SEARCHING FOR COURAGE:
EXPLORING THE IDEA OF A COURAGEOUS MINDSET

Dr. Arthur J. Schwartz, Professor of Education & Executive Director
Oskin Leadership Institute
This publication is an edited version of an invited lecture given by Dr. Schwartz to the Widener faculty, staff, and students on December 7, 2012. He was introduced by Widener’s president, James T. Harris III.

For additional copies of this publication, please send an e-mail to oskininstitute@widener.edu.

The invited lecture can be viewed at www.widener.edu/oskininstitute.

Publication design: Melanie Franz, University Relations
INTRODUCTION

This talk is a bit of an intellectual homecoming for me. I began my doctoral studies looking at the construct of hope, or more precisely, the loss of hope in the lives of 14-year-olds in North Philadelphia. I could see in their eyes—literally in their eyes—a bleaching away of hope, and I went off to Harvard to understand how this could happen to these physically healthy teenagers, especially as I saw some of their friends persevering, showing real grit and resilience. Yet many of these young people, whom I still see in my mind’s eye, lacked the building blocks of what we will be talking about today.

Courage is ubiquitous. It’s widely talked about and universally held in high regard.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: Courage is a fuzzy construct. It lacks a universally agreed upon definition. And for those empirically minded, I believe only two validated instruments have been developed, and both of these are relatively recent contributions to the field. On the other hand, courage is ubiquitous. It’s widely talked about and universally held in high regard.

My purpose today is to boldly go where many have gone before—into the mystery of the virtue we call courage. I’ll begin by pointing out the landmarks of those who have taken this journey before us; for example, the ways in which philosophers and psychologists have normatively used the term. I’ll share with you my own working definition of courage, examine the factors associated with a courageous mindset, and, finally, I’ll propose several potential lines of research or programs that our university and the Oskin Leadership Institute might pursue to increase humanity’s knowledge, appreciation, and practice of what Winston Churchill called the “first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others.”
Physical Courage

Let’s begin by examining physical courage, and, more specifically, the courage of the soldier. This type of courage runs through the writings of Homer and Aristotle to the Romans and Cicero all the way to Aquinas. There are two kinds of physical courage. One I call the “courage to charge.” This is the courage that has defined the soldier since the phalanx of the Ancient Greeks to Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg. This sort of courage was displayed by firefighters and first responders during 9/11. The “charge” is the ultimate test of courage. While many of us can imagine mustering the courage to defend our family or property, the courage to attack seems so much more daunting. This is the courage of Homer’s heroes. Even Plato, ever the rationalist, suggested that courage is the ability to face your fear and “stand and fight.”

But there is a second kind of physical courage, what I call the “courage to endure.” This is the courage of the prisoner of war, such as the thousands of American POWs during WW II, or the courage that John McCain showed during his five years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. It is also the courage of soldiers who endure shell shock, the nightmares of trench warfare, so brilliantly captured by Steven Spielberg in his recent film War Horse. The courage to endure is what Aquinas was referring to when he wrote about fortitude as a virtue. This temperament is much different than the temperament to charge. It is about suffering silently, with dignity. Suffice it to say, if it is fear that we must overcome to charge into battle, it is despair that we must defeat if we are to endure.

But let me return, for a moment, to the courage to charge; more particularly to the context and situation that formed the moral currency surrounding the men who comprised the phalanx. Imagine you are one of those men. What are your thoughts as you prepare for battle? Perhaps you are thinking about your duty to your nation-state. Others might be experiencing the fear of shame, the fear of a tarnished reputation if they do not show bravery in battle. Some may feel loyalty to the group, an emotional bond to those to their left and right. Finally, a few might be thinking that their extensive training and drilling will make the difference between living and dying. In his poem “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars,” Richard Lovelace captured so beautifully what is at the core of the courage of the charge. He wrote:

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind,  
That from the nunnery  
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind  
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,  
The first foe in the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such  
As thou too shall adore;  
I could not love thee, Dear, so much,  
Loved I not Honour more.

