

Everyday Courage and the Writer

By Holly Lisle

Back when I was attending a fair number of conventions and signing a decent number of books, I came up with a saying which I attributed to my Hoos headhunters from the Arhel books, and called a Hoos proverb. It was, "Courage is nothing more than taking one step more than you think you can."

Neither the proverb nor the sentiment are particularly original, but I have no idea who said the words first, or how he might have said them. I do know the words are true. Courage has nothing to do with feeling or not feeling fear, with doing great deeds (though sometimes courage accomplishes great deeds), or with conquering life-and-death situations (though in such situations it is certainly helpful.)

Courage is a form of tenaciousness, a refusal to quit when you want to quit because you're tired or humiliated or broken, and it is as necessary in everyday life as it is in moments of great upheaval. In fact, I could easily say that everyday courage is *more* important than the 'great deeds' sort, because every one of us will be in everyday situations, while not all of us will be called upon in our lifetimes to perform great deeds.

Courage is as essential to the writer as oxygen, no more and no less. The writer who lacks courage will never succeed.

And you're saying, "That's silly. I can't think of a safer sort of work."

Really? Think again.

Let me define what writing is for you. You're going to attempt

to sell the products of your mind to a world that doesn't care right now whether you breathe or not. You're going to strip your soul naked and parade it in front of editors and agents, publishers and eventually—if you're persistent and lucky and talented—readers. You're going to say “What I carry around inside my head is so interesting, so compelling, so riveting, that you, the agent, are going to want to risk your reputation with editors for being a shrewd judge of talent to present the products of my fancy to them; and that you, the editor, are going to want to put your career on the line to fight to bring my imaginings to press; and that you, the publisher are going to want to spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars presenting these imaginings to a world that has never heard of me; and that you, the reader, are going to want to put your hard-earned money on the line so that I can tell you a story that will give you nothing tangible.”

While you are reaching out to editors, agents and publishers, you're going to fail. Over and over and over again, you are going to send things out and they are going to come back with impersonal rejection notices, with no notices at all, with the occasional signed memo that “This isn't for us.” You are going to stare at your words and sit in a darkened room and wonder, “What the hell is the matter with me?” You are going to take the rejections personally, are going to hurt, are going to bleed. Agents will turn you down, editors will turn you down, places that don't even pay for stories will turn you down.

So say you have courage. Say you go on, and you take one step more than you think you can, and then one step more after that, and then one step more after that. Eventually you will sell something. You'll get paid. You'll 'succeed.' Your story or your book will enter the marketplace, and maybe you'll do well with it, or maybe you won't. In either case, let's say you keep going. You sell again.

Or perhaps you'll decide to publish your work yourself, skipping the pain and frustration of dealing with publishers.

In that case, along with writing your book, you will either do your own cover art, layout, formatting, editing and copyediting, uploading, selling, and promoting, or you'll pay someone else to do these things. Either way, you are investing in yourself—in your ability to know what is good, in your ability to tell a story worth reading, in your ability to reach readers directly and entertain them enough that they will not only like your first effort, but like it enough to search out your later works. Again, if you focus on your craft, learn what it takes to write a good story, and learn how to make sure your work is presentable when you send it out into the world, you will eventually succeed.

Even though you've succeeded, you're going to fail some more. You'll get hostile reviews. Letters from people who don't think you can write. Comments from critics questioning your talent, your vocation, your species. These will, if you're lucky, come interspersed with glowing reviews, a nice sell-through, an offer from your editor to buy the next thing you're doing, but don't think for a minute that the good things will offset the pain of the bad. They run in parallel courses, these good and bad responses, and they don't touch each other's worlds at all. I'm always delighted by the good reviews, always hurt by the bad ones.

But go on. You take another few steps, and these seem easier. You do more books, find an audience, settle into a flow. You discover one of the ugly facts of success—that there are people who you thought were your friends who were only your friends when you were failing. Now that you have, in their eyes, reached success, you have become the enemy. A target. They want to see you fall down, because when you are standing, you make them feel their own failures more.

You leave the false friends behind. You keep writing, keep selling, get fan mail, generate some nice reviews, make guest appearances at conventions, become (as much as any writer ever does) a celebrity in your field. And somewhere along the way

you realize that you want to stretch your wings. Try something you haven't tried before. You write this new thing, and your fans hate it because it's different, and your editor takes a beating, and your publisher loses money, and all of a sudden you're in a precarious position. You have to decide—pursue the new course and take chances, or stagnate in the old thing that has become popular and that is starting to feel like a prison. Or find some third writing course.

All along the way, you've had to face the certainty of various sorts of failure. You've been embarrassed by your family, who does not understand why you must do this ridiculous thing. You've felt pain and rejection and worthlessness. You've had your soul and your talent and your hope stepped on, and you've cried your share of private tears, and you've kept up a brave face in public more than you'll ever admit. Even when you succeed by your own definition of success, whatever that might be, you will continue to struggle, and you will never leave the struggle behind. Every story and every book is another chance to fail just exactly as much as it is another chance to succeed. Every new level of success raises the bar higher, making failure more public and more painful ... and more likely. Every day is a challenge, and every day requires courage.

I've learned this about writing—if you will not put yourself in a position to fail, you cannot succeed. The two are as inseparably linked as breathing in is linked to breathing out. You cannot have one without the other, though you can live a safe life and have neither.

Courage is standing at the bottom of the mountain, knowing that the climb is going to hurt like hell and that you might never reach the top, and climbing anyway. Courage is saying "One more step. Just one more step," when hands and knees and heart are bleeding. Courage is saying that you might let yourself quit tomorrow, but that you're going to hang in today, just for now... and not telling your tired, hurting self that the next day is always today, and the next moment is

always now.

What about my climb? I've done my share of falling, and I have the scars to show for it. It seems like there's as much mountain above me as there ever was, though when I look back, I can see that I've covered a surprising amount of ground, every bit of it one step at a time. I still don't know what the view from the top is like. I do know what the view from the first ledge above the treeline is like, though, and it's been worth the climb so far. I'm still working my way up the mountain, because what you can see from up here is nothing you can even get pictures of in the valley where it's safe. Part of the beauty, I think, comes from having survived the pain. Part of the elation, too. If it were easy, it wouldn't be any fun.

This is the world of writing, and it is the *only* world of writing. Every writer climbs the same mountain, though we all climb it by our own path. You can make this climb. It takes courage, but it only takes the sort of courage everybody can have—the courage not to quit when quitting would be the easy thing to do. You will not be called on to perform heroics—to leap into burning buildings or lift cars or fling yourself into the midst of a shark feeding frenzy to save a drowning child. All you have to do is take one more step. Remember to keep your head up, brush the dirt off your face and pick the gravel out of your palms when you fall, and know that every other person who climbed the mountain has done the same thing.

Good luck in your climb. My wish for you is this: May you have the courage to fail, because it is the courage to succeed.

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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