COURAGE IS CALLING
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FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

RYAN HOLIDAY

PROFILE BOOKS
Let us not wait for other people to come to us and call upon us to do great deeds. Let us instead be the first to summon the rest to the path of honor. Show yourself to be the bravest of all the captains, with more of a right to leadership than those who are our leaders at present.

XENOPHON
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It was long ago now that Hercules came to the crossroads.

At a quiet intersection in the hills of Greece, in the shade of knobby pine trees, the great hero of Greek myth first met his destiny.

Where exactly it was or when, no one knows. We hear of this moment in the stories of Socrates. We can see it captured in the most beautiful art of the Renaissance. We can feel his budding energy, his strapping muscles, and his anguish in the classic Bach cantata. If John Adams had had his way in 1776, Hercules at the crossroads would have been immortalized on the official seal of the newly founded United States.

Because there, before the man’s undying fame, before the twelve labors, before he changed the world, Hercules faced a crisis, one as life-changing and real as any of us have ever faced.

Where was he headed? Where was he trying to go? That’s the point of the story. Alone, unknown, unsure, Hercules, like so many, did not know.
Where the road diverged lay a beautiful goddess who offered him every temptation he could imagine. Adorned in finery, she promised him a life of ease. She swore he’d never taste want or unhappiness or fear or pain. Follow her, she said, and his every desire would be fulfilled.

On the other path stood a sterner goddess in a pure white robe. She made a quieter call. She promised no rewards except those that came as a result of hard work. It would be a long journey, she said. There would be sacrifice. There would be scary moments. But it was a journey fit for a god. It would make him the person his ancestors meant him to be.

Was this real? Did it really happen?
If it’s only a legend, does it matter?
Yes, because this is a story about us.
About our dilemma. About our own crossroads.
For Hercules, the choice was between vice and virtue, the easy way and the hard way, the well-trod path and the road less traveled. We all face this choice.

Hesitating only for a second, Hercules chose the one that made all the difference.

He chose virtue.


In the ancient world, virtue was comprised of four key components.
ThE fOur VIRTUes ◇ COURAGE IS CALLING

Courage.
Temperance.
Justice.
Wisdom.

The “touchstones of goodness,” the philosopher king Marcus Aurelius called them. To millions, they’re known as the cardinal virtues, four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine. They’re called “cardinal,” C. S. Lewis pointed out, not because they come down from church authorities but because they originate from the Latin cardo, or hinge.

It’s pivotal stuff. It’s the stuff that the door to the good life hangs on.

They are also our topic for this book, and for this series.
Factory books.* Four virtues.
One aim: to help you choose . . .

Courage, bravery, fortitude, honor, sacrifice . . .

Temperance, self-control, moderation, composure, balance . . .

Justice, fairness, service, fellowship, goodness, kindness . . .

Wisdom, knowledge, education, truth, self-reflection, peace . . .

* This is book 1.
These are the key to a life of honor, of glory, of *excellence* in every sense. Character traits that John Steinbeck perfectly described as “pleasant and desirable to [their] owner and makes him perform acts of which he can be proud and with which he can be pleased.” But the *he* must be taken to mean all of human-kind. There was no feminine version of the word *virtus* in Rome. Virtue wasn’t male or female, it just *was*.

It still is. It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. It doesn’t matter if you’re physically strong or painfully shy, a genius or of average intelligence. Virtue is a universal imperative.

The virtues are interrelated and inseparable, yet each is distinct from the others. Doing the right thing almost always takes courage, just as discipline is impossible without the wisdom to know what is worth choosing. What good is courage if not applied to justice? What good is wisdom if it doesn’t make us more modest?

North, south, east, west—the four virtues are a kind of compass (there’s a reason that the four points on a compass are called the “cardinal directions”). They guide us. They show us where we are and what is true.

Aristotle described virtue as a kind of craft, something to pursue just as one pursues the mastery of any profession or skill. “We become builders by building and we become harpists by playing the harp,” he writes. “Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”
Virtue is something we do.
It’s something we choose.

