

Council for
Public Interest
in Anesthesia

The Brain and Heart of the Cowardly Lion

Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP
*Executive Director
Council for Public
Interest in Anesthesia*

Like the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*, we all have fears that may stop us from attaining our true potential. The characters in *Oz* believe that something is wrong with them, and that only the wizard can fix their problems and make them whole. The story also challenges the belief that lions are always brave and suggests that even big and outwardly “ferocious” people can be insecure and afraid. As the Cowardly Lion discovers, fear of the unknown can be the greatest obstacle to our effectiveness, and only by facing and moving through our fears can we find courage.

The story of *Oz* is about growth, self-understanding, and the struggle for change. Much like Dorothy and her friends, to find our way we must work together in harmonious cooperation to overcome our own self-limiting doubts. Unfortunately, our fears often hamper our ability to go forward, and we may stop trying new things. The more that we allow fear to stop us, the less we believe that courage is already within us. This causes us to be more fearful, reinforcing our lack of faith in ourselves, and even making our fears come true.

As human beings, we have the capacity to visualize what we need, but we are not always willing to reinvent ourselves to achieve our goals. We see too many challenges, get lost or turned around on our path, and become disappointed when we turn out to be something less than what others expected us to be, or who thought we should be.

Courage

Most of us don't see ourselves as particularly courageous. Like the Cowardly Lion, we

don't recognize or understand how formidable we are as we go about our daily lives resolving conflicts at work and home or raising children. We don't see how strong we are for picking ourselves up after a divorce or death, or for caring for an aged parent or critically ill family member. We do not see that taking time out of a busy life for personal peace and quiet is a sign of commitment and courage.

Putting your life back together after any disruptive or traumatic event is not easy. It takes strength, patience, and the courage to ask for help and rebuild the infrastructure of your life. Self-awareness is a critical first step in changing the way you reconstruct your life. Awareness of who and what you are is essential. You cannot expect to change what you don't understand. Self-awareness allows us to distinguish between what is beneficial and what is destructive. Self-awareness encourages us to be patient as we work through our situation without trying to force the results.

Courage does not come from outside of us. Courage is choice, often linked to individual ability to cope or manage stressful or disturbing situations. We can choose to be optimistic, cooperative, and enthusiastic rather than being a victim of our negative emotions and experiencing burnout and stress that hinders productivity.

Columbia University researchers have found that the amygdala region of the brain processes strong negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Anxiety often occurs when we become aware of stress and unresolved conflicts. The study shows two levels of anxiety: the anxious apprehension group (verbalizing worry, physical symptoms of stress) and the anxious arousal group (intense fear, panic, or both). The first group exhibited enhanced left-brain activity, and the anxious arousal group had heightened activity in the right brain. The anxious apprehension group showed increased activity in a

region of the left inferior frontal lobe that is associated with speech production. The anxious arousal group had more activity in a region of the right-hemisphere inferior temporal lobe that is believed to be involved in tracking and responding to information signaling danger.

Further research indicated that when the amygdala signals the brain that an emotional conflict is present; this conflict then interferes with the brain's ability to perform a task. The rostral anterior cingulate cortex, a region of the frontal lobe, activates to resolve the conflict. The rostral cingulate dampens activity in the amygdala, so that the emotional response does not overwhelm subjects' performance, thus achieving emotional control. In other words, bravery does not remove anxiety; courage appears to arise “in spite of it.”

The famous quote “know thyself” is attributed to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. How well do you know yourself? Can you name your greatest strengths or what are you most passionate about? What are you most proud of? What gives you the shivers, makes you cry, or pushes your limits of control? If you were absolutely guaranteed to succeed, what one thing would you dare to dream?

Courage involves risk. Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the power to take action while being afraid. In earlier times, courage was seen as mental or moral strength to venture, to persevere, and to withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.

We often do not recognize the strength exhibited by our willingness to take risks, to take on the hard tasks or tough questions and follow the answers wherever they lead.

- It takes courage to say no to that extended call, weekend, or shift when fatigued.
- It takes courage to accept those things you regret and cannot change.

