The Cowardice of My Convictions: Questioning Anti-Human Values

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This essay makes the argument that contrary to long-standing, unquestioned, popular belief, human courage is not a virtue – not if courage is defined broadly as risking one’s personal well-being for a higher goal and virtue is defined as a quality conducive to the long-term betterment of oneself and/or humankind. I contend that courage in general is best viewed as a morally neutral, innate or learned, behavior or attitude which can be used for great evil, i.e., unnecessary harm, as well as for good. In the latter case, I would use the qualified expression “moral courage.” Continuing to indiscriminantly promulgate within human culture, the belief that courage is an aspirant virtue is I believe a mistake humankind can no longer afford to make with the advent of technological weaponry that threatens its survival.

Wars are always fought for the best of reasons: for liberation or manifest destiny, always against tyranny and always in the interest of humanity. So far in this war, we’ve managed to butcher some ten million humans in the interest of humanity. Next war it seems we’ll have to destroy all of man in order to preserve his damn dignity. … As long as valor remains a virtue, we shall have soldiers. So, I preach cowardice. Through cowardice, we shall all be saved.
– From the screenplay for The Americanization of Emily (1964)
by Paddy Chayefsky

1. Introduction

All my life I have everywhere heard the quality of human courage spoken of and regarded as a virtue, praised as something of unquestionable, intrinsic positive value, always worthy of admiration, and its opposite, cowardice, viewed as something despicably ignoble. On 9/11/2001, nineteen men gave the world a vivid example of supreme courage in commandeering large airliners into skyscrapers and bravely dying, and killing, for the sake of their religious and political beliefs, thinking they were defending their people and way of life against evil heathens, using horrific, indiscriminant violence as the only
desperate option they felt they had against the overwhelming military force of their enemy. (They were also demonstrating unquestioned faith, another “virtue” of which I have my doubts.) These people must have been terrified in the final hours and minutes before their martyrdom, but they valiantly overcame their fear, as they had no doubt been taught to do all their lives. Courage isn’t fearlessness I’m told, it’s doing what you believe is right in spite of your fear. These men would never have done what they did if they had not been indoctrinated with the notion that courage is an all-important virtue. This courage of theirs cruelly, brutally ended the lives of about 3,000 innocent human beings that day and set in motion a chain of events of even more massive violence, wars, suffering, and horror across the globe for years to come.

On the west side of Chicago where I grew up in the 1950s and 60s, courage was frequently tested in the form of willingness to engage in a fist fight fought for no reason other than that, i.e., the testing of your courage. It was always the kids who were quick to anger and had the most “guts,” in the sense of being willing to beat people up without hesitation, who were most admired, their opinions (such as they were) valued, their rules obeyed, and their example emulated. If you got into an argument, it often came to a physical fight, and if you won the fight, you won the argument, irrespective of the truth or falsity of the opposing positions, if there were any actual opposing positions. Anyone who held back from an unnecessary fight because of self-preserving fear or natural aversion to pain or feeling sorry for the person they were required to pummel and their example set in motion a chain of events of even more massive violence, wars, suffering, and horror across the globe for years to come.

Boys in urban slums are indoctrinated in a thousand ways by their peers, the media, literature, films, even their parents with the idea that if they’re not brave, they’re not real men, and on the streets brave translates into beating people up, sometimes killing them and risking being killed yourself. Physical assault and murder are not viewed as intrinsically good, but as long as you bravely risked it happening to yourself at the same time you inflicted it on others, it’s wonderful. If you’re willing to increase the collective pool of potential victims with yourself, the same violent behavior instantly transforms from evil to holy, just like Holy Eucharist. At the inevitable funerals, we show appropriate mourning for the victims of this value system and rhetorically ask: Why can’t we rid the streets of brutal gang violence? Why can’t we get through to these kids? Why can’t we get our message across to them? But our message did get across to them.

