



# **Everyday Courage**

**Living courageously without being a hero**

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## **Abstract**

The world in which we live is crowded, so crowded that we can become lost in the experience of making our own way through. This can manifest itself in feeling powerless to protect ourselves from the pushing and shoving of others, relying on them for direction and meaning, being swamped and 'petrified' by fear and doubt and generally getting swept along above the ground never really knowing what it feels like to be connected to the earth beneath, to have a strong sense of our own being and to feel truly alive. Regaining our ability, in the midst of the resultant despair, to deliberately intervene in our own lives and live according to our own inner wisdom requires a constant commitment to be personally courageous. There is indeed currently a heightened interest within the psychological community and wider society in the concept of courage and specifically the importance of giving primacy to the subjective experience of courage when assessing its relevance to the challenges and obstacles that each of face in our daily lives. This paper introduces the five key components of 'everyday courage', namely, being, self-hood, choice, faith and creativity, surveys their antecedents in existential thought, assesses their significance for the challenge of everyday living and comments upon their relevance for and resonance with the practice of existential psychotherapy. Concluding thoughts highlight the need for both qualitative and quantitative phenomenological research in this field which would include a deeper emphasis on personal courage in the inter-relational dimension as well as studies of how everyday courage relates to different client groups and therapists from the existential as well as other theoretical orientations.

## **Keywords**

Courage, being, non-being, self-hood, choice, faith, creativity

## Introduction – The Age of Courage

Yesterday I dared to struggle. Today I dare to win.

Bernadette Devlin (1969)

Contemplation of our own life and death, quite literally our *being-there* and our *not-being-there* provides us with the opportunity to question what is this being that is actually there, what is it that enables us to experience our being as distinct and meaningful and how is it that we can protect ourselves against the threat of *non-being* and harness our own life force... everyday. From an existential perspective this quest for meaning and purpose is expressed in the inevitable and continual decision-making process that underlies our lived experience and recognises that being-in-the-world-with-others continually challenges us as we struggle to maintain a sense of who we are specifically and live according to this fluid inner knowledge with courage and commitment.

Choosing our future therefore requires us to turn this self-awareness into deliberate action whilst staying true to our own world view and where necessary transcending the despair that an awareness of the ultimate meaninglessness of our existence can engender. This endeavour consists of deliberately and courageously intervening in our own lives to prevent the replication and rehashing of old and inauthentic ways of being and having the strength to face the unknown with only a sense of ourselves and an inner commitment to stay true to that self in the world of others as our ultimate guide. Far from feeling guilty about choosing our own being, it is this very choice and the courage to make it that can help us to overcome our sense of existential guilt which arises from a state of non-being in any meaningful sense and which in practice equates to thoughts such as 'I know I could have' and 'I really wanted to'. In this respect existential courage not only constitutes a consciousness of our being but underpins our very being itself as distinct from a listless and fearful existence of non-being-in-the-world-with-others.

As we reach the next stage in the maturation of cyberspace society, a reaction seems to be developing where individuals are becoming increasingly concerned with 'who they are', 'what they want to be' and 'how they want to live'. Accordingly existential awareness appears to have become far more prevalent as the human struggle with depression and anxiety becomes more determined

and overt. Furthermore individual resilience is being viewed as increasingly fundamental as in some respects the 'age of anxiety' gives way to the 'age of courage'. This necessity for personal courage is born out of a recognition that in the absence of any essential or enduring truth about our existence and even less agreement as to what constitutes success in contemporary society, the only way to overcome our unique set of anxieties and sense of ontological insecurity is by choosing to live courageously, every day.

This concept of everyday courage enables us to continue to consider courage as an important virtue, if not the most important virtue, but whereas throughout most of history it was located on the battlefield with its main protagonists as soldiers and warriors, we are now able to see it as more applicable to the "battlefields of everyday life" (Haitch 1995:83) where courageous acts are required by us all. This broader understanding of courage has largely come about as the result of thinkers and practitioners in the sphere of existential philosophy, psychology and literature including, Kierkegaard 1980a, 1980b & 1985, Nietzsche 1968, Tillich 1952 & 1957, Camus 1947 & 1961, May 1976 & 1977, Binns-wanger 1963, Frankel 1963 and Kohut 1979.