Not once, for Hercules’s crossroads was not a singular event. It’s a daily challenge, one we face not once but constantly, repeatedly. Will we be selfish or selfless? Brave or afraid? Strong or weak? Wise or stupid? Will we cultivate a good habit or a bad one? Courage or cowardice? The bliss of ignorance or the challenge of a new idea?

Stay the same . . . or grow?
The easy way or the right way?
Introduction

There is no deed in this life so impossible that you cannot do it. Your whole life should be lived as a heroic deed.

LEO TOLSTOY

There is nothing we prize more than courage, yet nothing is in shorter supply.

Is that just how it goes? That things are prized because they are rare?

Possibly.

But courage—the first of the four cardinal virtues—is not a precious stone. It is not a diamond, a product of some billion-year, timeless process. It’s not oil, which must be drawn from the earth. These are not finite resources, doled out randomly by fortune or accessible only to some.

No. It is something much simpler. It is renewable. It’s there in each of us, everywhere. It’s something that we are capable of in a moment’s notice. In matters big and small. Physical. Moral.
INTRODUCTION

There are unlimited, even daily opportunities for it, in work, at home, everywhere.
And yet it remains so rare.
Why?
Because we are afraid. Because it’s easier not to get involved. Because we have something else we’re working on and now is not a good time. “I’m not a soldier,” we say, as if fighting on the battlefield is the only form of courage the world needs.
We’d rather stick with what’s safe. Me? Heroic? That seems egotistical, preposterous. We leave it to someone else, someone more qualified, better trained, with less to lose.
It’s understandable, even logical.
But if everyone thinks that way, where does it leave us?
“Must one point out,” the writer and Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “that from ancient times a decline in courage has been considered the first symptom of the end?”
Conversely, the greatest moments in human history all share one thing—whether it’s landing on the moon or civil rights, the final stand at Thermopylae or the art of the Renaissance: The bravery of ordinary men and women. People who did what needed to be done. People who said, “If not me, then who?”

COURAGE IS COURAGE IS COURAGE

It’s long been held that there are two kinds of courage, physical and moral.
INTRODUCTION ◊ COURAGE IS CALLING

Physical courage is a knight riding into battle. It’s a firefighter rushing into a burning building. It’s an explorer setting out for the arctic, defying the elements.

Moral courage is a whistleblower taking on powerful interests. It’s the truth teller who says what no one else will say. It’s the entrepreneur going into business for themselves, against all odds.

The martial courage of the soldier and the mental courage of the scientist.

But it doesn’t take a philosopher to see that these are actually the same thing.

There aren’t two kinds of courage. There is only one. The kind where you put your ass on the line. In some cases literally, perhaps fatally. In other cases it’s figurative, or financial.

Courage is risk.
It is sacrifice . . .
. . . commitment
. . . perseverance
. . . truth
. . . determination.

When you do the thing others cannot or will not do. When you do the thing that people think you shouldn’t or can’t do. Otherwise it’s not courage. You have to be braving something or someone.

Still, courage remains something hard to define. We know it when we see it, but it’s hard to say it. Accordingly, the aim of
this book is not definitions. Rarer than a rare gem, courage is something we must hold up to inspect from many angles. By looking at its many parts and cuts, its perfections and its flaws, we can come away with an understanding of the value of the whole. Each of these perspectives gives us a little more insight.

But we do this not to understand virtue in the abstract, of course. Each of us faces our own Herculean crossroads. Perhaps we hold elected office. Perhaps we’ve witnessed something unethical at work. Maybe we’re parents trying to raise good kids in a terrifying, tempting world. Maybe we’re a scientist pursuing a controversial or unorthodox idea. Maybe we have a dream for a new business. Maybe we’re a foot soldier in the infantry, on the eve of battle. Or an athlete about to push the limits of human performance.

What these situations call for is courage. In real terms. Right now. Will we have it? Will we answer the phone that’s ringing?

“To each,” Winston Churchill would say, “there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.”

