



Be strong and of good courage

James E. Read

After September 11th, what does one dare to say?

So much has been said by so many commentators already, what could I add that would be new or helpful?

And yet, to go without saying anything would seem to be a greater failure for a column space that is supposed to be devoted to values, to questions of right and wrong, to ethics.

I have found myself imagining what it must have been like for people trapped in the staircases of the World Trade Center as the tower started to crumble. What would have crossed their minds? Would they have been filled with terror or calm? Suppose I had been there...

Suppose I had been an NYC firefighter. Would my sense of duty to try to save others have been so clear that I would have dismissed any thought of danger to myself?

Or suppose I had been aboard United Airlines Flight 93. Would I have been with Todd Beamer when he said, "OK, let's roll."? I do truly hope so. Courage has not been my long suit, but reading accounts of what Todd and a few of his fellow passengers did makes me want it. There's no question that such courage is a moral virtue that no one in this chaotic, sin-wracked world can do without.

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What we know through Lisa Jefferson, the GTE Airfone operator who talked to Beamer for 13 awful minutes, is that he remained calm and strong. He had started the morning bound for San Francisco to meet with business colleagues there and found himself trapped on a hijacked plane instead. The pilot and co-pilot had been injured or killed and replaced at the plane's controls by others he did not know, determined to do he did not know what.

"We're going down, we're going down," he said to the Airfone operator about nine minutes into the call and fifteen minutes before the plane actually crashed in Pennsylvania. "We're coming back up. No, we're turning around. I believe we're going back north. At this point I don't know where we're going."

Confused and disoriented at one level, Beamer was not at all confused at another level. He asked Jefferson to call his wife if he died, and then asked her to recite the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm with him. I can barely imagine it, but at the moment of maximum crisis, Beamer is praying, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies" and "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

What kind of a man thinks of forgiving his enemies while he is readying himself to storm the cockpit where they sit in hateful control? An incredibly Christian man, I suggest. The kind of man I might hope to be if ever such action is demanded of me.

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It's the goal, not the strength of will or fearlessness, that made the difference between Todd Beamer and the hijackers. I suspect that they were at least as resolved as Beamer ever was. And if interviews with would-be suicide bombers now in custody are any indication, they were calmer than he—those who drove the planes into the WTC towers were not trembling at the controls. But what they did was evil, and what Beamer and his mates did was good. Did it take courage to hijack the planes? If so, then courage is not always a virtue. What is virtuous, what ethics demands, is courage that is in service of the right cause.

Professor Robert C. Roberts of Wheaton College says, "The virtues of will-power become morally good only if enlisted in the service of the moral and spiritual life—used in the interest of holiness, love, justice and obedience to God. The courageous Christian, faced with danger of persecution and even death, will manage his or her justified fear of these things by reminding himself or herself who he or she is—a child of God, a recipient of God's unspeakable grace—and by considering the danger of losing his or her life in the larger context of the losses and gains associated with unfaithfulness or faithfulness."

President Bush has said we need resolve. He has said we need to confront fear. He's absolutely right. The terrorists of the world must not win by turning us into cowards. Neither must we allow them win by letting ourselves become unthinkingly angry, ready to strike out in pure vengeance, not caring who gets killed along the way. It is **moral** courage that the times call for. Strength of will must be harnessed to the right goals. Todd Beamer

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is a hero, not because of those he killed, but because of the innocent lives he saved even in his own death.

If the September 11th horror has shown us anything it ought to have shown us that it matters immensely which God we follow. The God we know in Jesus couples courage with faith, and faith with justice, and justice with love: “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:13).

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