Honor. The courage of the soldier, both the courage to charge and the courage to endure, is built on a culture of honor. This has been true from Homer’s time to today.
Moral Courage

Let’s move to moral courage. One type of moral courage is what I call the “courage to take a stand.” This is the courage displayed by the abolitionists fighting to end slavery and women fighting for their rights. This kind of courage is understood universally—whether in Seneca Falls, Tiananmen Square, or in today’s Syria. On a personal level, there is one image of moral courage that had tremendous meaning for me growing up, an image imprinted in my mind forever. It’s the photo taken of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, at the height of the Black Power movement. A powerful image for a 14-year-old Jewish boy growing up in Philadelphia.

Moral courage is a relatively new term; scholars have noted that it didn’t appear in the Oxford English Dictionary until the 19th century. But since the days of Socrates, men and women have dared to show the courage of their convictions. Moreover, it is hard to conceive of moral courage without appropriating the “standing” metaphor. We stand on principle. We take a stand. We stand firm. Even Martin Luther boldly stated before the Holy Roman Emperor, “Here I stand. I can do no other.” This is the courage that speaks truth to power, as well as the courage to follow the harder right than the easier wrong. Of course, some acts of moral courage risk much more than a cold shoulder from one’s peers. Throughout history, those who have shown the courage of their convictions have risked imprisonment, torture, even death. Indeed, some theorists have argued that in some ways it’s easier to be shot at than scorned at. The courage to take a stand is often done alone, or at least just a few against the many. It’s a kind of courage that calls attention to oneself.

There is another side of moral courage. This is the “courage to forgive”—the courage to turn the other cheek. It’s the story of a mother in Minneapolis, Mary Johnson, who forgave a young man of twenty who killed her 16-year-old son. Her story was featured on CBS several years ago. She started visiting her son’s murderer while he was in prison. She then advocated for his parole and made arrangements for him to get a job where she works … and then, after a period of time, she made arrangements to have him live in the apartment next to hers.

It is hard to conceive of moral courage without appropriating the “standing” metaphor. We stand on principle. We take a stand. We stand firm. Even Martin Luther boldly stated before the Holy Roman Emperor, “Here I stand. I can do no other.”
It is the courage of the Amish. And for many of us, Nelson Mandela stands as a paradigmatic example of this kind of courage—both when he was in prison and certainly when he forgave his transgressors when he was freed from Robben Island and began to lead the people of South Africa. Mandela’s courage to turn the other cheek remains all too rare in our world today. Think of the bloody civil war in Rwanda between the Tutsis and Hutus or the recent stories of ethnic cleansing in former Burma between the majority Buddhists and the Muslim minority.

From neuroscientific research, we know that we plan and seek revenge using the same neural hardware we use to satisfy a desire, such as our desire for food, sex, or power. In other words, following the research of Michael McCullough, revenge pays neurochemical dividends for us. Shakespeare understood this insight way before we ever invented the fMRI machine. When asked what he would do with a pound of Antonio’s flesh in *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock responds by saying he might use the flesh to bait fish. And then he adds: “If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.”

Revenge is a built-in feature of our human nature. From an evolutionary perspective, the primal, instinctive “you hit me, I’ll hit you back” response helped our ancestors survive. Thus, the revenge response is a key building block to forming a culture of honor that Richard Lovelace writes about in his poem.

But allow me to suggest that the capacity to forgive is also an intrinsic feature of human nature. While we first learned the mechanics of forgiveness within the context of family and kin, research has shown that we use these same mechanisms to forgive a bitter enemy, or someone who has killed our son, daughter, brother, or sister.

