

In My Eleventh Hour: “I Wish I’d Had More Courage”

By Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

No one has looked back sadly on a life full of experiences, but many look back wishing they had had the courage to do more. -- Anonymous

Working as a hospice volunteer for more than four years, I’ve witnessed a variety of outcomes during a patient’s final moments, commonly referred to as the “eleventh hour.”

During this time, people process their final defining moment: dying. This is the moment that requires the most courage—the surrender and the acceptance of one’s life. When family and friends come to the care center to be with their loved one, it’s a blessing. But often, it is too late for words or actions that provide comfort or healing.

Calling to Be an Eleventh Hour Hospice Volunteer

My calling as a trained eleventh hour hospice volunteer is to sit with the hospice patient and to know the signs and symptoms that portend the end of life. As a volunteer I offer support by being “present” as the care center assists the patient and family during the patient’s last hours. I also provide companionship to ensure the patient does not die alone. Additionally, eleventh hour hospice volunteers attempt to reduce the patient’s stress and anxiety and provide the family information, guidance, and emotional, physical and spiritual support.

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With each of my volunteer experiences, I was challenged to reflect on my own personal journey—deliberating over past mistakes, contemplating regrets, and examining whether I was living in my

true self *today*. I know that courage lives in my true self and in coming to terms with my eventual demise. I began to ask myself, how much heartfelt courage will I be able to summon to peacefully embrace my own eleventh hour? The book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande confirmed for me that dying is not a disease, and it conveyed eloquently the importance of the quality of one’s journey and having dignity at the end.

Embracing Courage

The word courage comes from the French word *corage*, meaning “heart and spirit”. So courage is really about acting from our heart and spirit, from the center of our being, which is the true identity hidden beneath the false self of the ego. Tapping into our courage enables us to stand in our true Selves, our solid core. Although courage was one of the four cardinal virtues in classical literature, it has diminished in importance in these postmodern times as most people equate this important virtue with acts of bravado in the face of fear. By limiting the idea of courage in this way, we fail to acknowledge the courage in stopping

to smell the roses, asking for what we want, pursuing “spiritual courage”* and overcoming courage killers such as complacency. Courage manifests itself when we embark on a journey that is in line with our heart and spirit. When we apply this original definition to our lives, we feel more empowered to be discerning and better able to respond to the inherent energy of courage. In this way we design not only a good life, but also a good death.

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During my years as an eleventh hour hospice volunteer, I observed that patients often had not summoned the courage to do something they really wanted to do in life, or they sadly didn’t make time to just “be” instead of being in a constant state of doing. These observations correlated with my over twenty years of research on recognizing and interpreting courageous behaviors. Several reoccurring themes surfaced that confirmed “I wish I’d had more courage...”

Five are featured below:

1. I wish I’d had the courage to realize how important it was to stay in touch with family and friends.

We make choices about how we are going to spend our lives and who we are going to share our lives with, keeping ourselves busy until it may be too late. Rushing through life, we rarely see that complacency filled with excuses and justifications seeps into our spirits and drains our precious reservoir of courage. At 50 years of age we may eventually see that the people we called our friends have now died.

Once our time to pass on has come, the opportunity to live more fully, call a dear friend or practice gratitude for the people in our lives has closed. An eleventh hour patient is unable to talk and their chance to express forgiveness or share inner feelings has permanently disappeared—time has run out. The window of opportunity to change the story line has evaporated.

With these emotions lingering in their spirits, I’ve wondered why many eleventh hour patients are so agitated and seem to have a busy mind during their final transition. One hospice nurse shared with me that in her seven years of caring for the dying she assessed that 50% of her patients were agitated during this final phase. Sometimes referred to as “unfinished business,” complacency in life kept these patients from claiming their courage and ultimately, peaceful acceptance of the end.

2. I wish I’d had the courage to live my life expressing more of my true Self, not the life where I sometimes sold my soul to accommodate others.

Before people reach the eleventh hour, the patient tends to reflect on their journey and often express regrets to loved ones. This is a form of confessing, and confessing is one of twelve cousins to courage. “Shoulda”, “coulda”, “wouldas” are generally attached to

regrets such as “I wish I’d spent more time with my kids, “I wish I’d not been so afraid to travel,” “I wish I’d finished college” or “Sorry I never told you...” One time I sat with a man as he passed. Shortly thereafter, his daughter arrived and she shared with me that before her father deteriorated to the eleventh hour stage and was no longer able to talk he had looked up at her and said, “Honey, I have no regrets.” Sadly, that’s not the case for many people as they reflect on their life’s journey.

