Courage
By Rich DeSalvo

Courage is a word that comes to mind instantly when I think of soldiers in battle and the stories they live to tell. Everyone loves a good story about a courageous war hero, but these weren’t stories that my grandfather told often about his time in the Second World War. In fact, the majority of my grandfather’s memories are clearly associated with a notion of fear.

One night following an intense day in the field, my grandfather was assigned to stay up and keep watch throughout the night. He was so exhausted that he quickly fell asleep, and before long he was discovered by his commanding officer. In a short memoir he wrote about his time as a soldier, he writes, “To sleep on duty was bad news. A court martial offense. General Black was a wise and skillful commander. He was hard but I think fair. This was war. Why court martial an officer, which in this case carried the death penalty, when the enemy could do the job just as well. No court martial was filed against me. But the next day I was ordered to go with the advance platoon as a forward observer. I would lead the attack. After all, someone has to go first.”

This is how my grandfather found himself walking down the center of a street in a small town that represented a likely resistance point, while his battalion followed behind cautiously, taking cover in doorways. He writes, “I had not gone more than thirty yards up the center of that little street when I became conscious of a thousand eyes watching me from behind those boarded windows, and perhaps not a few guns were pointed at me through the cracks. Suddenly I became aware of how quiet things had become. An eerie silence developed. It was a very tense moment. A door banged. A woman screamed, and right down the center of the street came a little boy. His poor mother followed at about thirty feet. As the little boy passed me, he brushed against my leg. I put my hand down and ran it through his blonde curls. Not taking my eyes off the street ahead, I continued walking. But I had not gone more than two paces when out of every window and doorway came white sheets and smiling faces. This town had decided to surrender.”

My grandfather says he doesn’t think he was brave, only following orders, ashamed of the threatened court martial, only bone-tired and full of fear.

The topic of today’s sermon is courage. What does it mean to be brave? Does it mean being fearless? Game of Thrones fans will recall the very opening scene of book one, A Song of Ice and Fire, when Bran asks his father, “Can a man still be brave if he’s afraid?” Ned Stark replies, “That is the only time a man can be brave.” Ask yourself, if a person is truly fearless, why would he need courage? Although he was afraid, when the moment came, my grandfather chose to walk down that road, no longer thinking of himself, but of the job ahead of him. So it is not being fearless but overcoming fear that constitutes courage.

Why is it so important that courage is part of our makeup throughout our lives? This summer we have talked about friendship, kindness, truth and honesty, service, adversity and grit, being yourself. These virtues work together to form our moral compass. A compass is a tool that guides the way; you use it when you need it, and it is particularly helpful when you are lost or confused.
Our moral compass does precisely the same thing. When you are lost or confronted with obstacles, it is helpful to stop and think on these virtues, pull out your moral compass and let it be your guide. I don’t exactly know how a compass works. But I have faith in a good compass. We all should have faith in our moral compass as well.

Yet a common theme in all of these talks has been the question of why. If we know the direction our moral compass is pointing, why is it that taking those first steps in the right direction is so difficult?

It comes down to courage. C. S. Lewis said courage is "not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” At times we are all going to be tested, lost, and uncertain.

Raise your hand if you have felt nervous or scared at some point this summer. Everyone is going to feel some level of fear at some time or other: fear of not fitting in, fear of going off the high dive, fear of a tough hike, fear of making a mistake or of admitting a mistake.

A courageous approach to feeling fear on the inside involves pulling out your moral compass and choosing to act, seeing the different paths in front of you and taking the one you know is right, even if it is the harder road. I’m grateful to my grandfather not only for his example of bravery and service, but also for being so honest about his fear so that I could learn this important lesson.

When I think about courage and walking a lonely road, I think about umpires on a baseball field. Counsellors at Pasquaney love to take hacks at the plate and make fancy plays in the field, but I’ll bet that one of the places that scares them the most – has scared me the most – is just behind the pitching mound where they are asked to call balls and strikes. An umpire’s moral compass is based on the rules of the game. Balls, strikes, safe, out, so much depends on their call. They observe a play, they stop and think, and then they have to make a call, in front of everyone. Not so much at camp, but in many other places, when umpires get the call wrong, they are often heckled and booed. When they get the call right, no one notices. This takes courage. You can see how easy and rewarding it would be to be influenced by the home crowd. But if umpires lacked the courage to call the game the right way, regardless of the reactions of others, no one would want to play. Nobody would want to watch. Their courage to do the right thing makes the game possible.

I’d like to invite you to think of a situation this summer when you felt afraid, yet you chose to make the right call.

What was it that helped you? What did you think to yourself? What did you or others do to help you face your fear?

I’d like you to think about this question throughout the day because if you have done it before, you can apply those same skills.

Think of all you have gained by facing those fears with courage. When we look for and recognize these simple acts of courage in each other, it helps all of us believe in our own courageous selves.

When the virtues we live by are tested, how are we going to respond? Are we brave enough to be kind when others are being mean? Do we have the courage to speak when others are afraid to speak? Are we willing to stand alone and serve when others are running away?
Thinking about our definition of courage—feeling afraid yet choosing to act. What are the consequences when we decline to act? In the play *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare writes, “Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once.” The truth is that often when we are tested neither choice is going to be easy. But no choice can be worse than the one that cuts you off from the feelings in your own heart. In my life the things I regret the most are the times when I know what is right on the inside, yet because I am afraid I act differently on the outside by sitting out, by staying quiet, by not telling the truth, by going with the crowd, by saying yes when in my heart I want to say no or no when my heart wants to say yes.