A key aspect of the practice of existential psychotherapy involves being with our clients in a way that helps them find the courage to choose in the present whilst challenging ourselves as practitioners to have the courage to fully engage with our clients just as we find them in the encounter, wherever the relationship takes us and whatever the demands it places upon us. The constant need for courage in our everyday lives is therefore also present in our work as therapists and this paper intends to define and explore the key components of everyday courage, primarily as it relates to the self and comment on their resonance for the practice of existential psychotherapy.

## **What is Courage - Defining the Coeur of Man**

Then Laches, suppose we first set about determining the nature of courage.... tell me if you can, what is courage.

Socrates (1987)

The question 'what is courage' has always garnered significant interest and debate without necessarily providing an agreed consensus definition. What is agreed is that there are many different types of courage and many different situations that call for courage. The heightened interest in this topic within the psychological community as well as wider society seems to be borne out of a

recognition that in some way grappling with the issue of courage has contemporary relevance and furthermore that there is something important and valuable to be gained from re-examining and re-quantifying both explicit and implicit theories of courage by seeking the opinions of 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens. A recent issue of *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (April 2007) was devoted solely to the subject of courage and included four major research studies investigating definitions of courage and courageous behaviour.

The assumptions about courage that underpin this research reveal an emerging understanding that courage can be attributed not only to the occasional and isolated acts of rescue or self-sacrifice, but also to everyday acts (Evans and White, 1981, Putman 2001, Woodard 2004). There is however, a reticence in these studies to accept that courage can be more than the behavioural act of responding courageously in the moment and can in fact be a character trait or disposition which informs all our actions. The exception to this view is expressed by Peterson and Seligman (2004) who focus on the trait-like quality of courage and favour a more attitudinal perspective. Others frame courage as an attributional phenomenon where courage is, at least in part, in the eye of the beholder (Rate 2007). Ontologically however, courage is defined as more of a subjective experience where an actor perceives risk, experiences fear and overcomes those fears and is able to act whilst still maintaining authenticity in the face of risk.

There are numerous studies (Rachman 1984, Rothschild and Miethe 1999, Becker and Eagly 2004) that have involved a highly select group of those who have been recognised for their extreme courage in specific situations and been lauded as heroes, e.g. saving the life of another by rescue or organ donation and extreme acts of bravery in the face of physical danger. Despite their praise-worthiness, these are examples of “monumental courage” (Pury et al 2007:100) and have the effect of limiting the scope of courageousness in a way that is analogous to an understanding of depression that only involves the study of sufferers who have been hospitalised after frequent suicide attempts.

Aristotle (trans. 1999) viewed the subjective experience of courage as the mean of fear and confidence in the individual and the results of much of this research has highlighted the need to understand an individual's personal experience to truly be able to appreciate their courageousness, i.e. compared to their own typical actions a strong swimmer saving a drowning child could well be displaying far less personal courage than a dyslexic adolescent taking a written exam. With this in mind, perhaps the most important task that participants were set was to “describe a time in your life when you believe you

acted courageously” (Pury 2007:102). The narrative data collected however was interpreted against a fixed set of assumptions concerning emotions and behaviour. To have employed phenomenological methodology would have allowed a broader understanding of courage to emerge and would have likely addressed the important question - does a courageous act have to involve taking care of someone else or can courageousness also be about taking care of ourselves and facing our own challenges?

The idea that courage is not the preserve of the exceptional few and that we can all look for acts of courage in our lives opens the way to a new appreciation of the old understanding of courage. Aquinas described courage as a “general virtue” (in Pury 2007:120) whilst Samuel Johnson said that “courage is reckoned the greatest of all virtues; because unless a man has that virtue he has no security for preserving any other” (Miller 2000:5). Similarly, although courage is the characteristic virtue of the armed aristocracy in Plato’s ideal society, it is always related to the *thymos* or ‘spirited’ element in the soul. Haitch picks up on this theme when describing courage as the “power pack” (1995:84) that enables reason to stay its course over fear as the individual strives to resist external pressures in their everyday judgments. Socrates in turn thought that courage was in fact related to knowledge of the human condition and that true courage involved knowing when to act on that knowledge. As Tillich comments, “soldierly fortitude [is thus] transcended by the courage of wisdom” (1952:11). Closely associated with this contention is the notion of the inner character of courage and the idea that it is not the act per se that is courageous but the inner character of the person expressed through the physical act, as Olds puts it, “the outward act is an expression of the inner harmony of the person” (1989:64). Here, the existential formulation of courage and the self materialises which if understood correctly and translated contemporaneously, provides a rich and vibrant insight into the definition of what everyday courage actually entails. There is no sense in which this is a dry, philosophical discussion, indeed grasping the understanding of the human condition that it conveys and accepting some of the challenges it presents can not only transform our understanding of how courageousness relates to each of us individually but also allow us to appreciate how living with existential courage can empower us to stay in control of our ever-changing lives.