The 1950s movie *Shane* is a beloved western classic. I have it on videotape. Shane is a gunfighter with a good heart who helps some homesteader farmers and ranchers fight against a cattle baron trying to force them off “their” land. No one in the film suggests the possibility of finding a creative win-win solution to their problems or a compromise in which the homesteaders and cattle drivers can both meet their needs. This might make sense, but wouldn’t provide for a very emotionally uplifting, rousing story, and box-office receipts would be minimal. The tunnel-vision like focus is exclusively on courage, manliness, and killing to settle the issue. At one point, admirable Shane calls the evil hired gunslinger Wilson a “low down Yankee dog” and Wilson insists Shane “prove it,”
meaning the outcome of a shoot-out will and is, in fact, required to, conclusively establish
the truth of this assertion. By the end of the film, lots of good guys and bad guys are worm
meat, but the homesteaders, i.e., those still alive, have “won” the war and the argument,
winner take all. Shane rides off into the sunset with a bleeding wound leaving us to
wonder whether he’ll live, and Joey, the wide-eyed little boy who idolizes him and whom
Shane taught to be “strong” by using a pistol, calls after him to tell him that he loves him.
I’m sure this film was an inspiration to many American kids, some of whom, upon
growing up, bravely killed and died trying to forcibly spread our way of life to evil
Vietnamese peasants who insolently tried to drive us out of their country because they
failed to appreciate the Chinese, Japanese, French, Americans, and other foreigners
coming in there for decades and telling them how to run things. Maybe some of the Viet
Cong saw Shane too.

I wonder if some people secretly admire the courage of suicide bombers, kamikaze
pilots, violent gangsters, and Nazi soldiers who joined the ranks of the endless stream of
warriors throughout history who have valiantly died hailing in their dying breaths the
power-mad, war-profiting demagogues, safe back home, who used them. The commanders
of concentration camps in World War II were praised by their superiors for their strength
and courage in carrying out their tasks without letting any human sympathy and empathy
get in the way, which weaker men might have shown, or without requiring alcohol.

I believe a primary ingredient of the fuel that feeds endless violence and warfare on
this planet is the value human beings place on courage. Yet many claim it is the highest
human virtue (personally, my choice is compassion). In the end, we may choose it over
the continuance of human life, or any life, on earth. We admire it that much. With what
little time we may have left before our courage kills us all, what could it hurt to allow
ourselves to feel a little natural, God-given (or evolved), self-preserving fear, and think
this thing over a little, while we can?

My purpose here is to argue against or at least raise the question of whether we
should continue to value and inculcate “courage” as an indisputable human virtue,
whether in so doing, we are perpetuating, from one generation to the next, a very
destructive and dangerous idea. In this age of weapons of global destruction, I don’t think
we can afford the luxury of this kind of mistake any longer. Although I believe the quality
of courage is sometimes necessary in life and even occasionally used in a positive way for
the good of humanity (i.e., moral courage), our unqualified admiration for this trait is very
often the foundation of the most horrific evil imaginable. Courage, in the broad sense, is
not a virtue, and should not be considered as such. Like other qualities, e.g., intelligence, it
can be used for good, but, at least as often, courage, or let us say misplaced, misguided or
misdirected courage, is the cause of monstrous evil as well.

Our long-held indoctrinated delusion and confusion on this issue has led to great,
unnecessary human suffering and tragedy. We are long overdue in exposing this ignorant
and vicious wolf in sheep’s clothing. To slightly rephrase Shakespeare, “Thus courage
doth make us all conscience-less.”
2. Defining Courage

Dictionaries differ slightly in how they define “courage” or “bravery.” Pulling together what is common in these definitions, I would describe it loosely as a quality of character in which a person overcomes fear in order to achieve a desired goal. As I mentioned before, the concept is usually considered to be different from fearlessness. A psychotic, sociopath or psychopath can be fearless. In a brave person, fear is assumed to exist, but it is overcome. I deliberately leave out inclusion of the word “moral” (as understood in Judeo-Christian or Humanistic terms) in my definition because it attaches a quality of ethics to the concept, which clearly is not a necessary component of the meaning as it is understood in popular culture. Oftentimes warriors on all sides of a conflict are referred to as brave and courageous by each other without regard to the justness of the fight in which they are participating. I was referred to as “brave” by a person once because I flew in a glider plane, but I wouldn’t say there was anything in my action which was manifestly moral or immoral. In the poor urban subculture I grew up in, kids who were more eager to fight others were sometimes referred to with respect as “bad,” meaning brave, a kind of indirect way of acknowledging that this kind of courage was morally evil. I’d say courage, broadly defined, is a morally neutral attribute; it can be used for great evil or good, more often for the former in my opinion. Therefore, it is not necessarily a “virtue,” if one understands that to mean a quality conducive to the long-term betterment of oneself or society. I once saw a photograph of the corpses of some Nazi soldiers in WWII who had frozen to death on the Russian front rather than surrender. They preferred that gruesome death rather than to fail to be brave. They valued courage above their own lives and above any human reason or sense of morality, though at least the doubt must have arisen in their minds from time to time that they were helping to perpetrate an evil ideology. I would say that courage is generally not considered a virtue according to the Judeo-Christian value system although “fortitude” is considered so, but this concept is more akin to “moral courage” which I discuss further below.

