

12@12
The Bedrock of Daring Greatly
April 30, 2015

Just a little more than a year after the completion of his second term, President Roosevelt's travels had him pass through Paris. There he delivered a speech in the Grand Amphitheater at the University of Paris. It is a speech that is worthy of complete review,¹ but I want to share with you today perhaps the most remembered words he spoke on that day in 1910.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again . . . who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

I wonder what your internal response is to words like this. I am compelled to think that many of you find them rather inspirational. In fact, that is why I think these are the most remembered words he spoke that day. By them, Roosevelt calls us not to remain on the sidelines. He tells us that there is something far more valiant, more noble, more praiseworthy, and more life-giving about entering into the arena than remaining out of the fray as a quiet, timid, and often critical soul.

Daring greatly. Don't those words do something to you? I think there is something in us all that wants to dare greatly. We want to be brave enough to start a new business or ask our boss for a promotion. We want to have the fortitude to express a new idea that may be shot down, or not even work. We want to have the courage to stand up against voices that have long berated us. We want to dare greatly enough to ask the one we love to spend the rest of his or her life with us. We want to boldly stand up against the evil and suffering in the world. We want to try something new, dance with joy, cry out in pain,

or call others into the battle. In so many ways, we want to dare greatly. We want to be in the arena.

So what is it that keep us from being people who enter the arena, who dare greatly? This has largely been the work of sociologist Brené Brown, a professor of the University of Houston. Have you heard of her? She has written a book that went to number one on the New York Times bestseller list. A short speech she gave a couple of years back in Houston has nearly twenty million views. She has been asked to address institutions as varied as Westpoint, the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation, and Dell computers. What is it that she studies and what does she speak about? She speaks of how our fear of shame keeps us from daring greatly. Her research suggests that the foundation of daring greatly is not the trait of courage, if there is such a thing, nor the presence of some dominant personality, rather daring greatly is tied to a willingness to no longer attach our worth to accomplishments and achievements, and thus be shame-resilient. Let me say that again. Dr. Brown's research has revealed that those who are able to consistently dare greatly in their lives, to enter arenas where others fear to tread (whether it be professional or personal, public or private), are those who are willing to divorce their personal worth and dignity from their accomplishments and thus not be trapped by the forces of shame. Along these lines, she writes this:

When our self-worth is not on the line, we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts. From my research with families, schools, and organizations, it's clear that shame resilient cultures, nurture folks who are much more open to soliciting, accepting, and incorporating feedback. These cultures also nurture engaged, tenacious people who expect to have to try again and again to get it right—people who are much more willing to get innovative and creative in their efforts.²

Peter Sheahan, founder and CEO of ChangeLabs, a firm that consults on large-scale behavioral change projects for clients such as Apple, IBM, Google, Goldman Sachs, and Hilton Hotels, adds a similar voice:

The secret killer of innovation is shame. You can't measure it, but it is there. Every time someone holds back on a new idea, fails to give their manager much needed feedback, and is afraid to speak up in

front of a client you can be sure that shame played apart. That deep fear that we have of being wrong, of being belittled and of feeling less than, is what stops us taking the very risks required to move our companies forward.³

I have to guess you have felt that fear of being wrong or “less than” on many occasions. You did not speak up at a meeting when you had an idea, you didn’t go to a party because you feared you wouldn’t be dressed right. You did not go for that job that sounded really exciting because it seemed too out of your league. You did not stand up for what you knew was right because you knew your stance would not be popular. I have certainly known that feeling. In fact, I think I feel it every week. There are times I don’t say things or don’t approach people because I am afraid of sounding or looking stupid, of being tagged as uncaring or narrow-minded or just plain incompetent. Obviously, I am not fully bound by this fear. I get into the arena each week at 12@12 and in other venues, but I do not do so in the absence of a struggle to untie my worth from the success of my efforts but in the midst of that struggle. And it seems to me that if we want to dare greatly, then this is what we must strive do—we must fight the battle to divorce self-worth from performance.

Francis Su is a distinguished professor at Harvey Mudd University, probably one of the top five undergraduate math universities in the country. He received a national teaching award in 2013, and is the president of the prestigious Mathematical Association of America. When receiving his award for excellence in teaching, he spoke about the biggest life lesson he had ever learned, and the one he has had to learn over and over again. He said this lesson has changed the way he related with people. It reshaped his academic life. And it continually renovates the way he approach his students. The lesson is this: *Your accomplishments are not what make you a worthy human being.*

He went on to state that making such a statement might sound easy for him, especially after having some measure of academic ‘success’ and winning the teaching award. But then he told his story. He said that twenty years previously, he was a struggling grad student, seeking validation for his mathematical talent but flailing in his research. His Ph.D. advisor told him: “You don’t have what it takes to be a successful mathematician.” This is what he said of that moment:

It was my lowest point. Weak and weary, with my identity and my pride stripped away and my PhD nearly out of reach, I realized then that my identity and self-worth could NOT rest on whether I succeeded or failed to get my PhD. So *IF* I were to continue in mathematics, I could not do it for any acclaim that I might receive or for the trappings of what the academic world would call success. I should only do it because math is beautiful, and I feel drawn to it. In my quiet moments, with no one watching, I still found math fun to think about. So I was convinced it was my calling, despite the hurtful thing my advisor had said.⁴

Francis Su could have quit at this moment. Had he continued to tie his worth to success, he would have found something other than math to succeed in. But rather than count himself a failure and quit, he chose to dare greatly. He entered back into the arena, something that he could only do when he divorced his worth from his success, and tie it instead to his worthiness in the eyes of God who made him in His image.

Theodore Roosevelt said that the credit belongs not to the one who ultimately succeeds, but to the one who is willing to enter the arena. Brené Brown says that those who are mostly likely to enter the arena are those who divorce their worth from their achievements. And Francis Su discovered for himself the bedrock of daring greatly – basing his worth in the fact he has been made in the image of God.

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, “[Citizenship in the Republic](#),” address delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910.

² Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love and Lead* (Gotham, 2012), 64. By “shame-resilient,” Brown means cultures where dignity and worth are not tied to performance/achievement.

³ Ibid, 65.

⁴ Francis Edward Su, “[The Lesson of Grace in Teaching: From Weakness to Wholeness, The Struggle and the Hope](#),” MAA Haimo Teaching Award Lecture Joint Math Meetings, January 11, 2013 January 11, 2013. See also Francis Su’s [opening marks](#) at a public forum held at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, February 12, 2015.