

Courage vs. Skill

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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 assistance. It was then that I decided to become more courageous, riding 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 deciding to launch ourselves off a dirt ramp we found in the park. You had to go down the concrete hill, then into the grass, and finally launch yourself off the dirt. You would fall down, get back up, and try again until you were the first person to do it. Maybe practicing courage amongst a group of young boys is necessary, almost like a rite of passage to becoming a man.

Once we conquered the dirt, we learned to skateboard at FDR Park. FDR skate park is one of the most legendary skate spots, built entirely by skaters. The ramps are made from concrete, extremely large, almost oversized. Needless to say, it requires a lot of courage to skateboard there. You see, I was never a technically skilled skateboarder, or one that could kickflip, or do all of the fancy tricks. However, I possessed the courage to conquer large ramps, obstacles, and throw myself down sets of stairs. I remember being 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, but the courage required is more critical. You have to learn to fall and persevere through hours of practice. At the end of a 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 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. **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 being in high school, around 17 or 18, and trying 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, snapping shots without asking for permission, with flash. One of the first times I tried this, a man took off his belt and tried to whack me with it! I kept going out there, trying time and time again, fueling myself with courage as a street photographer by using flash. Alas, I realized that this was not something I was interested in, and I switched to simple black-and-white or color photography without flash. I realize that using the flash as one of my first methods for practicing street photography is what fueled me with courage early on in my journey.

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

I transitioned 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 new places. I remember a particular moment in 2016 when I photographed a basketball scene. It was one of my very first successful street photographs. I remember it was golden hour, and I entered this basketball court because there were people playing, a beautiful background, and perfect light. I was using a Ricoh GR11 at the time, simply set my camera to P mode, and didn't necessarily have the technical skills of operating a camera yet—photographing with automatic functions and simply pointing and shooting. However, I mustered the courage to enter the scene, position myself strategically, and get close to life. I made a photograph through intuition.

After making this picture, I turned to the left of me, and a street fight broke out. They were gambling and began fighting over who won. I took a picture of this fight and went home with my head held high, filled with adrenaline, fueled by courage. **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*, which 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 the 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 the courage to enter this place, packed my camera, went through the metal detectors and security guards, and went beyond the wall. I remember finding my way through this community with ease as people greeted me, offered me tea and coffee, and even invited 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. It 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 defeat me. I essentially beat everybody in this village in arm wrestling, and because of my physical strength, they respected me more.

I spent a lot 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 had skill, knew how to make a composition with impact, but the courage is what carried me 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, toward the rainbow. I responded fast with my camera and 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 even explored the caves here, discovering artifacts from ancient civilizations that were from around 3000 BC. When I consider David, being a small farmer boy mustering the courage to fight against a giant in armor, Goliath, it inspires me.

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. **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 about 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: the local language, washing clothes by hand, cooking over fire, and sleeping in a mosquito net under a 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 explored lakes filled with crocodiles, climbed mountains, and photographed emotional situations, such as funerals and baptisms. At this point, I had a lot of experience as a photographer and was skilled, but I was courageous. Frankly, I was hardly making photographs during my time in Zambia. I mostly spent my time on 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.