Mandela talked about this form of courage when he was released from prison. He told reporters that he still had anger for some of the guards (and especially one of the wardens) and yes, during the first weeks of his freedom, he felt the deep emotions of hate and revenge. But he repeatedly told reporters: “They had me for twenty-seven years. That is long enough. I don’t want them to have me for another twenty-seven. I have to find a way to let my anger go.”
Personal Courage

Let’s move on to the final type of courage: personal courage. Once again, I want to suggest that there are two kinds of personal courage. The first I call the “courage to be”—following Paul Tillich’s book of the same title. This is the courage undergirding the online campaign It Gets Better (regarding sexual orientation), as well as the courage of Bangladesh women to start a business, or the courage it took for Jean Vanier, born into a world of wealth and aristocracy, to dedicate his life to working with mentally challenged children and adults, first in France and now throughout the world. Writing in the early 1950s, Tillich argued that the courage to be is the courage to affirm one’s essential identity, one’s inner aim or telos. Often, this is the courage to take off the mask that we’ve been told to wear. It’s the courage to fiercely ask, “who am I?” Or, as my intellectual mentor Alasdair MacIntyre would put it, it is the courage to create a life, to embed oneself into a set of practices and beliefs that has, for the individual, narrative meaning and unity. The courage to be is also the courage to step outside one’s comfort zone—even in the face of fear, doubt, or alienation.

The second kind of personal courage is the “courage to change.” These are the stories of those who face “inner battles.” For example, people in 12-step programs. In many ways, this is the most difficult courage of all because there is often no one standing to your left or right. You are alone.

Writing in the early 1950s, Tillich argued that the “courage to be” is the courage to affirm one’s essential identity, one’s inner aim or telos. Often, this is the courage to take off the mask that we’ve been told to wear. It’s the courage to fiercely ask—who am I.
Is Courage a Form of Love?

While researching the literature on the nature of courage, I had one of those “aha” or “eureka” moments that perhaps only an academic can truly appreciate. I discovered, at least for myself, something that might undergird and hold together each of the six courage narratives described above: the power of love.

For physical courage, it is *the love of country, cause, and comrade*. This is the love that Richard Lovelace wrote about in his “Lucasta” poem. It’s the love that Nathan Hale expressed when he told the British that his only regret was that he had only one life to give for his country. It’s the love that James McPherson writes about in his book *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*.

For moral courage, it is *the love of justice and mercy*. Martin Luther King Jr. called this “the love that does justice.” We know that King struggled with fidelity to this love; his collection of sermons *Strength to Love* describes how difficult it was for him to resist the hate and violence that was all around him.

For personal courage, it is *the love of purpose and meaning*. This is the love that Viktor Frankl writes about after experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust. It is the love that Frankl discovered in the midst of his suffering. To Viktor Frankl, purpose and meaning were pure gifts of love.
Can courage be defined across all six kinds of courage described above? I believe it can. Drawing on historical and contemporary scholarship, courage comprises three discreet dimensions:

1. **A WILLINGNESS TO PURSUE** (Aquinas called this “firmness of mind”)

2. **A NOBLE GOAL OR PURPOSE** (often related to one’s identity as a soldier, mother, friend, etc.)

3. **DESPITE RISK, DANGER, OR FEAR** (whether it’s physical danger, reputational risk, or real fear)

Of course, there is a calculus at work here. Levels of risk and danger differ as well as levels of willpower and sacrifice. Not all goals and purposes are the same. In fact, one key difference between this definition and, say, the one proposed by Aristotle is my emphasis on “a noble goal or purpose.” Historically, the courage of the bank robber was the same as the courage of the soldier. Both displayed a willingness to pursue a goal despite risk, danger, or fear. I want to argue that courage has an ethical dimension to it, one that extends beyond mere self-interest. Let us also recognize Aristotle’s notion that courage is a mean between excess (what he called rashness or foolhardiness) and deficiency (timidity or cowardliness).