- It takes courage to face something you wish to avoid: confronting a rebellious teenager, a colleague with an obvious alcohol or drug dependency, or an abusive spouse.
- It takes courage to get out of bed in the morning when caught in the depths of depression or constant pain.
- It takes courage to face up to the ethical challenges in your daily lives.
- It takes courage to use mistakes and failure as an opportunity to learn.
- It takes courage to be afraid, be nervous, be hesitant, but do it anyway.

Courage is at the heart of recovering addicts and alcoholics. It takes courage to endure the consequences of attitudes, actions, and neglect when entwined with fear of the future.

It takes courage to resist lashing back at others who hurt or offend us. It takes courage to believe no situation or person is hopeless. It takes courage to maintain our enthusiasm and effort despite delays and setbacks. It takes courage to do the things we know are right in spite of fears and rejection or inadequacy. It takes courage to refrain from taking over a loved one's responsibility when he or she is failing to meet it.

Self-employment takes a particular type of courage. You must be willing to take action with no guarantees of success, be willing to face and overcome the roadblocks. It takes strength, focus and responsibility to succeed or fail on your own merits, and to be willing to ask for help or education when you need it.

The right ethical choice is difficult and whistle blowers have their own brand of courage. They receive enormous criticism and judgment for exposing what needs to be exposed, yet they persist in pointing out things that are wrong and unjust.

Courage is common among soldiers on the battlefield as well as those who march with them to care for their injuries—or their

souls in last moments of life. For whatever reason, without question, they willingly take the path that risks disability or death.

Patience

Courage and patience go hand in hand—without patience courage is weak. We must be willing to wait, willing to stand still, willing to have courage even when things all seem to go wrong. Patience is a temporary truce, a willingness to accept what cannot be changed now. We change our tactics, look for other solutions, and relentlessly press on. It is a decision to wait. It is a decision to hold on despite of setbacks. Patience is small tasks repeatedly done that lead to major accomplishments.

While patience is a virtue and a key to success, it must also be measured and balanced. We can be too patient and wait until it is too late to take action. The success that could have been ours is lost because of delay.

Learning to be patient and remain calm reduces and relieves stress and worry. Cultivating patience is really learning impulse control. You can learn how to do “emotional

maintenance” and shake off stress, keep on track of what you want to do, and let go of frustration when something is getting to you. Patience is learning how to wait until you've thought

before acting and made sure you understand the options and take control of your own ideas and decisions. It's a growth process, a transformation of self through awareness and learning.

Courage gives one strength, power, and endurance to overcome or surmount obstacles, weaknesses, hardships, and crises. Courage can be moral or physical. Instinct, luck, training, peer pressure, opportunity, skill, shame, and the desire for glory are all factors that can influence the actions of a hero or a coward. Bravery implies fearlessness in the face of danger, but courage is often shown in spite of fear.

The Heart of the Cowardly Lion

The Cowardly Lion was not a coward, only riddled with self loathing and self doubt. He was ashamed because society expected him to be brave in his role as the King of the Beasts. His character, just like the others in the film, is a metaphor of the human psyche and how self doubt leads us to believe that we lack crucial qualities.

The Wizard of Oz is about searching for something very important like a brain, heart, courage, vision, and dreams of home. It took difficult circumstances, teamwork, obstacles, support, and outside help along the way for each character to realize that they already had what they needed inside of them. Each of us travels the same journey, and the heart, emotions, passion, creativity, aliveness, and courage of the lion lives inside each of us. Everyday acts of conscience or steps toward balancing life and work remind us that courage doesn't require earthquakes, civil wars, or killing fields—it can surface anywhere that people believe in themselves. ■

Be a first rate version of yourself, not a second rate version of someone else.

Judy Garland

References

- Biberman J, Whitty M, Robbins R L. Lessons from Oz: Balance and wholeness in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Management*. 1999;12: 243-254.
- Hirsch J, Etkin A, Kendel E, Hen R. Anxiety by type in different brain areas. *Neuron*, 2006; 8.
- Johnson P. Brains, heart and courage: keys to empowerment and self-directed leadership. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 1994: 9; 17-21.
- Saxena M, Andrews P. Patience and change: a conflict of interest? *Critical Care*. 2006; 10, 422.