

FAITHFUL WORDS REFLECTION: ON COURAGE

Lessons in Courage

by Karen Hering

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We were not told why, but we were told to pay attention to a minor difference in our physical appearance and to sort ourselves accordingly. Stick to your own kind, our teacher said, with a special nod and smile in the direction of the group to which I'd been assigned.

Special privileges came our way as well: access at any time of day to the water fountain in our classroom and to the small bathroom just outside the door. The other group had to ask permission and then walk farther. The other group also was not allowed to talk with my group unless they'd been specifically asked a question to which they were replying.

What strange and ridiculous rules were these; my 10-year-old brain turned somersaults to consider. What an arbitrary and uncomfortable world they created. What unnecessary nonsense, that I was being told to ignore and separate myself from my best friend who happened to look a little different from me, who happened to have brown eyes while mine were blue.

It was 1969. We were a nation struggling, as we still are today, over deep racial divides created centuries earlier and now properly but painfully being challenged. My teacher, attempting to raise awareness of racial identity in our all white classroom, had decided to replicate the now famous blue-eyed, brown-eyed experiment. It was an experiential lesson in discrimination first designed by Jane Elliot, another grade school teacher, who on the day after Martin Luther King's assassination sought some meaningful way to teach her all white class in an all white town about the violence and tragedy of racism.

My teacher introduced Jane Elliot's experiment in our classroom, not telling us what we were doing or why. And my young indignation rose, at first silently knotting itself in my throat and my stomach and my brow. And then, inexplicably, snapping. The knot inside me tore open, and I leaned over to my best brown-eyed friend, whispered into her ear and clasped her hand firmly in mine.

The teacher's response was quick and angry, reminding me that I'd broken our new rules. When I spoke back, decrying those rules, something in him snapped too, as he lost sight of his deeper intentions and thought only of how I was derailing his experiment.

He picked up the paperweight on his desk and threw it across the room at me, fortunately for both of us, missing his mark.

Was it courage that caused me to defy those rules so long ago? I don't remember it that way. They simply struck me then as wrong and foolish. But what strikes me now, and almost like an object flung right at me, is how fiercely we are all taught not only the rules of oppression but also the difficult and intimidating consequences of challenging them. How we are all carefully trained, no matter what our racial identity, to be silent in the face of the spoken and unspoken rules of racism. How we are taught *not* to rock the boat, *not* to call attention to what – we have also been taught – is beyond our ability to change. That is, the system. The way things are.

So we are taught to be less than our whole and truest selves. Have you ever felt that knot in your throat that tightens when you notice something's wrong? Have you ever swallowed silently until it became a knot in your stomach? Regretfully, I have many more memories of my own knotted silences than of times when the knots have broken open and beckoned me to speak. I choose to recall *this* early memory, of a time when the knots snapped and I spoke up, in order to remind myself that I am – as we all are – capable of doing this.

Courage calls us to tend to our whole selves – to listen to the knowledge of our bodies, so often delivering our first warning that something is amiss. Courage calls us to speak up when we know the rules are wrong. Courage calls us to untie the knots that bind us silently to the way things are. Take courage. Learn courage. Be courage. The world needs nothing more and nothing less of each of us than this.

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Reflection questions for discussion

1. When have you had the experience of knowing the rules at play were wrong? How did you know? How did it feel? Does your body ever alert you when “the way things are” is wrong?
2. If you spoke up, in that incident or another, what helped you take action? If you remained silent, what might have helped you to speak up?
3. How do we learn courage? How might we teach it, to ourselves and to our children?

