

Courage VS Skill

When I was around four or five years old, I learned how to skateboard and ride my bike. I remember taking the training wheels off, and learning to ride without the assistance. It was then that I decided to become more courageous, ride downhill, in the grass and even on dirt ramps. I grew up in Roxborough, Philadelphia and spent my youth in Kelly Park, where I fueled myself with courage as a young boy. I remember my friends, and brother, decided to launch ourselves off of this dirt ramp that we found in the park. You had to go down the concrete hill, then into the grass, then launch yourself off the dirt. You would fall down, get back up, and try again until you're the first person to do it. Maybe practicing courage amongst a group of young boys may be necessary and sort of like a right of passage to becoming a man.

Once we conquered the dirt, we then learned to skateboard at FDR Park. FDR skate park is one of the most legendary skate spots and is built entirely by skaters. The ramps are made from concrete and are extremely large and almost oversized. Needless to say, it requires lots of courage to skateboard here. You see, I was never a technically skilled skateboarder, or one that could kick flip, and do all of the fancy tricks. However, I possessed courage to conquer large ramps, obstacles, and throw myself down sets of stairs. I remember at skateboard camp in the Franklin Mills Mall at Woodward skate park, my brother and I threw our bodies down the set of stairs until we landed an ollie. You need skill to be able to ollie, however, the courage required is more critical. You have to learn to fall and persevere hours of practice. At the end of the long day, my brother and I finally landed the ollie down the set of stairs, conquering this location like warriors.

To me, the courage necessary to skateboard outweighs the technical skill. It takes courage to even step on the board, and push yourself along a flat surface. It takes courage to go down hills, up ramps, and overcome obstacles. The skill, is learned through courage. **Skill becomes a byproduct of you, your heart, and throwing yourself out there onto the front lines of life.**

The street is an arena

I view the street as an arena. I remember in high school, I was 17 or 18, and I tried to use flash on the streets. I would buy disposable cameras from the Rite Aid or CVS and get really close to people on Market Street, and snapshot without asking for permission with flash. One of the first times I ever tried to do this, a man took off his belt and tried to whack me with it! I kept going out there and trying time and time again, and fueled myself with courage as a street photographer early on by using a flash. Alas, I realized that this was not something I was interested in, and switched to simple black-and-white or color photography without flash. I realize that using the flash as one of my first solutions of practicing street photography is what fueled me with courage early on my journey.

Street photography requires courage. It requires courage for you to even step into the arena, the street, and practice, candid photography. It requires courage for you to pick up a camera, and go out there, into the unknown, where you never know what can happen.

I transition to Baltimore, where I studied in university, and explored the streets there with my camera. It requires courage to enter new communities, interact with strangers, and photograph in new places. I am reminded of my time in 2016, when I photographed the basketball scene. This was one of my very first and successful photographs that I made on the streets. I remember it was golden hour, and I entered this basketball court because there was some people playing, a beautiful background, and perfect light. I was using a Ricoh GR11 at the time, and simply set my camera in P mode. I did not necessarily have these technical skills of operating my camera yet, photographing with automatic functions, and simply pointing and shooting. However, I mustered up the courage to enter the scene, position myself in a strategic location at the action, close to life, and I made a photograph through my intuition.

I remember after making this picture, I turned to the left of me, and there was a street fight that broke out. They were gambling, and began fighting over who won. I made a picture of this fight, and went home with my head held high, filled with adrenaline, and fueled by my courage. You see, courage is more important than skill within the realm of photography, and any endeavor in life for that matter. This

photograph I made wound up winning first place, and was recognized by the president of Magnum at the time, Martin Parr. I had no idea what I was doing, I just had a camera, courage, and the results were delivered to me almost like a miracle.

Do you believe in miracles?

I remember when I was a little kid, watching the movie “Miracle on Ice” where it covers the 1980s Olympic Games. The United States was going up against the Soviet union in a hockey match. The Soviet union was certainly the stronger team, and bound to win. However, with strategy and courage, the underdog, the United States won the Olympic Games and defeated the giant, the Soviet Union. I remember at the end of the movie, the announcer of the game asks, “Do you believe in miracles?”

Be dangerous

After my time in Baltimore, I decided to study abroad at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I honestly did not go there for any rhyme or reason, and was merely fueling my curiosity, as this was the most interesting location to study abroad that was on the list of countries for me to choose from. I remember that first time I decided to venture beyond the wall, into the West Bank territories. There was this refugee camp, Shu’fat, in East Jerusalem. This location is very daunting, as it has a large looming wall that surrounds this neighborhood. I turned to the Internet, looked at images, and checked the news to see what was going on at this location. Needless to say, I found lots of doom and gloom, and negative imagery of this location. **What I learned in this moment was that you must enter new places without preconceived notions of what you will find.**

Alas, I mustered up the courage to enter this place, packed my camera, went through the metal detectors and security guards, and went beyond the wall. I remember I found my way through this community with ease as people were

greeting me, offering me tea and coffee, and even inviting me into their homes. I spent time on the rooftops, observing their pigeons, and even spent time with some young men at construction sites, enjoying meals together.

