives can be changed by a single utterance. So say it like you mean it: “I believe in you.”