

Changing the Face of Courage: Author Wants Women to See Their Strengths

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Count Sandra Ford Walston out when it comes to joining the fan legions of “Xena: Warrior Princess.” It’s not that Walston doesn’t appreciate the kick-butt-and-take-names-later approach of television’s most visible warrior woman. It’s more that she views Xena as an essentially male notion of female courage in drag—of the bustier and buskin variety.

“Rather than seeing strength and courage as part of the gentle fabric and soul of any woman, such images depict courage as unusual and atypical, and usually with masculine bravado,” write the Denver author in “Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every woman” (Bona Dea Publishing, \$18.95).

Walston is interested in a kinder, gentler version of courage—one that better jibes with the feminine nature. “I wrote this book to help women understand what courage really is, why society rarely recognizes women as courageous, and why such recognition is vital to knowing ourselves,” she writes.

The theme has struck a chord. Since arriving on local bookstore shelves six weeks ago, her book has been a strong seller; the two Tattered Cover Book Stores have moved more than 200 copies.

Walston, a consultant and executive coach who designs and delivers interpersonal skill programs, has more than a passion acquaintance with courage. A devout Catholic who found herself pregnant and unwed at 20, she elected to carry the pregnancy to term and give up her baby for adoption. Years later, she was left in a strange city without friends, family, or job after a painful breakup with the man she’d followed to Colorado as a preamble to marriage.

“It takes courage to have faith when hope seems gone, and that was my situation,” Walston recalls. “How was I going to remain strong and determined to face this horrible setback in my life?”

It was a bleak time, but one that reminded Walston how she had repeatedly tapped her own courage to re-invent herself during difficult passages. “I recognized the power of that and proceeded on,” she recalls. “The outcome of that was the book. If I die tomorrow, I’ve done what I was supposed to do.”

Walston’s research included surveying nearly 700 women who attended her training seminars and women’s business meetings; only 71 selected “courageous” from a list of 36 adjectives they were offered to describe themselves. Over a period of three years, the author interviewed 50 of them, hoping their stories would help other women discover or reclaim their own courage. She also identified 12 behaviors that

embody courage and a three-step process to help women integrate courage into their own lives.

Common to women

“All women have had debilitating experiences that compel self-examination and re-invention,” she explains. “Many emotional, physical and psychological crises are common to women cross-culturally: fear, loss, illness, abuse, betrayal, and low self-esteem.”

Women often respond courageously to such difficulties, she says, but their bravery is rarely recognized by a culture that defines courage as facing down danger—typically the province of men.

“Society and women themselves underappreciate courage in women,” she says. “My book... is a celebration of the unsung courage in the everyday woman.”

Walston explains the word’s roots: the French *courage*, which means heart and spirit. That earlier definition is broader than the contemporary, encompassing mental and moral strength to take risks and to preserve through emotional difficulty or simply a dark night of the soul. Seen from this perspective, women’s bravery often forms the heart and spirit of relationships, though it’s rarely viewed that way.

“Men are socialized in a way that, for them, courage is something to do with keeping autonomy and being strong and in charge, expressing one’s position clearly,” says Myra Bookman, a professor of language and psychology at the University of Colorado—Denver. Bookman studies under Harvard professor Carol Gilligan, whose pioneering research illuminated how men and women frame and resolve moral problems differently.

“Because women’s idea of courage is sometimes not the same, they may be construed as less forthright, autonomous, independent,” Bookman says.

New definition

Women may not feel good about the often mundane responsibilities that occupy their day-to-day lives, says Denver therapist Jane Bilett, though they’re hugely important. “The stay-at-home moms who do homework with the kids, gets them places—they tend to undervalue what they do,” she says. “But using Sandra’s definition, it’s easy to see this as courage.

“She is coming up with ways that women behave with heart and spirit, and has defined them as courageous.”

“Courage is the forgotten virtue because women do not recognize their everyday actions as significant,” Walston writes. “If EveryWoman identified the acts she performs every day as courageous, she would be able to use that same courage to transform her life and accomplish her heart’s desire.”

Revising the narrative

Clinical psychologists call that “restorying”: revising the narrative you tell about the truth of your life. “If you start to tell the stories a little differently...it may allow you to see them in a more positive way,” Bookman says.

And that can lead to a better future.

“There’s a Chinese fortune that says if you want to change your life, change what you think,” Bilett says. “Language is extremely important.”

Courage is an empowering concept, she says. “From both a therapeutic and a woman’s consciousness perspective, one of the serendipitous effects of Walston’s interpretation is that maybe women will think, ‘Hey, I am courageous.’ ”

“It’s important for women to expand their definition of courage to include all acts that require inner strength,” Walston says. “What I found is that women reveal those circumstances in their life and rename them as courage, we begin to build a reservoir, an energy we can draw upon and use.”