I suppose the value of courage exists because it is an evolutionary holdover which had great utility when we were cavemen, an alpha-male thing. But it has much less survival value now. In fact, it now has a very dangerous anti-survival quality. It is quite possible that people may someday take deliberate actions which will end all biological life on this planet in order to pay homage to the supreme priority of being brave over all other considerations. Confusion over the value of courage may also arise because we incorrectly assume that because it is sometimes difficult to do what is morally right, the converse must also be true, i.e., if something is difficult to do, like being brave, it must be right. The value of courage is passed on from each generation to the next via simple indoctrination and peer pressure. (I wonder if there is any connection between homophobia and our valuation of macho bravery). It is often used exploitively. Many despots have known that nothing can be counted on to more easily get a person to suffer great hardship and injury, or kill or die for you than impugning the person’s courage. The victims will die praising the scam artist who’s deceived them out of their lives. People will sometimes subordinate their reason, their conscience, and their ethical values to meet the challenge of
their courage being questioned, and the manipulative know this. Perhaps it is true, as some say, that courage is our highest value – tragically so.

In my opinion, fear is a natural emotion, as pain is a natural sensation, both of which have evolved because they have great survival value, and are ignored at our peril. There is no shame in being afraid. In general, like pain, fear should be controlled or treated only when it would be considered pathological because it is exaggerated, irrational or inappropriate in a given context, causing only suffering or dysfunction, and loosed from any natural beneficial role. I think sometimes unnecessary brave acts are a reaction to unnecessary pathological fear, a desire to stave it off.

3. Evil Courage: Urban Juvenile Violence

I’m not a sociologist, but I believe regard for courage as a value is a powerful toxic ingredient in the poison that produces urban juvenile violence. Urban youth gets a mixed message. Above all, be brave, which means fight, but please don’t hurt anyone.

In the Chicago of my youth, the alpha males were males with machismo. They also tended to be ignorant and anti-intellectual, though sometimes interpersonally cunning and manipulative. They were the leaders in a subculture in which young males often could not relate to each other until something was first done to establish who is tougher.

In the early 1960s, the film West Side Story was a big hit among the kids in my neighborhood. The movie is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy about urban gang violence, Romeo and Juliet, this time set in 1950s New York City instead of Renaissance Verona, Italy, and with teenage Puerto Rican and white gangs, the Sharks and Jets respectively, substituting for the wrangling Capulet and Montague families. The film was well-intentioned and drums you over the head with the message that urban gang violence is a stupid, stupid thing that often brings great tragedy, a sentiment with which I’ve never had any disagreement. However, most kids in my neighborhood missed that point slightly. They resonated more to the tough-guy courage of the Jets and Sharks. There were a lot of impromptu gang fights of various kinds in and around where I grew up, but I personally never participated in or saw a real, formal premeditated gang fight, i.e., a rumble, until shortly after the movie West Side Story came out and unintentionally incited some. One day, during this West Side Story precipitated mass hysteria, I was asked, out of the blue, by a couple of my neighborhood buddies to participate in helping to beat up some other kids in the neighborhood whom I knew slightly and had nothing against. I was being recruited for a rumble. My abject fear of being seen as not brave by my friends edged out my fear of a possible bloody nose and peer-pressured me to participate. I was too cowardly to be a coward. This fight was not based on any dispute of which I was ever aware. It was a pure celebration of the virtue of courageous violence inspired by the anti-violence themed film West Side Story. During the fight, I managed to spot a kid in the opposing gang whom I was acquainted with enough to know he was a benign, nerdy sort like me, who was no doubt there for the same psychologically coercive reasons as I was, another trapped, innocent soon-to-be victim of the unquestionable value of courage. We both tacitly agreed to wrestle around a little in the sandlot, enough to not stand out as
obvious chickens, but without actually hurting each other. I’m not aware of any serious injuries that resulted from this rumble other than some black eyes and bruises because no one had the courage to introduce knives or guns – this particular time. On that occasion, cowardice saved us at least from that. The important thing is that my gang apparently won the rumble, and although I know of no tangible benefit I, or anyone else, received from our victory, it’s an honor I’ve always deeply treasured. I might not have known for sure who the victor was except for the fact that as we walked away after the fight, one of the toughest kids on our side kept looking back at the dejected looking members of the other gang, shouting “Our fight! Our fight!” All the boys in my gang seemed proud as peacocks, whereas I was merely relieved that although I’d cheated, my peers seemed to have given me a passing grade, just barely, on yet another test of courage, and without my having to have gotten injured. I had surely displeased the All Knowing Unquestionable God of Courage by not proudly offering up to Him a sacrifice of my intact jawbone or eyeball and/or that of my opponent, but, until this cathartic confession, my shameful deed was apparently known only to myself, His Holy Maleficence, and my nerdy accomplice in cowardice.

