

Most people think they know what courage is. When asked to name a courageous person, many pick a Hollywood hero like Jack Bauer, the impossibly capable action star of television's 24. Others choose real-life heroes, often those who confront great physical danger like firefighters or soldiers. Indeed, our culture teaches us to view courage as a kind of Rambo-style bravado. Consider these cases, however: Chardee, a battered wife who finally leaves her husband; Luis, who goes against his family's wishes to pursue his dream of becoming an actor; Ann, who cares for a father with Alzheimer's disease, patiently having the same conversations day after day yet infusing their small apartment with good cheer and kindness. Do any of these people exhibit courage? In his classic book *The Courage to Create*, American psychologist Rollo May invites us to examine more deeply the quality he believes is essential to a meaningful life. Courage, he insists, is not just one emotion among others, but the foundation on which all other virtues and values rest. May divides courage into four distinct types—physical, social, moral, and creative.

Physical courage is familiar to most people: the ability to confront bodily pain or danger with self-possession, usually for a greater goal or good. For example, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, causing devastating floods in New Orleans, local police raced to curb looting and rescue the stranded. These officers had no experience facing such a catastrophic emergency and little training in search-and-rescue. Yet they risked their lives to save desperate and angry citizens amid surging water, threat of disease, and even sniper fire. The pressure proved too much for some; several dozen deserted. But the truly remarkable fact was that 1,700 men and women continued to report to work each day, exhibiting the brand of physical courage that May believes capable of transforming society.

Physical courage has lost much of its usefulness in contemporary life, May cautions. Whereas our society once applauded the self-reliant pioneer, now we egg on the Tony Sopranos,¹ who justify their violence with talk of disrespect or frontier justice. What masquerades as physical courage in television, films, music videos, and games is often little better than the bully's swagger on the playground. A more productive physical courage, like that of the New Orleans officers, puts the body on the line, not to overpower or harm others, but to serve and protect them.

The second category, social courage, is the type demanded of us in daily life. This is the courage to have meaningful relationships, to dare to reveal who we really are, to tell the truth in public forums despite the risks. The child who faces peer disapproval to befriend an unpopular classmate demonstrates social courage. The 55-year-old woman who goes back for her college degree though she fears she will feel out of place demonstrates social courage. The employee who volunteers to give a business presentation despite a lifelong terror of public speaking demonstrates social courage. Marriage, parenthood, any relationship that calls for an engagement of the heart and mind invites this brand of courage. May writes, "It is easier in our society to be naked physically than to be naked psychologically or spiritually." But when one chooses to open oneself, despite real risks of embarrassment, rejection, or worse, the reward is the chance of making a profound connection in a world of superficial ones.

Moral courage may exact an even heavier toll. The one who exhibits moral courage usually recognizes the suffering of others and decides to help despite the consequences. Aung San Suu Kyi is such a figure. The daughter

1. Tony Soprano: lead character in *The Sopranos*, a dramatic HBO series about a Mafia family