In addition everyday courage seems to be a particularly important concept in redefining the parameters of what is considered courageous at a time when it takes as much courage not to fight a war as it does to fight one and more courage not to succumb to social and cultural edifices than it does to keep up

and fit in. As May comments “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Camus and Sartre have proclaimed that courage is not the absence of despair; it is, rather, the capacity to move ahead despite despair” (1976:12). This is the central measure of existential courage and the “courage to be” (Tillich 1952:xii) a self all the time, every day. In broad terms the everyday-ness of courage as it applies to the person can be split into five component parts; being, self-hood, choice, faith and creativity, the exploration of which allows us to further understand the very heart of man.

## **The Five Components of Everyday Courage**

### ***Being* – Courage and Being from Moment to Moment**

Either life entails courage or it ceases to be life.

E.M. Forster (1923)

In contrast to the ordinary fear of a threatening object, existential fear is a response in the depths of a person’s being to the general human situation particularly when the situation reveals the threat of non-being or nothingness. Dealing with this profound fear was central to Heidegger’s work as he resurrected the question of being and the juxtaposed threat of non-being in anything but the physical sense (1927). Accordingly, instead of ignoring the three-fold anxiety of physical, moral and spiritual non-being by pretending that it is not there, the individual is required to become courageous in the way they live to combat anxiety and maintain a sense of their own finite being. Tillich directs us that “courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of non-being. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of non-being upon itself by affirming itself.... courage always includes a risk, it is always threatened by non-being” (1952:155).

For some clients who seek psychotherapy there is an assumption that somehow in the natural course of things, life should always be good or trouble-free. As existential therapists noticing with a client how this fantasy of a ‘good life’ is very often not borne out in anything but brief moments of their past can be important in helping them come to terms with a far more realistic picture of their own lives and in turn empower them to accept the challenge that this wider and deeper understanding of their own being presents. A key facet of this greater understanding of being is that the struggle to be and to become is constant and consistent with our very being-there and furthermore, as Vunderink says, in actuality “courage can only resist anxiety but not overcome

it" (1970:241) and there is therefore a need for the individual to be courageous everyday if he is to be equal to the challenge of living and flourishing as opposed to despairing and stagnating. As May comments, "this is why Paul Tillich speaks of courage as ontological – it is essential to our being" (1976:14), "makes possible all psychological virtues" (1976:13) and is firmly centred within our own being. It is the courage to 'be' every day that makes our 'becoming' possible and here again the struggle of many clients with 'what they want to become' and 'how they can become it' is closely connected to a knowledge of their own being and crucially, their courageousness in acting upon that knowledge in their everyday lives. Hence just as our being persists, so does our need to live with courage and as Hannah suggests, employing the attributes of resilience, agency and will in our daily lives actually "accumulate over time" and results in a more durable person with a more courageous mindset" (2007:130) who is better able to cope with the anxiety that awareness of the limitless possibilities of our being perpetuates.

The understanding of *Dasein* as literally our 'being-there' (Heidegger 1927) is also valuable in this context as it emphasises the importance of the courage to know that we are there and accept this fact and its resultant implications in the most basic manner. Although at first glance this idea may appear to be contradicted by Tillich's contention that we should have the faith to "simply accept the fact that [we] are accepted" (1948:162) by a power greater than ourselves, both these ideas still require a person to mindfully formulate their own defence against the "darkness of non-being" (Haitch 1995:93). Is courage therefore, something that is wholly coincident with being and hence something that everyone possesses, "simply by virtue of existing" (Haitch 1995:93)? Perhaps not, but it certainly is something that is synonymous with a personal understanding of our being-there in the midst of nothingness and involves an undertaking to initially create something that reflects this sense of self in the present and remain committed to re-creating that self with an everyday courageous attitude founded on inner belief and self-acceptance. As Cunningham comments, it involves breaking the stalemate of "I am, I am not, by assuming that I am, that I exist, I can then prove what I am by what I feel, by what I create and by how I live" (2007:77).