Ethnic violence in the city was also fueled partly by courage. I was a relatively studious kid and stayed out of most of the fighting between African-American kids and the poor, working-class white kids that was going on. The two groups found convenient scapegoats in each other for injustice and economic hardships, each side prejudiced against the other. Everybody was psychologically cornered by peer pressure and the demands of courage. Many parents taught their kids ethnic hatred. I was lucky. My parents took their religion based morality seriously. I remember my father taking me aside once as a young boy and telling me not to use insulting language about African-Americans, which apparently I had picked up on the street. There were sensible, peaceful people among both the whites and blacks, but it was braver to hate and fight, and sacrifices must always be offered at the sacrosanct altar of the insatiably wrathful God of Courage, and so the black and white kids fought, and occasionally, city-wide, someone was killed, sometimes in a “cowardly” act, but more often bravely done.


I wouldn’t argue that a need to demonstrate strength and courage is the sole or primary cause of warfare, but I believe a value system that subverts all virtues to the priority of bravery is a factor that contributes to initiating wars and greatly prolongs them. At one point, LBJ escalated the Vietnam War in the face of advice to the contrary and diverted funds and effort from his War on Poverty because he said he did not want to be considered a “coward.” Nixon was finally willing to accept non-victorious peace in Vietnam, provided it was “peace with honor,” i.e., that we would not be considered cowards. So one could argue that thousands of young Americans and even more Indo-Chinese men, women and children were brutally sacrificed to accommodate LBJ’s and Nixon’s virtuous desire to, above all else, be brave.
I should mention that I respect and appreciate the sacrifice of soldiers who have defended our country, whether in “good” wars, as WWII is often considered, or bad ones – most of the others in my opinion. Although I may question a specific war or military action taken by my government, this does not necessarily imply anything negative about our soldiers fighting it who I believe are generally well intentioned and feel they are defending the freedom of what is, I believe, in spite of my criticisms, still the freest country in the world. Although the coercive effects of value of courage affects soldiers as well as commanders, any decision to wage an unjust, unnecessary war is the fault of government leaders, not soldiers in the field. In fact, I would extend the patriotic exhortation to “support our troops” beyond what it’s usually thought to mean to also include speaking out about their being callously, deceptively, exploitatively and/or opportunistically put into harm’s way needlessly by government leaders, if one sincerely feels that is what is happening in a particular situation.