I wanted to photograph the wall. I spent many weeks going back to this location, walking along the wall. This wall was what I decided I needed to conquer. Walking along this wall, it feels like no man's land. It's just you, a bunch of trash, and nobody in sight. One day while I was walking along the wall, a young Palestinian boy threw a rock and hit me in the back of the leg from the top of the hill. This hurt really badly, but I kept pushing forward. Eventually, a young boy threw a baby stroller against this wall, and a very chaotic scene broke out suddenly, and I was there, prepared, and I made a photograph. This picture wound up being one of my strongest photographs from this trip, and certainly is an intriguing moment. I remember climbing the wall, standing proudly on top of it, as I conquered this location.

One fun way I showed courage in Jericho, was by arm wrestling all the young men in the village. They came up to me one by one to compete against me, but nobody could ever defeat me. I essentially beat everybody in this village in arm wrestling and because of my physical strength, they respected me more.

I spent lots of time photographing conflict between Israel and Palestine on the borders. During these situations, people are shot, killed, and I was even tear gassed. However, being a bit naïve, and dangerous, I threw myself onto the front lines, and made photographs that are powerful, and strong. I have skill, know how to make a composition with impact, but the courage is what carries you there.

Perhaps you must be a bit naïve, like a child, and explore your curiosity, setting yourself in motion, without preconceived notions.

David and Goliath

I spent many months taking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was there in Jericho, where I found the most fulfilling opportunities to make pictures. One time, it rained. It was very rare to see rain in Jericho, as it is the lowest elevated and oldest inhabited city in the world completely filled with desert land. It is so dry, and hot there, that to see rain, was like a miracle.

Alas, it rained for about five minutes, and a rainbow appeared. A young boy, Ramsay, picked up a stone, and threw it into the distance, towards the rainbow. I responded fast with my camera and I made a quick picture, as the rainbow only lasted maybe one minute, which felt like seconds.

This photograph reminds me of David defeating Goliath with a stone. I actually visited the location of the battle between David and Goliath during my time in Israel. At the Valley of Elah, I stood on top of the mountain, looking out towards the battleground. I actually explored in the caves here, discovering artifacts from ancient civilizations that were from around 3000 BC. When I consider David, being a small, farmer boy, mustering up the courage to fight against a giant, with armor, Goliath, it inspires me.

The sculpture of David by Michelangelo, is one of the most influential works created from the Renaissance. When you see this sculpture in Florence, you are looking at a tall, slim boy, in deep contemplation, armoring himself with courage, and God.

The word "courage" comes from the Old French "corage," which itself derives from the Latin "cor," meaning "heart." Originally, the term was used metaphorically to mean "heart" as the seat of emotions and spirit, particularly with reference to bravery and boldness. Over time, it evolved in modern English to specifically denote the quality of being brave and willing to face danger or difficulty.

Perhaps the heart of David, was full, and he went forward with courage and audacity, to conquer this giant. As David charged towards Goliath with courage, skill followed as he hit a precise headshot with a stone, and eliminated the target, beheading Goliath with his own sword. **My thought is, when you show courage, skill follows.**

Think of Harry Potter, in the chamber of secrets, when he goes to defeat the basilisk. Harry Potter did not have a weapon, however, the Phoenix appeared, delivering him the sword of Gryffindor. The sword is delivered to the person who shows the most courage, a key trait of the Gryffindor house. In the end, Harry Potter defeats the basilisk in the chamber of secrets because of his courage.

Into the unknown

Throughout my journey as a photographer, I've always been one to explore the unknown. I'm always just curious, *what's out there?*

I spent my time as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia Africa, where I had no expectations or destinations in mind. I simply signed up for the Peace Corps, and they sent me there. Once I arrived, I had to learn a whole new set of skills, local language, washing clothes by hand, cooking over fire, and sleeping in a mosquito net under an thatched roof. I learned to prepare chickens to eat, by slaughtering them, plucking their feathers, and cooking them over the fire. The first day I arrived in the village, I was greeted by a scorpion on my door. I had to pick up a stone, and kill it. What a wonderful greeting this was, as when you slept at night, all you hear are the sounds of the bush, the animals, and the unknown insects, that are lurking all around you.

My courage carried me throughout this trip, as I explored the dirt paths, that led to seemingly nowhere. I found myself biking all day for many miles, looking for things to photograph in the bush. I've explored lakes filled with crocodiles, climbed mountains, and photographed in emotional situations, such as funerals and baptisms. At this point, I had lots of experience as a photographer, was skilled, but courageous. Frankly, I was hardly making photographs during my time in Zambia. I was mostly spending my time in the farm, working with fishermen, and making connections in the community as a volunteer, working on local projects. The camera was kind of just there with me throughout the journey, and I made some photographs each day here and there. The point is, it doesn't matter how skilled you are as a photographer, if you have the courage to go out there on the adventure, into the unknown, beauty will be delivered to you.

At the end of the day, I know what it takes to make strong photographs. It requires curiosity and courage at the forefront. It does not matter how much you know about your camera, the history of photography, or how skilled you are. What matters is how courageous, bold and dangerous you are. Become formidable, physically strong, and you will become a strong photographer.

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