Before going on to consider the relationship between courage and self-hood, it is also worth briefly mentioning the aspect of everyday courage and being that requires us to face the idea of our ontic non-being, in other words our death, or more specifically to face the existential anxiety that an understanding of our own mortality creates. Terror management theory argues that this anxiety

should be kept under control and our death awareness should be carefully managed with a system of values and beliefs that translate into “cultural world views” (Greenberg et al 2001) that act as a system of protective structures that may include either secular or religious content. This concept of “anxiety buffers” (Freidman 2007:794) has a quality of diminishing our levels of everyday courage and authenticity as we are invited to immerse ourselves in the potentially ‘bad faith’ attachment to shared perspectives. Consequently whilst it would be undoubtedly detrimental for the individual to be swamped or ‘petrified’ by the knowledge of their own death or indeed by the knowledge of the dangers present in their daily lives, it would also be ultimately counter-productive to do anything but face these challenges incrementally and individually by being open to the potentially rich and rewarding experience of courageously defining our being every day in full awareness of our eventual non-being.

### ***Self-hood* – The Everyday Courage to Be an Individual**

We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth. We accept ourselves as we appear to ourselves and do not care what we really are.

Paul Tillich (1948:55)

In many ways the existential view of self concurs with the existential view of life as constantly changing and challenging. This view does not accept the existence of a substantial or solid self but instead views the self as a fluid process which relies on personal intention. As van Deurzen suggests “the self might best be described as the dynamic and ever-changing experience of being at the narrative centre of gravity of ones particular world experience” (2005:160). She goes on, “the dictum ‘existence precedes essence’ (Heidegger 1927; Sartre 1943) introduces the notion that people have to live and discover who they become out of what they created for themselves later” (2005:160). The very fact therefore that our ‘self’ is not there de facto infers something constant about the challenge of being and becoming a self. Kierkegaard’s conceptualisation is that man is a synthesis of “the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal... and necessity. So regarded, man is not yet a self” (1980b:146). Nietzsche shares this view of the developing self but, as van Deurzen indicates, his process involves “power and assertion rather than a balancing act” (2005:162). For Nietzsche the will to power or the ability to prioritise our own being is something that is a more intrinsic ability that in fact precedes self-hood. This ability can be viewed as the courageous part of our

being; “will a self and though shalt become a self” (Nietzsche 1977:232). For Sartre it is our freedom to choose and sense of being-for-ourselves that is important in re-creating the self in each moment which includes taking personal responsibility for all the choices that we make.

The need for constant commitment and courage to maintain a sense of our own agency is essential to this task and becomes all the more difficult when taking into account the Buberian perspective which affirms that the self only really exists in relation to the other, as van Deurzen clarifies, “there is never purely an ‘I’ on its own. There is only ever the ‘I’ of the ‘I-Thou’ or the ‘I’ of the ‘I-It’” (2005:165). Hence, just as we can only truly find ourselves in the world of others we are also constantly in danger of losing our sense of self in the relational dimension where without an everyday courageous dedication to plot our own course we are reduced to becoming the Heideggerian ‘they-self’ or Das Man (1927) as distinct from an authentic ‘real self’. It is this sense of alienation from the ‘real self’ that is often at the heart of the concerns of clients seeking therapy who have quite literally lost themselves in their own lives and with it a sense of their own ability to find themselves again and to re-connect.

One of the early psychoanalysts, Otto Rank, would say that “people who have lost themselves in this way, have been unable to confront the two different kinds of fear that require social courage; the fear of living autonomously, ‘life fear’ and the fear of being totally absorbed by the other, ‘death fear’” (1958:95). This is the anxiety that appears in anyone who cares for another and also in anyone who cares too much about the ‘others’. Living in the tension between these two fears is in fact the place where we can find our sense of self and through our daily decisions, allow this inner awareness to provide a sense of personal safety as well as the development of an underlying direction, or what Sartre (1943) called the ‘fundamental project’. This ongoing involvement in our own lives requires a constant commitment to transcend the herd and an everyday courage to self-define; as Maddi says, to have a “comprehension of and influence over social and biological experiences” (1998:13). He describes the notion of persistence or “hardiness” (2004:279) which is a conceptualisation that would seem to contribute towards a clearer understanding of what everyday courage and self-hood entails. Maddi contends that “hardiness, comprised of the attitudes of commitment (vs. alienation), control (vs. powerlessness) and challenge (vs. security) is offered as an operationalisation of existential courage” (2004:280).