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We must ask ourselves, am I living in my true self? When my time comes to pass will I be filled with regrets or happiness? Regrets represent the times in our lives when we allow fearful insecurities to undermine the courageous choices. Recognizing regrets, the task then is to cultivate courage and trust that going for it is better than dying without it. Courage is a journey from the head to the heart, outside of emotion. We have to have the courage to ask ourselves: what percentage of my life right now is filled with regrets?

3. I wish I’d had the courage to take time out of my busy schedule to enjoy and appreciate the precious facets of life.

My yoga teacher lovingly preaches that the habitual response “I am so busy!” has become our culture’s new mantra. We continue to work very hard trying to fill up every moment of doing without stopping, and in that whirlwind, we’ve probably sold our soul (again!). Call it what you want, but we all know the feeling.

Embracing some form of stopping or contemplative practice can help initiate this transformative process. Doing sacred reading, chanting, practicing Tai Chi, hiking, or taking a silent retreat are all examples of contemplative practice, moving us beyond actions, words and thoughts and into the inner silence of our hearts. Other priceless facets of self-care include enjoying a cup of tea, going for a walk or quiet time with friends. The stillness found in peace provides maturity to our inner experience and accelerates spiritual courage. This is a simple lifestyle choice that requires courage consciousness.

American artist N.A. Noël said, “It is safe to say that two intangibles, Time and Fear control our lives. They have become inherent to our humanness. The only question is to what degree. Neither time nor fear is of our spiritual nature. In our attempt to control, we unconsciously turn our backs on our peaceful and powerful higher selves.”

4. I wish I’d had the courage to live a life that demonstrated all of my passion and potential.

Erma Bombeck’s quote says it all: “When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and I could say: ‘I used everything you gave me’.”

Our lives on Earth are short, and there's only one chance to live fully. Living in courage consciousness is a choice and this choice requires action. We decide if we will give ourselves permission to claim and apply our courage. We decide if we will make courage our daily legacy. Do your life's priorities need to be reviewed and reconsidered (or re-prioritized)?

5. I wish I'd had the courage to dispel my fears and listen more closely to the promptings of my heart and spirit.

Underlying all fears is the primitive and intuitive fear of death itself. Learning to stay courage-centered in the present may not banish fear or the self-blame it spawns, but it will at least begin to diminish the tendencies that keep us stuck in fear. Fear blocks and paralyzes the heart and ultimately, fear blocks courage.

By delving into the heart and spirit of our true identity, we begin to recognize our innate courageous will as well as the ego's insidious control mechanisms, which capitalize on fear and insecurity such as with dying. As we recognize the fears that the ego uses to justify its self-importance, we undermine the ego's power to dominate our lives and we begin to manifest our true identity.

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We must begin to recognize that fear is a man-made creation. The dualistic concept of fear versus courage keeps us stuck within the mental limitations of ego. When human beings claim their courage, they begin to experience that heart and spirit truth transcends the duality of the mind. In turn, we begin to see that fear is simply an illusion used by the ego to maintain its position of control. This recognition dissolves fear, allowing love to fill our hearts. This is the experience of “dying to self.”

How will you live *today* so as not to have any regrets in your eleventh hour?

***Spiritual courage:** The spiritual journey requires being in the present. It is a trust in faith that propels you to continue growing. You become a “witness” to your attachments to results and learn to self-correct. You surrender your ego to a higher level of courage consciousness, and you begin to exist in a place “where courage meets grace.” As all this happens, humility steps in to replace arrogance and righteousness. The sacred within awakens. When this occurs, you are differently focused, reflective and have a heightened self-awareness.

About the Author:

Global speaker **Sandra Ford Walston** is known as The Courage Expert. She has been a human potential consultant, speaker, coach, writer and corporate trainer for over twenty years. She is a trailblazer in the field of the feminine behaviors of courage and non-gender courageous leadership. Featured as a witty, provocative, concrete and insightful

speaker, she has sparked positive changes in the lives of thousands of leaders each year. She is certified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and the Enneagram. Sandra also instructs at the University of Denver.

She is the internationally published author of bestseller ***COURAGE The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman/Reclaiming the Forgotten Virtue*** along with her follow-up book for women, ***The COURAGE Difference at Work: A Unique Success Guide for Women*** and non-gender ***FACE IT! 12 Courageous Actions that Bring Success at Work and Beyond***. Sandra is published in magazines such as ***Chief Learning Officer, Training & Development, Accelerate*** (Malaysia), ***Real Simple, Maria Shiver Blog***, and ***Strategic Finance***. Visit **www.sandrawalston.com** to subscribe to her courage blog or sign up for her free monthly courage newsletter, or watch this short YouTube on **Courageous Leadership**.

Sandra enjoys golf, skiing, yoga, travel, cooking, meditation, reading, and being an 11th Hour hospice volunteer.