

Blessed are the fearless

You will fear no more once you have faced your own death

Helen knew her weeks were numbered. We had chatted last August about her recurring cancer and about the young family she must soon leave behind. I carefully asked how she coped with her anxiety – and whether I could help in any way. Looking slightly surprised, she said: ‘Oh no. I have two lovely children. And a great partner. God has given me time to prepare two little boxes for my sons. One day they will ask their Dad about their mother. In the boxes, I have put a letter for each of them, together with some of my hair, and a small phial of my favourite perfume. I am lucky to have time to do all of this. So why would I be afraid or depressed?’ I often reflect on Helen’s words. They have a shocking simplicity about them. They also carry a freedom, a trust and a great courage.

For a long time now, the experience of the abundant life, for me, had always to do with freedom from fear. You cannot be truly unafraid until you are unafraid of death. The ultimate courage must lie in the fearless facing of the terrifying unknown. This is why I have been so taken by the amazing words of Helen. As she spoke, the fruits of redemption were already flowering within her. A new level of living had already arrived: a more abundant life. Her essential being was not deserting her; it was being transformed. There was no fear in her face as we talked – only a gentle smile.



Such are the moments of raw courage we remember forever. When Jesus was raised from the dead all that remained nailed to the Cross was fear. It was fear that crucified Jesus, it is fear that crucifies us. It lies so insidiously deep within us that its compulsive influence is quite unconscious. It presents the negative in the guise of the positive. Fear, not suspicion or hatred, is the opposite of trust and love. To be able to encounter and befriend our fear is to become a new creation, to have our hidden self emerge in delighted living.



Helen left us in November. As we move on into another new year, I tell her story, for January is a month of new beginnings, new risks and resolutions, of what may be called ‘courageous conversations’ with ourselves and others. It is a time when we are encouraged to bring into focus the latent aspirations of our soul. Whatever relentless urging lies deeply within us, this month is a good time to reflect on what it takes to opt for growth and transformation.

Before embracing new beginnings, we need to be familiar with death. January can be called the month of fear because it is also the month of new possibility. Our inner passion for transcendence and transformation, often felt in January, also brings to the surface the existential fear that we all live with, that dogs every step of our days. Nelson Mandela believed that it is not our inadequacies that make us afraid, but the immeasurable power of our true, graced nature.

How different everything would be if we could speak, act and grow out of passionate conviction rather than stay passive and silent out of a debilitating fear! Those who have met and befriended their fear light up the room and light up the world. They set us all free, they enable us to live our dreams into reality, and most of all, to tell the truth, though, inevitably, like the Saviour before us, they always pay the price for their courage. A heartfelt moment of hope, a whisper of truth, an Easter candle in a window – all are subversive, invincible. Solzhenitsyn said that one courageous word would save the world. So often, however, saying that difficult word is like a mini-death.

I remember, I had the privilege of ministering to a parishioner who died just before Christmas. Edward lingered between life and death for many months. On two occasions I had the opportunity of talking to him about the moment of his imminent death. For some reason or other, I have always thought it to be supremely important for a dying person to be able freely, confidently and consciously to hand over their lives to God. Not everyone has this sacred opportunity, this blessed time, to radically surrender their lives – no matter what the sins, mistakes and failures – into the safe hands of God who cannot wait to embrace and welcome them home.

Like Helen, Edward, too, gave an unforgettable example of the miracles that happen when you face your fear. 'Yes,' he whispered, 'yes, I do commit my soul to heaven. I freely trust my life to God. I am ready.' There was, I felt, something eternal, something forever true, something that made death powerless, in those few timeless seconds of no more than a dozen words. Where does that kind of courage come from? I wondered.

Where does it begin? At the hour of our death are we supported and sustained by the hours of our childhood? Do the huge graces of our first years, lost by our compromises, betrayals and original sinfulness, return with faithful destiny to breathe a new dynamic of energy and vitality into us, for another beginning, another journey? A contemporary Greek poet wrote:

'In those fields and streets where you grew up,
there you will always live – and die.'

To become the child you were, in the fields and streets you once explored like a young heroine, a daring hero, is this why Jesus summed up his teaching about eternal life in the symbol of a child? The gifts and graces of our early years are the clearest expression of the nature of God – and of heaven. Maybe, on our deathbeds, they craft the wings of our destiny, to carry us safely home over the necessary chasms of darkness and light. And maybe, after all, it is not a bed of death, but a bed of life, when immense and unimaginable powers of transcendence are being released.



away from childhood

in any real sense', writes Rahner. 'We move towards the eternity of this childhood, to its definitive and enduring validity in God's sight – a field which bears fair flowers and ripe fruits such as can grow in this field of childhood, and in no other, and which will be carried into the storehouses of eternity.'