Seen in this light, courage is ultimately created through self-attributions, one of the most important aspects of which is the ability of the individual to resist

conformity and so retain individuality whilst at the same time not becoming too rigid or fanatical. May says that “this dialectic relationship between conviction and doubt is characteristic of the highest type of courage” (1976:20). Furthermore the courageous individual will be open to the possibility of changing their beliefs, ideals and understanding of themselves throughout their lives but will resist doing so purely on the basis of external pressures. Kohut identifies courage as empowering the ‘nuclear self’ to remain true to itself and allow the individual to “oppose the pressures exerted on them and remain faithful to their ideals and themselves, while all the others, the multitudes, change their ideals and swing with the current” (1979:5). So, everyday courage is something that comes from within the self whilst at the same time forming the foundations upon which the self is built. The strength of these foundations or the depth of our everyday courageousness will ultimately protect the self from collapsing or caving in when facing adversity.

Accordingly, just as Tillich sees the challenge of courage as existing in our being itself, Kohut sees it as existing in our psyche. The synthesis of these two formulations then becomes; what self is it that wins out in our daily lives, the ‘me-self’ or the ‘they-self’ and how does this everyday self react in moments of challenge and crisis? From the point of view of existential psychotherapy it is the real self of potentiality, personal truth, honesty and inward reflection that we are initially trying to help our clients uncover and then connect with through the therapeutic experience. In this respect it is also important for the therapist to have the courage to be themselves and accept themselves in the space and not inadvertently take on the role of others in their clients’ lives. To retain a sense of ourselves as therapists therefore whilst always being mindful of the need to bracket and horizontalize as we enter the world of the other actually requires a high level of dedication and expertise. This ability to stay true to our-selves and accept our-selves both as clients and therapists requires courage and an understanding, as Camus shows in his works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Plague*, that as human beings we can only truly rely on ourselves in the present. As the examples of Sisyphus and Dr. Rieux show there is a need to be courageous in accepting ourselves and staying true to that sense of self, despite despair and with vigour – the everyday courage of the self to carry on.

These two paragons of everyday courage also allow us to think about the idea of our embodied selves and to view bodily courage as our ability to be physically sensitive as opposed to being physically overpowering and as Nietzsche puts it “learn to think with the body” (1968:14). This is the idea of using our body, our very embodied self, as a means of empathising with others

and as an expression of ourselves that also includes the moral courage of the individual to notice the suffering of others. Nietzsche interestingly concludes that “whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” (1968:254). It could be argued however that ontic being is not enough in itself and that it is specifically because of our ability as individuals to concentrate our efforts on staying ‘stuck’ and living in despair, sometimes endlessly, that we need the courage to trust in the power of the self and in so doing both challenge ourselves and allow ourselves to be challenged by others. This in the end is what truly makes us stronger.

### **Choice – The Courage to Choose With Wisdom and Authenticity**

A decision is a risk rooted in the courage of being free.

Paul Tillich (1952)

A key assumption of existential theory and by extension existential psychotherapy is that personal meaning derives from the choices people make everyday. Furthermore as Maddi says, “it is one thing to say that daily decisions determine personal meaning but it is quite another to understand how the decision making process... points the individual towards a new experience or keeps them in familiar territory” (1998:3-4). The foundation of everyday courage in this regard becomes the courage to know and to accept that as human beings we are constantly being presented with choices and that in the end we are solely responsible for the choices that we do make as well as the choices that we don’t. A person’s choices emerge from their attitude towards choice – their being-towards choice and their courage to decide to choose at all.

Having decided to choose, we are left the responsibility to choose mindfully and have the courage to remain constantly embroiled in the struggle between daring to amplify our inner thoughts or being directed by the external cacophony of seemingly solid imperatives in the world of others. Furthermore these important existential choices are often made within the context of a heightened awareness of our own feelings of despair and isolation and consequently the courage to choose in spite of everything, in spite of despair is identified as the greatest courage of all. As Kierkegaard affirms, “if one postpones the choice the personality makes the choice unconsciously or it is made by the dark powers within” (1992:483). The act of choosing therefore is something that resides within and the choices themselves do not present to the

