

“THE COURAGE TO BE IMPERFECT”

From a speech by Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D.

I have chosen today only one aspect of psychological importance to present to you for your thought and consideration; the subject of “The Courage to be Imperfect.” In this one subject and topic it seems that a number of basic problems facing us come to the fore. In this subject and topic we deal with our culture; we deal with the need for a re-orientation in a changing culture; we deal with the basic problems of education; and, finally, we have here an area where we may even learn eventually to deal more effectively with ourselves.

We can well see that perfectionism is rampant today. A great many people try so hard to do right and to be right. Only a few psychiatrists are perhaps catching on to the implications of such a desire which has highly depreciated our fellow men, our society. So it may perhaps be presumptuous to ask what right do we have to interfere with the peoples’ desire to be right and to do right and to become perfect. In a certain way we may even consider the term and the notion of God as the ideal of perfection. The question of justice is intrinsically linked to the demand to have the right – the right distinguished from wrong – punishing for the wrong and perhaps praising the right. Moral standards are impossible without a clear distinction between right and wrong, and stimulating efforts toward the right.

Let us perhaps first state the one thing; right and wrong are judgments. In many cases they are valueless judgments. The right and wrong can be clearly defined only when we have absolutes – only in an absolutistic way can we say “that is right” and “this is wrong.” And there are many people who out of the tradition of our culture are still looking for this absolute. Truth is

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an absolute; something is either wrong or right, true or false. That is how we think. And perhaps that is the way we have to act.

What we don't realize so often is that all these absolutes are gone in a civilization which has become democratic. Absolutes are only possible if we have an authority which decides what is right and wrong. As far as we are concerned in our private lives we have become such an authority because each one of us determines for himself what is right and what is wrong; what is true and what is false. But when it comes to a generalized statement, then we run into troubles. What is right for the one may be wrong for the other one. What is good for one, what is beautiful for one, may be not so for another one. And as we are losing the authoritarian order in our society we lose more and more the authorities which establish absolute judgments. The entire world were even science has to make this adjustment – mechanistic science in the 17th and 18th centuries was still under the impression that one can easily distinguish between true and false; the truth must be found, despite of the warning of philosophers like Kant that the real thing can't be seen, that everything is approximation.

So we find today that right and wrong are also approximations. We can only come closer to the right and see clearer something which is not so right. But the absolute right does no longer exist. The same way as we can never again dream about finding the absolute truth. Every truth is approximate, for the time being; until a better truth is found.

I have found many, many who try so hard to be good. But I have failed yet to see that they have done so for the welfare of others. What I find behind these people who try to be so good is a concern with their own prestige. They are good for the benefit of their own self-

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elevation. Anybody who is really concerned with the welfare of others won't have any time or interest to become concerned with the question of how good he is.

To explain a little bit further I might perhaps present to you two ways of movement on the social scene; two ways of working, of applying oneself. We can distinguish them as the horizontal plane and the vertical plane. What do I mean by that? Some people entirely and others in certain areas move on the horizontal plane. That means that whatever they do they move toward others; they want to do something for others, they are interested in others-- they merely function. That is clearly distinguishable from another motivation by which people move on the vertical plane. Whatever they are doing, they are doing it because they want to be higher, they want to be better.

As a matter of fact, improvement and contributions, can be done in either way: there are people who do something well because they enjoy doing it; and others who can do something well because they are glad to prove how good they are. Even human progress probably depends just as well on the contributions of those who move on the horizontal and on the vertical plane. Many have done tremendous benefit to mankind actually motivated only by the question of proving how good they are – looking for their own superiority. And others have done a great deal of good – as we call it, in an unselfish way – without consideration of what they may get out of it.

And yet there is a fundamental difference in the way things are accomplished, whether you move on the horizontal or the vertical plane. When you move on the vertical plane you go up; you increase your knowledge, you increase your status, your respect, your prestige – perhaps even your money. But at the same time nobody who moves on the vertical plane is never only

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moving up. He is constantly moving up and down, up and down. One day when he does something good, he moves a few notches up; next moment when he makes some mistake he moves back down again. Up and down, up and down. That is exactly the plane on which most of our contemporaries move today. The consequences are obvious. A person who moves on the vertical plane can never be sure that he is high enough, never be sure the next morning that he is not coming down again. Therefore he has to live with tension and fears and anxieties. He is constantly vulnerable. As soon as something doesn't go well, down he goes – if not in the opinion of others, then in his own.

Quite different is the movement on the horizontal plane. The person who moves on the horizontal plane is constantly moving ahead in the direction he wants to move. He doesn't move up but he moves ahead. When something goes wrong, he considers what's going on, tries to find a way around, tries to remedy it. He is merely motivated by interest. If his motivation is very strong, he may even have enthusiasm. But he doesn't think about his own self-evaluation; he is interested in functioning instead of being concerned with his own status or prestige.

