

“Dancing All the Dances as Long as I Can”

by Robert Fulghum

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I BELIEVE IN DANCING.

I believe it is in my nature to dance by virtue of the beat of my heart, the pulse of my blood, and the music in my mind. So I dance daily.

The seldom-used dining room of my house is now an often-used ballroom—an open space with a hardwood floor, stereo, and a disco ball. The CD-changer has six discs at the ready: waltz, swing, country, rock-and-roll, salsa, and tango.

Each morning when I walk through the house on the way to make coffee, I turn on the music, hit the “shuffle” button, and it’s Dance Time! I dance alone to whatever is playing. It’s a form of existential aerobics, a moving meditation.

Tango is a recent enthusiasm. It’s a complex and difficult dance, so I’m up to three lessons a week, three nights out dancing, and I’m off to Buenos Aires for three months of immersion in tango culture.

The first time I went tango dancing, I was too intimidated to get out on the floor. I remembered another time I had stayed on the sidelines, when the dancing began after a village wedding on the Greek island of Crete. The fancy footwork confused me. “Don’t make a fool of yourself,” I thought. “Just watch.”

Reading my mind, an older woman dropped out of the dance, sat down beside me, and said, “If you join the dancing, you will feel foolish. If you do not, you will also feel foolish. So, why not dance?”

And, she said she had a secret for me. She whispered, “If you do not dance, we will know you are a fool. But if you dance, we will think well of you for trying.”

Recalling her wise words, I took up the challenge of tango.

A friend asked me if my tango-mania wasn’t a little ambitious. “Tango? At your age? You must be out of your mind!”

On the contrary: It’s a deeply pondered decision. My passion for tango disguises a fearfulness. I fear the shrinking of life that goes with aging. I fear the boredom that comes with not learning and not taking chances. I fear the dying that goes on inside you when you leave the game of life to wait in the final checkout line.

I seek the sharp, scary pleasure that comes from beginning something new—that calls on all my resources and challenges my mind, my body, and my spirit, all at once.

My goal now is to dance all the dances as long as I can, and then to sit down contented after the last elegant tango some sweet night and pass on because there wasn't another dance left in me.

So, when people say, "Tango? At your age? Have you lost your mind?" I answer, "No, and I don't intend to."

Have Courage  
Jan K. Nielsen  
First Parish in Sherborn, Massachusetts  
November 15, 2009

We are living in anxious, fear filled times.  
Just reading the morning paper or watching the evening news  
can sometimes feel like an act of courage.  
And then there are times in all of our lives  
that can seem to demand more of us than we have –  
trouble at home, trouble at work, or both,  
no work,  
a diagnosis that comes out of no where and changes everything in an instant,  
the loss of someone close to our heart.  
It can all come with the living of a life.

The truth is: the living of any life in this world  
requires courage,  
sometimes more courage than we think we have.  
In nearly all of my prayers, I ask for courage,  
courage both for myself and for the people I love and serve.  
The wish for courage is an ancient plea,  
probably as old as human language itself.  
The Hebrew Scriptures,  
in nearly a dozen different passages,  
tell us to “*be of good courage.*”

What is courage, and where do we find it?  
Courage comes from the heart.  
Look at the word itself;  
the Latin root of our word “courage” is the word “*cor,*”  
which means “heart.”  
The wisdom of the Psalms, too,  
points us toward the heart,  
with the words,  
“*Let your heart take courage.*”  
No “headwork,” no dictionary entry,  
however well-crafted,  
can help us to know what courage looks like, in real life.  
To know, in our bones and in our souls,  
what it means to “have courage,”  
we turn to “heartwork” -- we listen to stories.  
What courage stories do you know?  
Who in your life taught you something about courage?

When you think of courage,  
whose face do you see?

When I was a young girl,  
Amelia Earhart was my hero.  
Whenever I thought of courage, I saw her face.  
I don't remember *not* knowing about her,  
and maybe that's no surprise, since,  
my mother, like Amelia, was a pilot.  
In our home, Amelia Earhart and her story  
were part of the atmosphere,  
as familiar as the old family rocking chair;  
among my mother's piles  
of navigation charts and aviation magazines,  
Amelia's face shone a message  
of determination, confidence and courage.

Nearly every time  
my teacher told us to read a biography,  
I chose one about her.  
Her story, in some small ways,  
reminded me of my mother's.  
Amelia was born in Kansas;  
my mother came from a tiny Missouri town  
just minutes from the Kansas border.  
They both wore their hair short,  
and they wore pants,  
at a time when most women still wore skirts.

Amelia's story matched my mother's  
in some big ways, too.  
Neither woman was content to "know her place"  
and stay there.  
Both women, instead, rose up, spoke out,  
and pushed on.  
About Amelia's eyes,  
the poet Judith Sornberger writes:  
*"a brazen/blue that never knew its place,  
believed the sky its sister,  
flew to her."*  
The poet's words remind me of my mother's spirit.  
Both Amelia and my mother were drawn to the sky,  
with a passion that reached the spiritual.  
They knew the open sky as their sanctuary.

I keep a book of words I have collected,

poems and passages that speak to my heart.

For years, I have carried with me  
those words from Amelia's poem:

*"Courage," she wrote,  
"is the price Life exacts for granting peace."*

What about you?

Do you count yourself among the courageous?

Maybe some of us would not be so quick to say "yes."

We're wrong not to see the courage

we bring to the living of our days.