War, in my opinion, is intrinsically evil with the only open question being whether in a given situation it is a necessary evil or not. Though I’d question the need for any full-scale war, most Americans I believe, including myself, would see our role in WWII as coming as close to meeting the criteria of a just and necessary war as any in history. We might all be doing the goose-step and shouting “Sieg Heil!” without the sacrifices and risks made by “the greatest generation.” However, even in this supposedly “good war,” the good guys killed uncounted numbers of innocent noncombatants and not all as unintended collateral casualties. The allies, like the axis powers, conducted large scale carpet bombings of dense civilian populations (e.g., Tokyo and Dresden). America twice dropped nuclear bombs on cities filled with women, children, the elderly, and other noncombatants without warning of the existence of or any previous demonstration to the enemy of the power of the weapons to be used, which might possibly have obviated their employment. Some say we needed to show the Soviet Union that we not only possessed these weapons but that we had the courage to actually use them. These actions against civilians were conducted deliberately, partly for the purpose of demoralizing the enemy. They would appear to fall within Webster’s definition of “terrorism” as “the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion.” The systematized genocide carried out by the bad guys in Europe and to a degree in China provide a comparison of evil horrors of war that are difficult or impossible to weigh, one against the other, in any attempt to discern moral equivalence or not. One of the many unfortunate consequences of WWII, its beloved “goodness,” and the reputedly poor diplomacy that led up to it, Chamberlain’s infamous “appeasement,” is that it has given every jingoist since then a golden rationalization to fall back on to justify unnecessary, falsely pretexted warfare as a first choice over diplomatic attempts to solve international disputes. You just have to say the magic word “Chamberlain” and that shuts up those cowardly peace idealists.

Peace on earth is a noble vision, but ending full-scale war forever on our planet may be an unrealistic goal, at least in the short term, and naive, ill-considered attempts to achieve it could possibly do more harm than good. However, reducing the frequency of war to only situations of consensually validated, last resort, absolutely necessary self-defense or limiting it to only multi-lateral military actions of narrow, defined scope,
clearly stated objectives, and short duration might be realistic ends to work toward. We might begin by trying to restrain our effusive outpouring of love and admiration for the thing. We could stop pretending it’s more romantic and noble for large numbers of people to hurl projectiles and high explosives at each other than to try to work out creative solutions to problems. But we must all of us always first pay respect to the ruthless value of courage in all our negotiations and international relations and this is one of the ways we are defeated. We must always show courage.

Our popular culture reinforces the admiration of courage in warfare. Well-intentioned anti-war literature and films often point out the horror of war, but rarely does anyone go directly after the sneaky, sly monster lying at the root of much of it, our value of courage. The great English film director, David Lean, hints at the accusation in films such as Bridge on the River Kwai (1957) and Dr. Zhivago (1965). However, the only broadside assault I’ve ever encountered in this regard in popular entertainment is the screenplay for the dark satiric film, The Americanization of Emily (1964) by the great humanistic Oscar winning screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky (writer of The Hospital, Network, Marty and other films). This is the only piece of fiction I know of in which the hero – not mere “protagonist” – of the story is a self-proclaimed, practicing coward, an American soldier who at one point in the film is delighted to find out he apparently won’t have to participate in the D-Day invasion in WWII. This cowardice endears him to his love interest who is tired of seeing the men she loves kill themselves in the war. Chayefsky uses a number of dramatic, sobering exchanges and dark humor during the story to express his point of view that it is courage that is destroying humankind and cowardice is our savior. (The stars of the film, James Garner and Julie Andrews, said this was their favorite of all the movies they’ve been in).

As Chayefsky points out in his film, every war is thought to be fought for noble reasons – by all sides in the conflict, though the motivation of the “other” side is always looked upon as simply irreducibly evil, not explicated, and made to look inexplicable by refusal to mention anything about the issues that led the other side to war. Not coincidentally, I have also noticed that in almost every war, God is on everybody’s side, all at once. To the deity’s attributes of omnipotence and omnipresence, we must evidently append omnipartisanship. Rulers on opposing sides of a conflict have claimed they prayed to God about whether it was justified to wage war or not, and both received the answer “Yes.” According to some of his self-proclaimed spokespersons, the Prince of Peace himself has recently stepped out of character to endorse the use of bunker busters, napalm, phosphorus, cluster bombs, torture of prisoners, and using bull-dozers to bury troops alive in trenches. Holy wars, crusades, and jihads abound. Even Stalin relaxed, during the duration of WWII, his intolerance of religious expression in order to provide the Russians an added wellspring of courage. We use religion to justify and bolster our warfare more often than we pay any attention to Just War Criteria which theologians have developed over the centuries to prohibit or restrain it. These criteria are essentially an extrapolation of the principle that it is immoral to kill a single human being unless it is absolutely a last-resort necessity in self defense or defense of innocent others. A quote of Voltaire comes to
mind – “All murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.”