At this time, allow me to introduce and bring to the podium a Widener student whose personal narrative will help me vivify my working definition of courage. Zach Ferrara is a sophomore majoring in business. Zach recently shared with me that after watching a TV show on the subject, he has decided to donate one of his kidneys, not to someone he knows, but to someone he may never meet.¹

¹ During the next several minutes, Dr. Schwartz asked Zach several questions about his decision to donate a kidney to someone he does not know. They discuss the three dimensions of courage (within the context of Zach’s decision), and at the end Zach invites the audience to learn more about the benefits of donating a kidney to someone in need by visiting the website of the Kidney Transplant Center at the Crozer-Chester Medical Center. See: [www.crozerkeystone.org/kidney](http://www.crozerkeystone.org/kidney).
The Courageous Mindset

Current research on the nature of courage has focused on how courage is produced. Theorists such as Sean Hannah and his colleagues suggest there are six interrelated factors:

1. **Positive traits.** Individuals may be born with a predisposition toward courage, based on their openness to experience (versus a risk-averse temperament), their level of empathy, or their propensity for conscientiousness.

2. **Positive emotions.** Emotions can inspire us. While Plato and Aristotle focused on the cognitive aspects of courage, we have long recognized that emotions help fuel our courage—emotions such as anger and rage, fairness, caring and love, fear, embarrassment, and disgust.

3. **Goals & values.** Our identity as a soldier or parent and our determination to “live our values” are critical to the production of courage. We each have “role expectations” that exert psychological pressure on us to show self-concordance with our self-formed identity or convictions.

4. **Positive states.** The belief “I can do this” (self-efficacy) makes a difference in the production of courage. So does “I’ve done this before” (coping efficacy) and “We can do this” (collective efficacy).

5. **Social forces.** Courage is contagious, especially when we hold and share with others certain normative beliefs (e.g., “never leave a comrade behind”). We also know how important role models are to the production of courage, ranging from vital information sharing (“my team leader will tell me the right thing to do”) to guided mastery (“you acted with real courage today”). Of course, social forces are not always positive.

6. **Situation.** Context is the critical factor in the production of courage. Each situation we’re in has a particular set of stimuli that primes a distinct part of our personality structure. Certain situations easily activate or produce the courage we need. And certain situations rob us of courage. We succumb to fear, peer pressure, group think, or obedience to authority. Sometimes we lack the confidence or competence to overcome them. Many of us fear the potential for negative consequences. At times, we’re paralyzed by conflicting values (such as being loyal to a friend versus being honest). Researchers remind us that much of our behavior does not stem from our inner core but is situation dependent.

In sum, Hannah and his colleagues have developed a working model of a courageous mindset that’s based on the following pathways:

- **Our personality structure consists of internal and external resources** (traits, emotions, convictions, states, social forces)
  
  - **Courage occurs when these resources are primed and activated by a particular situation** (e.g., Flight 93)

  - **Repeated exposure and training to these situations can create stable “courage-when-needed” responses** (“if-then” scenarios)
The military trains for physical courage in precisely this manner. How often have we heard a Medal of Honor winner tell an audience that he was “trained” to do what he did and therefore he doesn’t know why he’s been given any medal, or the sentiment expressed by so many medal recipients that anyone in his unit or platoon would have done the same thing if they were placed in the same situation. The question remains: Can we provide training and “if-then” scenario protocols analogous to physical courage to create stable moral and personal courage? In part, this is the approach that Dr. Mary Gentile has developed in her research and book *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right.*

Dr. Gentile currently serves (2012–2013) as Widener University’s Beideman Visiting Scholar, an initiative of the Oskin Leadership Institute.
A Program on Courage at Widener University

Let’s now go where no one has gone before. Join me in imagining that ten years from now Widener University has become known worldwide for our initiatives to increase humanity’s knowledge, appreciation, and practice of courage. What might some of our cornerstone programs look like? To stimulate our thinking, here are a few ideas of what we might be doing.