It’s more accurate to say that life has many of these moments, many such taps on the shoulder.
Churchill had to persevere through a difficult childhood with unloving parents. It took courage to ignore the teachers who thought him dumb. To head off as a young war correspondent, then to be taken prisoner and make a harrowing escape. It takes guts to run for public office. It took courage each time he published something as a writer. There was the decision to change political parties. To enlist in World War I. The awful years in the political wilderness when opinion turned against him. Then there was the rise of Hitler, and standing alone against Nazism in his finest hour of finest hours. But there was also the courage to carry on when he was tossed ungratefully out of political life again, in the wilderness again, and the courage to come back once more. The courage to take up painting in old age and put his work out in the world. To stand up against Stalin and the Iron Curtain, and on and on and on . . .

Were there failures of courage along the way too? Mistakes made? Opportunities not taken? Undoubtedly. But let us look to the courageous moments and learn from them rather than focus on another’s flaws as a way of excusing our own.

In the lives of all the greats, we find the same themes. There was the pivotal moment of courage, but there were many smaller ones too. Rosa Parks on the bus is courage . . . but so too were her forty-two years of life in the South as a black woman without losing hope, without becoming bitter.
COURAGE IS CALLING  INTRODUCTION

Her courage to pursue her legal case against segregation was simply the continuation of the courage it took for her just to join the NAACP in 1943, to work there openly as a secretary, and even more in 1945 when she successfully registered to vote in Alabama.

History is written with blood, sweat, and tears, and it is etched into eternity by the quiet endurance of courageous people.

People who stood up (or sat down) . . .
People who fought . . .
People who risked . . .
People who spoke . . .
People who tried . . .
People who conquered their fears, who acted with courage, and, in some cases, briefly achieved that higher plane of existence—they entered the hall of heroes as peers and equals.

Courage calls each of us differently, at different times, in different forms. But in every case it is, as they say, coming from inside the house.

First, we are called to rise above our fear and cowardice. Next, we are called to bravery, over the elements, over the odds, over our limitations. Finally, we are called to heroism, perhaps for only just a single magnificent moment, when we are called to do something for someone other than ourselves.
INTRODUCTION  S COURAGE IS CALLING

Whatever call you’re hearing right now, what matters is that you answer. What matters is that you go to it.

In an ugly world, courage is beautiful. It allows beautiful things to exist.

Who says it has to be so rare?

You picked up this book because you know it doesn’t.
PART I
FEAR

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

What forces prevent courage? What makes something so prized so rare? What keeps us from doing what we can and should do? What is the source of cowardice? Fear. Phobos. It’s impossible to beat an enemy you do not understand, and fear—in all its forms, from terror to apathy to hatred to playing it small—is the enemy of courage. We are in a battle against fear. So we have to study fear, get familiar with it, grapple with its causes and symptoms. This is why the Spartans built temples to fear. To keep it close. To see its power. To ward it off. The brave are not without fear—no human is—rather, it’s their ability to
rise above it and master it that makes them so remarkable. In fact, it must be said that greatness is impossible without doing this. Of cowards, though, nothing is written. Nothing is remembered. Nothing is admired. Name one good thing that did not require at least a few hard seconds of bravery. So if we wish to be great, we must first learn how to conquer fear, or at least rise above it in the moments that matter.
Before she knew any better, Florence Nightingale was fearless. There’s a little drawing done sometime in her early childhood. An aunt captured Florence walking with her mother and her sister, when she was maybe four years old.

Her older sister clings to her mother’s hand. Meanwhile, Florence “independently stumps along by herself,” with that wonderful innocent confidence some children have. She didn’t need to be safe. She didn’t care what anyone else thought. There was so much to see. So much to explore.

But sadly, this independence was not to last.

Maybe somebody told her the world was a dangerous place. Maybe it was the imperceptible but crushing pressure of the times, which said that girls should behave a certain way. Maybe it was the luxury of her privileged existence, which softened her sense of what she was capable of.

Each of us has had some version of this conversation, when an adult does us the cruel injustice—whatever their intentions—of puncturing our little bubble. They think they are preparing us...