individual as black and white propositions instead they appear as dilemmas that cause discomfort, part of which arises from an awareness that whatever choice we make includes the potential for failure, disappointment and ultimately loss. For Kierkegaard the mere fact that we are able to choose “makes man greater than the angels” (1992:490) and indeed the qualitative leaps in Kierkegaard’s thought relate to the everyday courage to make fundamental choices, firstly between ethical and aesthetic ways of being or vice versa and secondly, between ethical ways of being and personal religious faith. For Kierkegaard, to know but not to act constitutes the ultimate despair, “the ethical is not merely a knowing; it is also a doing... to risk is something which cannot be taught but springs from the will of the individual” (1992:155). May agrees with Kierkegaard in identifying the distinctive characteristics of the human being as our ability to influence our own personal evolution through having the courage through our choices to participate in forming our own future; “to push into a forest where there are no well worn paths and from which no-one has returned to guide us” (1976:12). Choosing our future therefore would seem to be at the heart of an everyday courageous attitude. As Maddi comments, it is an inherently stimulating process because it “provokes new observations, insights and formulations within oneself, and brings new reactions and feedback from others and the physical world” (1998:6).

The question does however arise, by regularly choosing the future, does a person become damned to a life of overwhelming anxiety? Not necessarily. Ontological anxiety is often assuaged when we make choices, is it ontological guilt that builds and burdens without release. Most importantly it is everyday courage that allows us to continually choose in a future orientated way as it arises from a self-confidence and a self-reliance that protects us from the unhealthy affects of being flooded with anxiety and as Maddi identifies also allows us to avoid “vegetativeness” which he sees as the “most severe existential sickness” (1998:15).

Choosing for ourselves often includes an awareness of the limitations to our choices; the things that cannot be changed, for example our height or the sex we are born with. Working existentially with clients in this regard involves increasing their recognition of the inevitability and constancy of the need to choose in life and working closely with them as they consider what choices are actually available to them specifically and exploring what it is that prevents them from actually choosing. Working with our clients in this way can help uncover the potentially transforming effects that a realisation of their power to choose can have in helping them to reclaim much of their lives back into the

realm of choice and away from the false ‘facticity’ of sedimented beliefs. The ‘serenity prayer’ included in the twelve step program of Alcoholics Anonymous illustrates this endeavour very well where a person asks to be given “the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference” (1952:4).

As therapists we need to have the courage to let our clients choose and not bring our own anxieties about a client’s choices into the work. It would also seem particularly important to be able to sit with a client as they decide not to choose, respect their reasons for doing so and allow the therapeutic space to be filled with ‘stuckness’ and a non-courageous attitude if that is the client’s choice. This equates to the courage of the therapist to ‘achieve less’.

Simply put, choosing to take charge of our own lives and committing quietly but steadfastly to be continually courageous in our daily choices without being a hero to anyone but ourselves entails a healthy and resilient approach to our own being, self-hood and sense of agency which also includes a strong sense of personal faith both in ourselves and in humanity.

## ***Faith* – Everyday Courage as Personal Faith in the Depth of Our Being**

The name of this infinite and in exhaustible depth and ground of being is God... if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it and speak of the depths of your own life... perhaps in order to do so you must forget everything traditional you have learned about God.

Paul Tillich (1948)

Tillich’s belief that the conceptualization of faith needed reinterpreting more than any other religious term remains as true today as it was in the 1950’s when he wrote *The Courage To Be*. As adherence to Christianity and other organised religions has gradually declined, the idea of personal faith has emerged as an alternative for ‘non-believers’. There is however still confusion as to what personal faith actually entails for each individual and specifically how the ability to transcend ourselves and believe in something other than ourselves can in fact lead to more enduring sense of self and allow us to unlock our being and guard against non-being in our everyday lives. Tillich attempts to clarify when he says that “faith is continually being confused with belief in something for

which there is no evidence, or in something intrinsically unbelievable” (1963:130).

For Tillich, the genuine meaning of faith could only be disclosed through a commitment to being personally courageous and thereby allowing our state of being to be “grasped by an ultimate concern” (1963:130). Haitch correctly identifies that “the best ultimate concern to be ‘grasped by’” (1995:92) for Tillich was the “ground of being itself” (1952:156) which is a term he often uses to mean God. In Tillich’s view a person’s ability to move between individuation and participation was not in itself enough to conquer the constant anxiety presented by the threefold threat of physical, moral and spiritual non-being and it is only through the courage to transcend both these poles that faith is redefined as our relation to and belief in “being itself” (1952:176) and courage is “that element in faith that is related to the risk of faith” (1957:103).