Wars are always well-intentioned, or at least the ones doing the fighting must be made to believe that. No one would be willing to die thinking they’re fighting for evil or to make the world a worse place for the next generation. America fights for freedom, but actually as often for money, markets, access to cheap resources, and hegemony. The communists fought for justice for the poor and freedom from capitalistic greed, against wage slavery, and exploitation, but actually as much for power-lust. The Nazis fought to avenge the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles and, however irrationally, because they thought they were saving the world from evil conspirators. Japan justified its attack on Pearl Harbor and expansionist military operations because of need for natural resources and America’s oil embargo. (America would never start a war under false pretexts in order to protect its access to oil resources!) America fights for Manifest Destiny, we sing of the Alamo, and now we try to keep “illegal” Mexicans off the land we forcibly took from them in the Mexican-American War. We label our ethnic cleansing of a continent full of human beings as courageously “Winning the West.” When another country does the same thing, we call it “genocide” and go to war to free the oppressed – provided the oppressed conveniently sit on natural resources we want. We won’t fight for the oppressed in Darfur because we don’t need anything badly from them right now. In the Civil War, with their motto “Deo Vindice” (“God Our Vindicator”) and singing their anthem “God Save the South” with the inspirational refrain “Freedom or Death!” the Confederates bravely went to their just reward in greater numbers than their evil Union enemies. The Christians brutally killed Muslims (and some Jews) during the Middle Ages for the glorious sake of the one-true-religion while the Muslims brutally killed Christians back for the glorious sake of another of the one-true-religions. We’re told we’re fighting a war against people who’ve decided to be evil for no reason, without background or context, but who think we’re evil. We saw the Soviets as invading Afghanistan and Georgia, but they saw a struggle against Islamic extremists and terrorists – our casus belli now. Others torture in war; we interrogate in an enhanced manner, and on and on.

Probably no war was ever truly a struggle of pure good versus pure evil. And even if one was, is the indiscriminant mass murder of innocents and the destruction of war the only solution? Suppose instead of fire-bombing Dresden or nuking Japanese children, the allies had conducted surgical military operations to rescue innocents in Nazi concentration camps? All wars are based to some degree on selective information, manipulatively labeled, framed and concealed history, propaganda, mass hysteria, vilification, exploitation, half truths, demonization, and outright lies. (How many Americans know our trouble with “evil” Iran began with an oil motivated CIA-backed coup of a democratically elected popular leader in Iran in 1953 followed by decades of repression by his American supported autocratic replacement? The Iranians know.) The poor and trusting are whipped up emotionally for war, given arms, and sent to their deaths proud to kill and die for powerful liars and war-profiteers who never served in combat. I suppose in any conflict, an objective look at all background factors and contextual circumstances might indicate one side as more morally justified than the other, but all sides always have a claim to the
rightness of their cause. I don’t think morality is relative but who is judged to be immoral often seems very relative. And one of the biggest obstacles to our reasoning out our problems is that this would violate the highest of all our virtues, our courage. The need to be brave is always the fuel that keeps the fires of war burning long after the original justification for the hostilities begin to look questionable and the initial enthusiasm is drained away like the blood from the masses of the dead.