And so we can see how on the one side, on the horizontal plane we have the desire to be useful. On the vertical plane we have the desire for self-evaluation with the constant fear of making mistakes. And yet, most people today, stimulated by our general social values of social competition, are entirely devoting themselves to the problem of their own value and self-elevation – never sure that they are good enough, never quite sure that they will measure up; even though in the eyes of their fellow man they may be highly successful.

Now that points us, then, to a crucial question for those who are so concerned with self-elevation. The crucial question is the problem of mistakes – making mistakes.

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Perhaps we first have to state a little bit clearer why people became concerned – badly concerned – with the danger of making a mistake. We can perhaps refer first to our tradition, to our cultural tradition. IN an autocratic society, making a mistake is unpardonable, intolerable. The king, the master, never makes a mistake because he has the right to do as he darn well pleases. And there is nobody who can tell him he has done something wrong except at the danger of losing his head. Mistakes are only possible to be made by subordinates. The only one who decides whether a mistake is made is the boss.

Making a mistake means thereby nonconformity with the demands: “As long as you do as I tell you there is no mistake possible because I am right. I say so. Making a mistake therefore means that you don’t do what I tell you. And I won’t stand for that. If you dare to do something wrong – that means different from what I tell you – you can count on the worst possible punishment. And in case you have any delusion that I might not be able to punish you, there will be somebody higher than me who will see to it that you will be punished. A mistake is a deadly sin. Making a mistake incurs the worst possible fate.” That is a typical and necessary authoritarian concept of cooperation: Cooperation means doing as I tell you.

It seems to me that our fear of making a mistake has a different meaning. It is an expression of our highly competitive way of living. Making a mistake becomes so dangerous not because of the punishment – of which we don’t think – but because of the lowering of our status, of the ridicule, of the humiliation, which it may incur: “If I do something wrong and you find that I am doing something wrong, then I am no good. And if I am no good, then I have no respect, I have no status. Then you might be better than me. Horrible thought.

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“I want to be better than you because I want to be superior.” But in our present era we haven’t so many other signs of superiority. Now the white man not longer can be so proud of his superiority because he is white; and the man because he is a man and looks down on women – we don’t let him do that anymore. And even the superiority of money is another question because we can lose it. The Great Depression has shown it to us.

There is only one area where we can still feel safely superior: When we are right. It is a new snobbishism of intellectuals: “I know more, therefore you are stupid and I am superior to you.” The superiority of the moralists: “I am better than you; therefore I am superior to you.” And it is in this competitive drive to accomplish a moral and intellectual superiority that making a mistake becomes so dangerous again: “If you find out that I am wrong, how can I look down on you? And if I can’t look down at you, you certainly can look down at me.”

That is how human relations of today are – in our community just as much as in our families; where brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, parents and children look down on each other for doing wrong and each one trying to prove so desperately that he is right and the other is wrong. Except, those who don’t care anymore can tell you, “You are right, you think, but I have the power to punish you; I will do what I want, and you can’t stop me.” But of course, while we feel defeated by a little child who is our boss who does what he pleases, we still have one thing left: At least we know we are right and he is wrong.

When you try to be cautious, when you use your judgment, you are not thinking about “I shouldn’t make this mistake;” you are merely trying to do what the situation would warrant. But anybody who is fascinated by the possibility of making a mistake is most liable to make one.

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Preoccupation with the danger of making a mistake leads you smack into it. The best way of avoiding a mistake is doing your part and don't think about the possibilities of making mistakes.

Actually, all these people who try so desperately to avoid mistakes are endangering themselves. The reason for that is two-fold. First, when you think about the mistake which you might make, you do to yourself the greatest harm by discouraging yourself. We know that discouragement is the best motivation for doing something wrong. In order to do something right, one has to have confidence---self-confidence. When you think about the mistake you might make you express your lack of faith in yourself, your lack of confidence in yourself. And, consequently, out of this discouragement we are more prone to make a mistake.

But there is another psychological mechanism that makes concern with mistakes so dangerous. We know today that everybody moves in accordance with his expectations. When you expect to do something, are really convinced you will do it, you are more strong to do it. You may not always do it because there may be other factors involved. But, as far as you are concerned, when you expect to behave in a certain way, you are most prone to behave in this way.

I don't know how many of you have had the experience when you learn to ride a bicycle or to ski. I learned both, and I had the experience in both. The first time I am alone on a bicycle in the middle of a street, completely empty except for one thing instead of going around left or right, but you will hit it. Because you expect to hit it. The same way when you are on skis and there is a tree here. Why should you just hit this on tree? But you do, the first time you are on skis, because that is what you expect from yourself in what you are doing. We are moving

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ourselves in line with what we anticipate and it is therefore anticipating the danger of mistake makes us more vulnerable.

The mistake presents you with a predicament. But if you are not discouraged, if you are willing and able to take and utilize your inner resources, the predicament is only stimulating you to better and more successful efforts. There is no sense in crying over spilled milk.

But most people who make mistakes feel guilty; they feel degraded, they lost respect for themselves, they lost belief in their own ability. And I have seen it time and again: the real damage was not done through the mistakes they made but through the guild feeling, discouragement, which they had afterwards. Then, they really messed it up for themselves. As long as we are so preoccupied with the fallacious assumption of the importance of mistakes, we can't take mistakes in our stride.