This faith in self, humankind and living is markedly different from the traditional faith which on the whole is not subject to doubt. The everyday courage to be faithful therefore becomes connected to our commitment to our own ultimate concern and specially our doubts about its “concrete content” (Tillich 1957:103) which the act of faith must affirm through courage. Nevertheless it is important to remember that as Vunderink says, on one level Tillich has in fact “welded existentialistic questions to the answers of Christianity” which is based on eternal salvation and that Nietzsche and Sartre would insist that man need not await “divine revelation before he can find meaning in his own life” (1970:247). Interestingly in his later years Heidegger began to talk of the “voice of being” and the “unhiddenness of being” (1960:358). To look beyond ourselves, however, without surrendering to the will of others is still important in both the religious and humanistic traditions. Tillich suggests that “perfect self-affirmation is not an isolated act which originates in the individual being but is participation in the universal or divine act of self-affirmation” (1952:22).

Tillich also identifies a “mystical longing... where the ‘courage to be’ is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared... the God above God” (1952:190). Carr encapsulates this concept well when he describes it as a feeling that “having completely accepted the possibility that God is not there, one discovers that there is still something there” (2001:258). The work of van Deurzen in conceptualizing the spiritual dimension to our being-in-the-world would seem to epitomise the contemporary formulation of personal humanistic faith. She describes this aspect as the “most controversial level of human experience” (2005:217) but one that allows us to make sense of our own world and maintain our own ideals without having to be religious in the traditional

sense. This is the foundation of the everyday courage of faith – to find our own meaning by maintaining a constant connection to own specific sense of the metaphysical as well as the physical dimensions of our existence.

Existential therapy, as van Deurzen comments, “aims to enhance a person’s capacity for being reflective about their perspective on the world” (2005:217) and indeed many clients who seek psychotherapy have not only lost a belief in their own individual being but have also become disillusioned with being itself. To work with our clients as they journey towards rediscovering and reformulating their ultimate concern, however deeply it is hidden, requires commitment and faith on the part of the therapist and a receptiveness on the part of the client to an understanding of the potential that faith in the power of being can have in creating personal meaning and a sense of self-hood. In certain circumstances it may also be necessary for the therapist to have the courage to move a long way from their own spiritual ideas and formulations to effectively enter the world of their clients who may be struggling with a completely different set of challenges in the broad realm of faith that are totally antithetic to those of the therapist. This is what it is to truly honour the sanctity of the beliefs of others in the therapeutic space, as it is from this base, this ultimate concern that no-one else can experience, that our clients find the courage to create something specifically for themselves that comes from their own form of faith in themselves and faith in their view of the world around them.

## ***Creativity* – The Courage to Constantly Create Our Own Meaning**

Every creative act must pass through a moment when it is neither seed nor flower... through the nothingness that is the hidden source spring of everything.

Norbert Wiener (1966)

May considers the courage to create as the most important aspect of personal courage. He warns that “if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself” (1976:12). The need for this creative courage appears in direct proportion to the levels of anxiety, despair and loss of self that an individual is experiencing. These states of being result in internal disintegration and are often easily observed in clients who are currently suffering from or have recently suffered with depression. There is a sense in depression of a ‘clearing out’ of ways of being that have

finally reached breaking point as the sedimented beliefs that have given us an illusion of strength and safety break apart. The spaces that depression opens up on the surface of our being therefore provide the individual with the opportunity and necessity to create new meaning in their lives.

This creative process requires daily courage as we attempt to reconstruct our lives by establishing alternate pathways and embracing newness both within ourselves and in our relations with others, some of whom may have been far happier relating to and benefiting from our old ways of being. Cunningham paraphrases Descartes when he says that “to create is to be” (2007:74) which in the most basic sense entails having the courage to be ourselves and create ourselves as we project into the future. Similarly Frankl (1963) believed that finding the courage to create our own meaning included giving up the expectation that life would in some way deliver ready-made meaning to us, and that despite the ‘tragic triad’ of pain, death and guilt, we should in fact seek to create our own meaning. The courage is in allowing ourselves to create without certainty but with intention and thereby not allow the presence of doubt (or ontological anxiety) to undermine the decision-making process. Tillich affirms that “creation and chaos belong to each other” (1963:51), so, to retain our ability to be autonomous and free-thinking in a society filled with second-hand meanings, requires the everyday courage to create something for ourselves that comes from ourselves.