Wouldn’t we be better off re-conceptualizing war as simply a terrible, stupid, massive tragedy resulting from the failure of rational means of resolving disputes, for which victory is often a fool’s compensation? (Pyrrhus of Epirus famously said, “One more such victory and we are undone”). As long as we continue to romanticize war as noble and honorable, we’ll keep doing it. It seems like those who have experienced military combat first-hand (e.g., President Eisenhower, General Colin Powell, John McCain, historian Howard Zinn, Paddy Chayefsky, John Kerry) soberly warn us of its horrors and are cautious about initiating military adventures, whereas those who have never participated in it (e.g., John Wayne, President Regan, President George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Karl Rove) tend to be the ones who perpetuate the supposed romantic machismo of the thing and have only the kind of courage that sends others to die. I’ve been fortunate to never have been directly involved in a war myself (high number in the Vietnam lottery), but I’ll readily take the word of most veterans that it is hell. If we refuse to see things realistically, our weapons will continue to become more monstrous and proliferate until the day inevitably comes when intentionally or unintentionally, events will occur that will trigger the end of life on earth. Hope will begin for us when we start to consider VE and VJ Days as days of national mourning, not celebration, when the fact of having gone to war is regarded as itself a defeat, irrespective of outcome, and the expression “winning a war” is thought oxymoronic. Leaders who are lauded as “great” will not be those who are victorious in war, but those who tried resolutely to solve problems without war. Instead of commemorating war with statues of brave soldiers for kids to want to emulate, how about being honest with them and displaying actual photographs of war so they at least know what they’re getting into – pictures of its burned, disfigured, blinded, limbless, mentally traumatized, diseased, and starving victims? Maybe a human intestine lying in the burnt rumble of a hospital would be a more truthful icon. We could censor any shots of gang rape since that might provide inducement for some.

5. Morally Neutral Courage

Many people like to do brave things because they’re exhilarating fun, e.g., bungee jumping and sky diving. I myself like roller-coasters, especially the ones that go upside-down, and scary science-fiction movies. This kind of thrill seeking behavior is of course not the kind of courage of which I am being critical. Done with sensible precautions, such things are usually harmless. Further, we all have to practice small acts of courage almost every day as a requirement of normal living, and occasionally a great deal of courage is necessary and useful for us to face an unusual problem or difficult situation in life. Our fear reactions can be hyper-sensitive and sometimes need to be suppressed. I certainly
don’t think there is anything wrong with placing a value on fortitude and bravery for these kinds of things. I lived in a neighborhood in Chicago once where I sometimes had to work up a little courage to throw the garbage out in the alley or walk the dog, when it was late at night. And maybe there’s something to be said for standing up to the school-yard bully.

6. An Important Exception: Moral Courage

I believe an important exception to my denunciation of the valuing of courage is what is often termed “moral courage.” By morality, I mean here, human, compassionate ethics, the virtues that are purportedly a component of all major religions and secular Humanism. I do not necessarily mean courage in the service of any specific religion. Moral courage is a kind of courage that in my opinion warrants praise.

I define moral courage as working arduously or risking one’s own well being or even life in a cause that is unquestionably morally right and of positive benefit to humanity, e.g., saving human life, protecting innocents, alleviating suffering, and/or improving peoples’ quality of life. I suppose mild versions of this can be attributed to the actions of many ordinary people engaging in positive actions for the sake of loved ones or others every day all around us. However, I’m especially thinking of, for example, the actions of firemen, honest policemen, doctors, social and political dissidents who speak up against injustice and tyranny, charitable religious or secular workers, teachers in urban slums, astronauts who risk their safety to further our knowledge and exploration of space or scientists who bravely face the unknown to try to obtain knowledge that will benefit humankind and then risk persecution when their findings or reasoned theories sometimes conflict with beliefs of a dominant cultural group. The passengers on Flight 93 on 9/11 who thwarted the terrorists’ plans comes to mind. So does the “Tank Man” of Tiananmen Square, Oskar Schindler and those who risked their lives to save Jews and other persecuted minorities, or soldiers fighting in a just and necessary military action for self-defense or defense of innocent others, when diplomatic means to address problems are exhausted and peaceful solutions are not possible (e.g., the allies in WWII, in my opinion), also people who have striven for nonviolent peaceful change for the benefit of humanity like, for example, Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Pope John Paul II, Jesus, and many others. In many of these instances, no person is deliberately hurt or at least not beyond what was necessary to achieve a greater good of saving more lives. Dr. King, Gandhi and Jesus were explicitly nonviolent. Gandhi was instrumental in replacing an oppressive regime with the largest democracy in the world. John Paul, who was outspoken against evil excesses of both collectivism and capitalism, played a pivotal role in the peaceful dissolution of history’s greatest totalitarian superpower when violent attempts to oppose global communism were fairly impotent or counter-productive (Vietnam, Korea, the Bay of Pigs, Hungary). Stalin’s famous satirical remark about the Pope having no divisions was naive about the true power the Pope could wield nonviolently. And King and Rosa inspired a movement that abolished unjust laws and ended widespread overt persecution in one of the most populous nations on earth. These people freed countless millions, employing nonviolent means only – they did not
deliberately hurt a single human being. They had tried to transform the evil within people, not destroy the people, and largely succeeded. Gandhi and King had said they would be willing to die for their cause, but they would not kill for it. And they had been true to their word. John Paul claimed it was only the hand of God that had spared him in a number of assassination attempts and plots. All these people acknowledged being at least partly motivated by the teachings and example of Jesus, whose benevolent philosophy in his day had replaced a bellicose polytheism and, some argue, was greatly responsible for uprooting the most powerful empire of the ancient world, predicated on the belief that only brutal force could maintain world peace and civilization, after centuries of bloody wars and uprisings had failed to free people from that empire. Jesus’ suggestions of forgiveness and turning the other cheek are, in my opinion, often the best practical attitude to take in many of life’s interpersonal problems.

