

## BON COURAGE

Address to the Graduates  
The Centre for Training in Psychotherapy  
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By Cathleen Hoskins

One night recently I went to sleep wondering what I might speak about at graduation. When I woke up, the first word I remembered was simply “courage.” Was this my way of encouraging my own challenge to write this talk or was this word a stone on the path of what I would find to say?

Later that day I looked up “courage” in both my well-worn Webster’s and my two-volume Oxford English Dictionary. As I already knew, the word comes to English via Latin and French, from the root “cor” – heart. The suffix -age suggests the state of belonging to and is used in English to make an abstract noun out of the name of a thing: language, baronage, wreckage. So cour-age is that which in some way belongs to the heart.

Now, those of you in the audience who do not know me may well be asking, “What’s this etymology of the word “courage” have to do with graduation?” And those of you who do know me are probably either smiling or thinking, “Oh no, not again, not another word explanation.” In either case, bear with me....

In my British dictionary the definitions of “courage” surprised me. The first was simply “Spirit, mind, disposition.” The second, “What is in one’s mind or thoughts; one’s purpose or inclination.” And finally, “That quality of mind which shows itself in facing danger without fear.” In the Webster’s, “courage” is defined as “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” Which is why we have to specify: “She showed great physical courage.” Courage itself has nothing to do with physical capacities or behaviours. Courage is an achievement of spirit, thought or purpose. It is a particular state of mind, and mind in many cultures is linked to the heart. Courage is a matter of heart.

Tonight we gather to witness and celebrate the graduation of five CTP therapists. For years these five have been called to explore the mental and moral strength required to venture, to persevere and to withstand dangers, fears and difficulties as they stretched and deepened in their personal therapeutic process and their psychotherapy apprenticeships at CTP. And though it is not uncommon to refer to a client’s courage in entering and staying with therapy, it is rare that we hear about the courage required to be the therapist. I’m sure that the therapists in this room have a sense of what I mean, but I thought I’d lay out a quirky quintet of dangers, fears or difficulties this work throws our way.

1. FINANCIAL INSECURITY. You have to be courageous, in this money-driven society, with the average house price in Toronto edging toward half a million dollars, to step out – in middle

age or beyond – from a costly, time- and energy-consuming training programme into the unknown of building a therapy practise in a culture still stigmatized by the notion that being in therapy means you're crazy. Even though NOT being in therapy usually correlates with the craziest behaviours and choices our culture can dream up. It is a real risk to be self-employed, to create a solid base of referrals for yourself and to sustain collegial connections.

2. Which reminds us of THE UNKNOWN in so many aspects of this work. Talk about courage. What we don't know can and does harm us, and so the unknown, in many guises, fuels the plots of horror movies and Stephen King novels, as well as our personal nightmares and day terrors. You know the story line: the hero heads deep into darkness, not knowing what lurks at the next turn in the path .... And yet, becoming a psychotherapist is fundamentally to welcome being with the unknown on a daily basis. For instance, an eagerness to not-know who this other, unique, sometimes troubled and often troubling human being is. A willingness to hold back the urge to know, the urge to feel certain, long enough for this other person to come forward as who he or she actually is in my presence. An embracing of the difficult fact that the unknown we will have with us always. That what-is will always exceed what anyone knows.

3. And in the face of the unknown, a therapist must sometimes risk DOING NOTHING. In a society of accelerating speeds, streamlined efficiencies and constant demands for quick solutions to age-old problems – from stains on the carpet to human self-destructiveness – it takes guts (what my grade 9 English teacher called “intestinal fortitude”) to do nothing. The courageous therapist knows in his or her heart that sometimes to risk doing nothing, saying nothing is the only authentic possibility. Sometimes there really is nothing to be done. Sometimes doing is the coward's way out. Sometimes there is just the listening presence of two human beings. And it takes real courage to enter the way of doing by not doing, of “doing” by simply being the often difficult intertwine of existence with existence. Of respecting the stillness of the other with the stillness of myself.

4. With the idea of stillness comes the daily practise of CONFIDENTIALITY. Very few people are skilled at this one. I saw a bumper sticker recently that read: “I don't repeat gossip so listen carefully.” Those of you who are not therapists, imagine for a moment listening, hour after hour, to the most amazing, most distressing, most moving stories of human achievement, human brutality, human compassion and bravery, and not telling anyone anything you hear. It takes a special kind of mental and moral strength to bear silence around the natural human desire for conversation, for talking about your life. It can take a similar fortitude to resist the temptation to let the world know, based on some particularly important session, what a wonderful, successful, clever therapist you are. And instead, to be satisfied at the end of the work day with nothing to show friends or family for the enormous challenge you've risen to simply by being as real as possible on that day with the people who walked into your office and an hour later walked out. No brand name recognition or celebrity endorsements here. In fact, there's not even a product. No successful sales figures or interest on investments. Just two people in two chairs exploring the world together. No wonder Hollywood does such a bad job with therapists.

5. My fifth and final glimpse of what takes courage in a therapist's life is BEING CREATIVE. I believe that gifted psychotherapists are artists of a high order. And the life of an artist is, in fact,

a definition of courage. There is perhaps nothing more courageous than a genuine act of the imagination, a generous giving of self through originality, through what Martin Heidegger calls moments of my ownmost existence. And because no one can practise therapy as a high art every moment, that's where the real courage comes in. Courage to face the danger of lazy thinking and careless words; courage to face the fear of not being good enough, of failing, of giving up or giving in; and courage to face the difficulty of always having to try, again and again. Therapy is the art of paying attention to relationship, and relationship can be the scariest thing in the world.

Over the past several years, I have had the privilege to supervise all five of you who are graduating tonight, either individually or in seminar or both. I have come to know the particular forms of courage you possess. Each in your own way courageous enough for the difficult, heartfelt experiences: I am on dangerous ground right now; I am afraid; This is very difficult for me. AND the capacity to withstand these feelings – to stand with these feelings – and not run away into old habits of thought, speech and action. To bring the two great gifts of the human heart, love and courage, to the challenge of being truly yourself in the presence of another who is so similar to you and yet so different from anyone else in the world. It gives me great pleasure to invite everyone to join me in applauding the 2007 graduates of the Centre for Training in Psychotherapy. Bon courage!