Maddi gives the example of Frankl’s work in attempting to answer the question as to why some humans “struggle incessantly to speculate beyond what they know” and answers that “these activities suggest the presence of a quest for meaning that is even more pervasive than the search for biological and social security” (2004:281). Indeed a defining aspect of the uniqueness of human beings amongst the other inhabitants of the earth is our ability to imagine and symbolise and as Spinelli puts it “step aside from our literal-minded view” and affirm our “polymorphic-minded-ness”, something he sees as being central “to what is normally referred to as creativity” (1989:52-53). He goes on to say that it is precisely this ability to “see what is not usually seen... that is the basis of all acts of creation be they artistic or scientific” (1989:53). A clear example of what Spinelli is referring to, which also sheds light on the everyday courage that is often needed on the part of the creator is that of Galileo. His scientific creativity led him to believe that the Roman Catholic Church was making a mistake but despite an overt challenge to the autonomy of his ideas he still found the courage to create and continued his research whilst under house arrest. It is this same courage to create that allows artists to paint, authors and

philosophers to write and actors and dancers to perform - they do so in the full knowledge that their work, which is a clear expression of themselves could well be criticised and disregarded but as May highlights they have in the process displayed personal creative courage “in discovering new forms, new symbols and new patterns on which a new society can be built” (1976:21). He suggests that by “the creative act... we are able to reach beyond our own death” (1976:19) and it is certainly true that when we dare to create we can sometimes also create a lasting legacy. From an existential point of view however, the ability to live out our imagination in our everyday lives whilst we are still conscious and embodied is of primary importance and is not a course that is only open to the most overtly creative amongst us but is in fact something that is a universal requirement for the maintenance of our moral and spiritual well-being. Accordingly, for the individual to create themselves just as they imagine themselves to be requires everyday courage and inner belief.

As existential practitioners the therapeutic environment can become a place where we can help facilitate our client’s specific creations as well affirm their ability to create in general. Central to this task is the need to explore with our clients as they make their own connections as opposed to interpreting the phenomenon of a client’s story and thereby robbing them of the opportunity to create their own meaning. As therapist’s we are sometimes also required to have the presence of mind to help our clients to re-create, especially in circumstances in which they are unable to retain information or a sense of the therapeutic alliance from one session to the next. Van Deurzen summates with clarity when she reminds us that “one of the fundamental characteristics of existential work is its openness to the individual creativity of the practitioner and the client” (1997:189). Everyday courage is required to maintain this openness to creativity, both in the therapeutic space and in our daily lives.

## **Conclusion**

What has been attempted here is the conceptualization of the five key components of everyday courage, namely; being, self-hood, choice, faith and creativity. What has not been achieved is a perfect or complete formulation and indeed there is clearly a need to undertake research using phenomenological methodologies to further qualify and quantify these assumptions and hence build towards a more robust definition of courage as it appears in our daily lives. It would seem to be important to study the inter-relationship between these components and discern from the lived experience of others what the significance of and struggle for everyday courage has meant for them. This research may also include examples of individuals in different client groups

such as recovering addicts, those suffering or recently having suffered from severe anxiety or depression, survivors of abuse as well as therapists working existentially and in other orientations. It would also be potentially enlightening to deepen the work to include a more specific study of everyday courage in the inter-relational dimension of our being as well as studies of how everyday courage relates to different client groups and therapists from the existential and other theoretical orientations.

Nonetheless what is clear is that courage is not essentially about the exceptional moments in our lives where we act above ourselves and become heroes in the eyes of others. It is in fact a virtue that precedes all other virtues, appears in every moment and if embraced by the individual can give rise to a courageous attitude that pervades all aspects of their lived experience. Everyday courage is about the constant struggle that our very humanity presents to stay true to ourselves and to commit to live our own lives and choose our own future with wisdom and resilience whilst always remaining connected to the world of others. Everyday courage therefore not only becomes a necessary dimension of our 'well' being but is also something that becomes synonymous with our being itself, if being is about persistently overcoming the obstacles, both real and imagined, that appear in our lives and can make us despair of our lives, and remaining committed to living and flourishing to the best of our ability. Being intimately concerned therefore with the courage or lack thereof with which our clients face their everyday lives is one of the most potent as well as fundamentally important aspects of the practice of existential psychotherapy.

Wanting to admit to ourselves and to those around us, more of what we hope for ourselves and know about ourselves and having the courage to try and achieve the personal goals that arise from this awareness, is not only the challenge of our times but the challenge of life itself – when faced with the choice, the decision not to sit it out, but to dance. This is everyday courage.

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