1. **Create a clearinghouse on all things related to courage**
   
   We could become recognized as the leading online repository on all matters related to courage, ranging from new books and publications on courage to the latest research. We could also become known for bringing together the very best scholars and researchers.

2. **Create various research initiatives**
   
   Widener faculty, in collaboration with scholars worldwide, might pursue joint research projects aimed at developing new insights and breakthroughs on any of the six kinds of courage. Our faculty might collaborate to learn more about “courage prodigies”—young people who have demonstrated the courage of their convictions. We could also develop a joint initiative to learn more about developing “if-then” behavioral scripts aimed at producing moral and personal courage.

3. **Create a series of prizes**
   
   We could offer an annual dissertation award to an individual who has examined a dimension of courage, or an annual publication prize for the best book or article on courage. Boldly, Widener might launch a “Courage to Forgive” prize to increase awareness of forgiveness as a type of courage.

4. **Create a series of interventions**
   
   In what ways might we bring courage to Widener University? Might we create a common experience or a common reading that focuses on courage? Can we imagine a future together where Widener graduates don’t just have the “know-how” but they also have the “will-to”? Is there a way to bring courage to our charter school?
CONCLUSION

In one of his most famous dialogues (Laches), Plato has Socrates end a discussion on courage by admitting that he does not know what courage really is. He writes: “Somehow or other she has slipped away from me, and I cannot get hold of her or tell her nature.” My sense is that over 2,000 years later, we still do not know the essence of courage. The virtue remains a mystery, yet one worthy of our scholarly and empirical attention.

I hope this working paper has, at the very least, set a high bar and standard for what courage is; it has to be something more than just sticking to a diet for three days. Following the Greeks, I don’t think we want our courage to come too easy, except perhaps on Memorial Day.

Some final stepping stones for us to consider:

- **Courage is about looking at ourselves in the mirror—who do we want to be?**
- **It is a verb—it helps us get to where we want to go.**
- **It brings out the best in us.**

And at some level that I still don’t fully understand, courage is about love; it’s an attachment, a yearning, a desire for something that extends beyond our radically autonomous selves. Courage belongs to those of us who have something to lose, and who care, and care deeply, about losing it. It’s about the love of country and comrade. The love that does justice. The love that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Gandhi put it this way: “A coward is incapable of exhibiting love.” Love, he writes, “is the prerogative of the brave.”

Courage is about love; it’s an attachment, a yearning, a desire for something that extends beyond our radically autonomous selves. Courage belongs to those of us who have something to lose, and who care, and care deeply, about losing it.
References & Intellectual Sources


Dr. Arthur Schwartz is a professor of education and the founding executive director of the Oskin Leadership Institute at Widener University. He comes to Widener from the United States Air Force Academy where he served as that institution’s senior scholar. Prior to his Air Force Academy appointment, Dr. Schwartz served fourteen years as a senior executive at the John Templeton Foundation. He is widely known for collaborating with Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania in catalyzing the field of positive psychology, and he has also contributed to the fields of health psychology and character education. Arthur’s current research focuses on theories of moral identity and leader development. His articles have appeared in a variety of journals including the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of Moral Education*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He received his doctorate from Harvard University, and he is currently a senior fellow at the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University. He and his wife have two children.

**About the Oskin Leadership Institute**

The Oskin Leadership Institute, which opened in 2011, has been made possible by a generous gift from David Oskin, the former chair of Widener’s Board of Trustees, his wife JoEllen, and their late son, David.

The mission of the Oskin Leadership Institute is to perpetuate and strengthen the university’s long and noble tradition of inspiring Widener students to be strategic leaders and responsible citizens who possess the character, courage, and competencies to affect positive change throughout the world.

The institute’s long-term vision is to drive Widener University’s evolution into a world-class leadership degree-producing institution recognized for its innovative leadership programs, especially opportunities for Widener students to lead outside their comfort zones.

The invited lecture can be viewed at [www.widener.edu/oskininstitute](http://www.widener.edu/oskininstitute).