Sometimes acts of great courage

are so much a part of one's being

that the courage in what we do

can seem invisible, both to one another, and to ourselves.

I think now of my mother and the time  
she returned home after her only plane crash.

She flew a Luscombe,  
a small single engine plane often used for aerobatics.

One summer day,  
the plane's wooden propeller broke in mid air  
and stopped its only engine.

That plane was going down.  
But she managed to guide the plane down  
so that its wings rested safe and sound  
in the branches of a grove of pine trees.

She avoided what might have been  
a life threatening, hard impact crash.

When I heard others talk about  
what skill and what courage that must have required,  
I remember thinking,

*"So? That's no big deal.  
Of course, that's what mom would do."*

My twelve year old eyes  
were blind to my mother's courage.

Just as we can be slow to see courage  
in the people closest to us,  
we can be even slower to see courage in ourselves.

I would bet, this morning,  
that as I stand here and look out from this pulpit,  
I see the faces of the courageous.

Maybe you stand by family and friends  
when life gets hard; you keep on.

You might say, "No big deal. It's just what I do."  
I say that's what courage looks like.

Maybe you have known great challenges in your life –  
setbacks, illness,  
times when it seemed your whole world  
had been turned upside down.  
Despite it all, though, you didn't quit.  
You picked yourself up and kept on.  
You might say, "No big deal. It's just what I do."  
I say that's what courage looks like.

Maybe your choice just to be here,  
in this church, was an act of courage.  
A lot of us were not born into this faith,  
but came here, on our own, as adults.  
Even if we couldn't accept all of its teachings,  
the faith into which we were born  
can have a powerful hold on us.  
Or maybe this is the first faith community  
you have ever known.  
You came here despite swearing that you  
would never, ever,  
sit in any church pew on a Sunday morning.

I once swore I would never, ever stand in a pulpit,  
but here I am.  
About the time  
I was struggling to discern a call to ministry,  
I heard Garrison Keillor say,  
"God made the earth round,  
so we couldn't see too far down the road."  
When people hear  
that I left a law practice and a well ordered life  
and moved a husband  
and three children under the age of five  
from Arkansas to Cambridge  
to begin preparing for the ministry,  
they say something like, "Wow! That took courage."  
The subtext, of course, is: "What *were* you thinking?"  
I have said, "No. At the time,  
it didn't feel courageous at all.  
It was just what I had to do  
to be who I really was inside."

Our faith stories are stories of courage.  
I hear from newcomers to our congregations  
they came to be a part of

a faith where no one will tell them what to believe,  
a faith where we are free  
to be true to our deepest beliefs.  
You came so that you could know  
the peace of being who you really are.  
That's what courage looks like.  
*Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Some of us know the challenge and struggle  
to be who we are  
in a way that is basic, and deeply personal.  
I stand in awe of the courage  
I hear in the stories of my sisters and brothers  
who risked rejection, and sometimes their very safety,  
when they stood up and told  
their families and their world  
that they were in love with someone of the same gender.  
You had to, to find any peace at all,  
to be who you really are.  
That, too, is what courage looks like.  
*Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

We all, at some level,  
know the challenge and struggle  
to be who we really are.  
There are voices in our world that would have us  
try to live in all sorts of ways  
that are counter to who we are.  
And there are voices out there that would have us  
sound, act, and look like someone else,  
instead of the unique soul we really are.  
When we give in, though,  
and try to be someone other than ourselves,  
we cheat ourselves, and one another,  
of the soul we were born to be.

Think about your life.  
When have you laid low, stayed silent,  
held back, lived a lie,  
failed to say, or do, what you knew was right?  
And when, in your life, did you rise up, speak out,  
and push on?  
Which time did you feel more alive,  
more real, more whole, more at peace?  
Courage is not only being who we are,  
but doing what we know is right.

*Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Sometimes, though, there is something before us,  
some new challenge, and we are scared.

Life seems to be asking us to do the one thing  
we most fear,

the one thing we think we cannot do.

Maybe it's something new or something hard.

What then?

*"Always do what you are most afraid to do,"*

Mary Moody Emerson once told her nephew,  
Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Eleanor Roosevelt said it a little differently:

*"You must do what you think you cannot do.*

*You gain strength, courage, and confidence  
by every experience in which you really stop  
to look fear in the face . . . .*

*You must do the thing you think you cannot do."*

When we step out to do

what we think we can't, despite our fears,  
we just might find our courage in the doing.

We can begin with a single step.

*"I believe in dancing,"* Robert Fulghum proclaims,  
and his goal, he says, is to

*"dance all the dances as long as (he) can."*

Maybe, like him, there have been times in your life  
when you weren't so sure you wanted even to try,  
either literally or metaphorically, to dance,

times when the fears of both

appearing foolish or a failure

kept you on the sidelines of life.

I think most of us have been there.

Maybe right now

there is something calling you to go out

and give to the world,

but you're holding back, resting on the sidelines,

telling yourself you don't have the courage.

The sidelines can seem safe,

but when we never step out onto the dance floor of life,

we can quit living

and die a slow death inside.

When we step out despite our fears,

we embrace life

and that's our only chance of finding true peace.

Our journeys are a series of steps.  
Sometimes the greatest act of courage is to  
put one foot in front of the other,  
day by day, and trust the journey.

To live a life of courage,

*Be who you are*

*Do what you know is right; and,*

*Do what you think you cannot do.*

What is life asking of you?

How will you answer?

*Courage is the price Life exacts for granting peace.*

Will yours be a story of courage?

Will yours be a story of peace?