I include above the example of soldiers fighting in a just military action as an example of moral courage, but any attribution of moral courage to acts that do violence to others must be made with extreme caution, otherwise we’re back to where we started from. I believe violence is only justified in absolute self-defense or defense of innocent others after all other peaceful solutions to problems have been exhausted, and only for a duration and extent necessary for the defensive objective. War is justified only if it’s the only means of avoiding an even greater evil, of which there are few, e.g., certain death or loss of freedom which would deprive life of its value. The burden of proof should be on those who argue for war, not those who want peace. There is a great danger of confusing moral courage with evil courage which occurs when wars of questionable necessity, ulterior motives, and/or dishonest rationale are waged, i.e., most wars in my opinion. Centuries old Just War Criteria should be addressed in any decision to go to war. I’m not qualified to comment on military strategy and global politics, but the Vatican and many American and Jewish religious hierarchies as well as secular Humanistic organizations claimed the starting of our “preemptive war of choice” in Iraq was unnecessary and did not meet Just War Criteria. Congressman Ron Paul said “it didn’t come close.” Once evil methods of warfare have been put into operation, then even the best resulting case scenario, i.e., where good ends are achieved, leaves a global awareness that massive illicit violence can work, without anyone knowing if nonviolent means could have produced the same or better ends had they been fully tried. And then what?

7. Closing Comment

I suppose some will consider this essay as nothing but a rationalization for the vice of cowardice (I should be so flattered). But let me end with a sobering vision: Imagine a world of cowards. Cowards too afraid to unnecessarily do violence to others lest it might be done back to them. Guns abhorred. War unthinkable. Suppose Hitler tried to exhort a nation never indoctrinated to value courage, that they must climb into armored vehicles and planes and shoot high explosives at the masses of Russia, England and America, all at the same time, who would be doing the same to them in retaliation, for the sake of some tribal honor. He would have been immediately confined for psychiatric care. In this
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cowardly world, everyone would be so fearful of diseases that money would be poured into medical research to find cures for them, or research to find ways to predict earthquakes and severe weather events or climate change and safeguard against them. Without the enormous amount of money spent on defense and war and its horrific destruction of the products of human labor, there would be ample funds for research and meeting the basic needs of the poor of the world. Soon no serious diseases. Everyone well educated because of the well-grounded fear of the dangers that ignorance brings. No ethnic or religious prejudice because everyone is a member of some sort of minority and they’d fear having prejudice shown against them too. Everyone charitable in helping everyone else for fear they might otherwise be left helpless themselves in a time of need. Everyone feeling sorry for and compassionate towards others knowing how pain, suffering, humiliation, and fear feel themselves and not wanting others to experience it.

Here’s an even more sobering vision: someday, somewhere, someone may quite possibly be in a position to have to decide whether to take actions which might precipitate a global nuclear war that might end all sentient and even non-sentient life on earth. A factor weighing in on that decision, perhaps above all other considerations, above compassion, good sense, caution, wisdom, reason, benevolence, foresight, and diplomacy, may be that person’s desire to demonstrate to himself/herself and to others that he/she possesses the attribute of courage to which that person has been indoctrinated to unquestioningly revere as the greatest human virtue. That frightens me. But then again what do you expect from a shameless, unregenerate, sniveling coward like myself?

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