

# Reclaim Your Hidden Courage

By Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

The words you use to describe yourself speak volumes of your personality and self-image. They also often determine how successful you will be in both your personal and professional endeavors.

Take this quick survey to evaluate a clear portrait of your own self-image. First, make 10 copies of the following list of words. Give a copy to nine women (keep one for yourself). Instruct them (you, too) to circle nine words that honestly complete this sentence:

**“I perceive myself to be...”**

charismatic	energetic	conservative	active
honest	goal-oriented	gregarious	reserved
mature	risk-taking	intuitive	approachable
athletic	practical	bold	ordered
humble	fair	happy	determined
intelligent	fulfilled	resilient	visionary
sensible	open-minded	complex	emotional
courageous	moderate	creative	insightful
independent	liberal	private	gutsy

If you're like the 750 or so women surveyed for *COURAGE: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman/Reclaiming the Forgotten Virtue*, you probably didn't circle the word *courageous*. Only eleven percent of the original respondents perceived themselves as courageous. While on the surface that may seem unimportant or merely coincidental, it reveals that few women understand what courage really is and why society rarely recognizes women as courageous. Yet such recognition is vital to knowing ourselves.

## **Why women don't think of themselves as "courageous"**

Over the centuries, the word *courage* has become equated with *bravery*. Think of your own courageous images. What comes to mind? Jumping into an icy river to save a drowning child? Tackling a robber to the ground? Pushing a pedestrian out of the way of a speeding car? These are all typical thoughts of courage.

Now think of some courageous women, and who do you envision? Joan of Arc? Amelia Earhart? Xena, Warrior Princess? While these women are all icons of bravery, they're not anyone typical women see when they look in a mirror. In fact, courage is not a cultural norm for women as few are taught that it is a necessary trait for the female gender.

The fact is that courage is much more than "spontaneous reactions to traumatic events." Women can free their hearts and unleash their true potential if they change their perceptions of courage.

## **The actual meaning of courage**

The word *courage* comes from the French word *corage*, meaning "heart and spirit." Throughout history, women have always acted from their hearts, but male notions of courage as heroic have diminished feminine courage. Once women embrace this concept of courage, they can progress to integrating courage into their everyday lives.

There are actually twelve behaviors of courage that courageous women use to reframe issues and correct self-destructive patterns. These behaviors include things such as conquering fear, speaking up, overcoming loss, revealing vulnerability and embracing faith. Some examples of this type of courageous behavior would be speaking up when a cold shoulder is turned to you, halting injustice by confronting it openly, letting go of denial to face the truth about an illness or loss, remaining emotionally strong when hope seems gone, and acknowledging vulnerabilities.

When facing a crisis, simply telling yourself or someone else to "have courage" or "be brave" is not enough. The secret is to understand how to use the energy of the different behaviors of courage and recognize that what you say and do creates and describes your world.

## **The missing link**

What all courageous women have in common are "defining moments," those times when you look deep into your heart and spirit to find the courage to persevere through illness, abuse and more. It's in those defining moments that we "call upon" certain virtues. When you step back and

examine the circumstances, you'll often find that courage is the energy that propels you to step up. Why? The word virtue in Latin means "energy."

With that said, it's easy to realize that women do indeed have courage; we just don't recognize it or claim it. This obliviousness to feminine courage can have severe consequences, ranging from a life of mediocrity to a life of pain and suffering, depending on the situation. For the woman who does not speak up and state why she is qualified for the job promotion, there is a missed opportunity. Being passed over for a promotion, not receiving a fair raise, being spoken down to, or having your boss publicly reprimand you are a few examples of career defining moments. Recognizing these workplace incidents is the first step to reclaiming your courage. When you don't achieve your potential for courage, your spirit erodes.

### **Take that first courageous step**

Once you embrace your courageous virtue and recognize those moments when it comes into play, the next step is taking specific actions—that is, using courage effectively in your everyday life.

All courageous women undergo a personal internal change by altering their thought patterns about their lives. Recognizing the essence of courage makes all the difference. When we realize that courage is a tool expressed from the heart, even the slightest internal change causes a reaction in our external world. By integrating courage in our hearts and spirits, day-by-day we change our lives.

What makes courage such an amazing virtue is that it already resides within each of us. Being courageous doesn't mean being an exceptional woman, much less a Superwoman. It means being an ordinary, everyday woman—one who uses her reservoir of courage to see her through abuse and illness, and to grow and blossom as well. When you integrate courage into your own life, you'll distinguish a different way of looking at this hidden virtue—the virtue we too often discount. Take the time to consider applying courage to affirm and change your life.

#### **About the Author:**

Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert, is an international speaker and author, human potential consultant, corporate trainer and behavioral coach. Sandra's expertise allows her to focus on the tricks and traps of the human condition through recognizing and interpreting courage behaviors and courageous leadership styles.

Featured on the speaker circuit as witty, provocative, concrete and insightful, she has sparked positive change in the lives of thousands of leaders each year. Sandra also provides skills-based programs for some of the most respected public and private blue-chip businesses and organizations in the world, such as IBM, Caterpillar, Inc., Institute of Internal Auditors, Hensel Phelps, Wide Open West, Agrium, Inc., Virginia Commonwealth University, Xanterra



Parks & Resorts®, Procter and Gamble, Hitachi Consulting, US Bank, Healthcare Association of New York State, Institute of Management Accountants, and Delta Kappa Gamma International Society.

The internationally published author of bestseller *COURAGE The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman* and an honored author selected for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, Sandra facilitates individuals and groups to discover the power and inspiration of their everyday courage.

*The COURAGE Difference at Work: A Unique Success Guide for Women*, Sandra's follow-up book to *COURAGE*, is directed at any woman, regardless of title or credentials, who wishes to grow professionally by introducing courage actions at work. Her third book, *FACE IT! 12 Courageous Actions that Bring Success at Work and Beyond* confirms that what holds you back on the job is the same as what hinders achievement—the reluctance to face and live a courageous life. Sandra is published in magazines such as *Chief Learning Officer, Training & Development, HR Matters, Malaysia*, and *Strategic Finance*.

Sandra is a certified Newfield Network coach and certified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® along with the Enneagram. She also instructs at the University of Denver. She can be reached at [www.sandrawalston.com](http://www.sandrawalston.com) where she posts a courage blog and courage newsletter.

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