There is a quote from Lord Chesterfield that I like: “Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.” I’ve seen tremendous courage recently both in watching Long Walkers set out on their journey, conquering doubts and anxieties en route to a triumphant finish but also in humbler moments: watching nearly all of you bravely leave the shore of our waterfront, plunging into the lake to swim your rafts, triangles, and half-miles. I’ve been particularly moved by watching a group of boys who have been working tirelessly with Rob and Sammy patiently building up the strength and skills to move to the next level as swimmers. It takes a lot of guts to seek swimming instructions day after day, out in the open, with little recognition or reward to show for it. While others are already sailing and rowing, and going on canoe species, these boys have continued to work on their strokes—trying and failing, receiving more instruction, trying again. Mark these swims as ordinary triumphs but genuine acts of courage. I’m also not sure many of the acts of courage we have seen this summer would have been possible without the supportive community we have here. Whether it is a railroad for the Long Walk or divers on the raft cheering on swimmers, when others seek to en-courage, to put courage in others, there is a powerful effect.

Courage is not innate. The root of the word is *cor-*, the Latin word for heart. Well, your heart is a muscle, and it can be strengthened. Courage is a habit of the heart that we have the power to foster and grow one courageous act at a time. Aristotle said that we become courageous by being courageous. Eleanor Roosevelt said,

*The encouraging thing is that every time you meet a situation, though you may think at the time it is an impossibility and you go through the tortures of the damned, once you have met it and lived through it you find that forever after you are freer than you ever were before. . . . You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’*

One of the challenges we face is the fact that society wants us to be courageous in a certain way. I took a course recently called “A Call to Men,” and one of the key concepts is the Man Box. The Man Box is a powerful notion that tells us what we can and cannot do or feel as boys and men and says that there is a right way and a wrong way to be male. Boys need to be strong, athletic, and in charge. Men should be decision makers, shouldn’t show too much emotion, shouldn’t ask for help. No pain. No weakness. No crying.

The consequences of living in the Man Box are serious. If we see some people as less human than others, we’re more likely to look away when we see someone mistreated. We may
shut down parts of our own selves and our emotions for fear of being teased. We’ll live our lives always on guard and anxious about proving our manhood.

Think about all the energy we waste trying to conform to the Man Box. As Alan Loy McGinnis says in his book Confidence, “Sometimes I feel like crying out, ‘I just can’t do it!’ And somewhere I hear a voice, ‘If you can’t do it, pretend.’ And the challenge to be a good pretender becomes the most challenging challenge of all. We create masks and learn parts. We make ourselves into actors and actresses and quick-change artists. We move from one part to another as rapidly as we meet someone in our life who has differing expectations. Other people think we’re amazing. They’re so proud of us. They seek our company. They promote us and give us merit raises and hugs and trophies. We’re so important to them but we have become strangers to ourselves. We have met everybody’s needs but our own.”

Think of the story of David and Goliath that Wyatt read to us. In an earlier portion of the story that was not read, David is offered a coat of armor, an impressive bronze helmet, and a mighty sword, but he refuses all of these things, saying, “I am not used to them.” David is used to being quick and light in movement; he’s used to his slingshot. It would have been tempting to flee, but his triumph is the result of having faith in his abilities and the courage to act, even when others show the lowly shepherd little respect.

The hymn asks us to come and find our quiet center, “to clear the chaos and the clutter /clear our eyes that we can see.” How temporary the rewards are when we seek to please someone else or a peer group, and how wonderful it is when you spend time with a friend who like the real you.

Breaking out of the Man Box is an act of courage. And if you can summon the courage to live closer to your true self, your life and our shared lives together will be far richer than you ever imagined. People will be kinder to one another; you’ll be free to share your feelings and explore what you love; you’ll be more likely to tackle challenges, learn new things, and grow; we’ll all be safer because people will ask more questions and admit their concerns. If I can’t show weakness, would I risk trying and failing on my triangle or half-mile? Most likely not. How would I then learn to swim? How would I build my courage muscles?

Let your loves and fears unravel, celebrate the space we gain. Think of all the loveliness we are hiding from one another and all the wonderful surprises that await us if together we choose to live more courageously.

It was just such a surprise that first attracted my family to Pasquaney. When I was very little, my family came to camp for the first time to visit some family friends. It was Water Sports Weekend, Saturday night, and when we looked into the crowd of Pasquaney campers singing, we spotted a boy we knew from home. This camper was a student at the high school where my father taught. He was an all-state catcher; in fact he’s one of the best players in the history of the school. My brother would watch his baseball games down the road from our house, and he aspired to be just like him. The last thing we ever thought we’d see was him in high socks and short gray shorts, singing, “This Little Light of Mine.”

It just wasn’t in our own mental image of him to see him singing camp songs. He had projected an image of masculinity onto him that was not who he was. To my brother he wasn’t a little light, he was a roaring fire of a young man, and his path was blazed with heroic athletic
accomplishments. So in my mother’s mind, if Pasquaney could put the courage in him to get up there and sing with passion and pride, then something special was happening here.

As the song goes, “This little light of mine. I’m gonna let it shine.”

Here in these last two weeks, we have an amazing opportunity to continue to practice and grow the important skill of courage. Do not expect it to always be easy. A courageous approach to times when we are afraid is difficult, and that is why it may in fact be the most important habit you develop throughout your time in school or in life.

When you are lost, have faith in the direction your moral compass is pointing you, and let your small but invincible light shine the way.