Now let's see what consequences these facts have on education and on living with oneself. It is my contention that our education today is very largely what I call mistake-centered. If you could enumerate the various actions of a teacher in a class and could enumerate for every hour and every day what she is doing with the children, you would be surprised how many of her actions are directly dealing with mistakes which children have made. As if we were obliged to primarily correct or prevent mistakes.

I fear that in the majority of tests given to students the final mark does not depend on how many brilliant things he said and did, but how many mistakes he made. And if he made a mistake he can't get a hundred regardless of how much he has contributed on other parts of the examination. Mistakes determine the value. In this way we unwittingly add to the already tremendous discouragement of our children.

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It seems to me that our children are exposed to a sequence of discouraging experiences, both at home and school. Everybody points out what they did do wrong and what they could do wrong. We impress them with their deficiencies, with their smallness, with their limitations; and at the same time try to drive them on to be much more than they can be. If what we want to institute in children is the need to accomplish something, a faith in themselves, and regard for their own strengths; then we have to minimize mistakes they are making and emphasize all the good things, not which they could do, but which they do do.

A teacher who is defeated by a child who is exceedingly ingenious in defeating her would not think of giving the child credit for the ingenuity and brains which he uses in defeating her. But that's exactly the only thing which might get the child to stop defeating her: If he could get some appreciation for what he is doing instead of being told, "You can't do it to me," when the teacher knows as well as the child that he can. But for every one child who really studies and grows and learns and applies himself, driven by this fear of "You are not good enough, not what you ought to be. You have to try so hard" – for every one of these children who succeeds, there are literally thousands who give up: "I can't be as good as Ma and Teacher want me to be. What's the sense of trying. I can't be as good and important as I want to be. I have to find other ways – and to switch to the useless side."

Most of our juvenile delinquents are the product of a perverted ambition instilled in them by well-meaning parents and teachers telling them how good they ought to be. Only that they preferred to be good in easier ways than by studying and applying themselves. If they smoke, drive hot-rods, indulge in sex, get in conflict with the police, break window and whatever have you; then they are heroic, then they are important. It's easier and much more gratifying because

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they really feel important – and, by golly, our fear gives them all the reason to feel important because they defeat us, society collectively, as they defeat their teachers and parents. And they are all over-ambitious, driven by their ideal of how important they ought to be and finding no other outlet except on the useless side, by misbehaving.

And so this mistaken idea of the importance of mistakes leads us to a mistaken concept of ourselves. We become overly impressed by everything that's wrong in us and around us. Because, if I am critical of myself, I naturally am going to be critical of the people around me. If I am sure that I am no good, I have at least to find that you are worse. That is what we are doing. Anyone who is critical of himself is always critical of others.

And so we have to learn to make peace as we are. Not, the way many say, “What are we after all? We are a speck of sand on the beaches of life; we are limited in time and space. We are so small and insignificant. How short is our life, how small and insignificant is our existence. How can we believe in our strength, in our power?”

When you stand before a huge waterfall, or see a huge snow-capped mountain, or are in a thunderstorm – most people are inclined to feel weak and awed, confronted with this majesty and power of nature. And very few people draw the only conclusion which in my mind would be correct: the realization that all of this power of the waterfall, this majesty of the mountain, this tremendous impressiveness of the thunderstorm are part of the same life which is in me. Very few people who stand in awe of this expression of nature stand in awe before themselves, admiring this tremendous power of their brain. This self-realization of what we are is missing because we are only slowly emerging from a traditional power of autocracy where the masses don't count and only the brains and only the emperor and the divine authority knew what was

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good for the people. We haven't freed ourselves yet from the slave mentality of an autocratic past.

How many things would be different in everyone's surroundings if we hadn't lived? How a good word may have encouraged some fellow and did something to him that he did it differently and better than he would have otherwise. And through him somebody else was saved. How much we contribute to each other, how powerful we each are – and don't know it. And that is the reason then why we can't be satisfied with ourselves and look to elevate ourselves – afraid of the mistakes which would ruin us – and try desperately to gain the superiority over others. So perfection, therefore, is by no means a necessity; it is even impossible.

There are people who are always so afraid of doing wrong because they don't see their value; remain eternal students because only in school one can tell them what is right, and they know how to get good grades. But in life you can't do that. All the people who are afraid of making mistakes, who want by all means to be right, can't function at all. But there is only one condition on which you can be sure you are right when you try to do something; to do right. There is one condition alone which would permit you to be relatively sure whether you are right or wrong. That is afterwards. When you do something you never can be sure – you only see if it is right by how it turns out. Anybody who has to be right can't move much, can't make any decision, because we can never be sure that we are right. To be right is a false premise and it usually leads to the misuse of this right. Have you any idea how many people are torturing their friends and their families because they have to be right – and unfortunately they are? There is nothing worse than the person who always has the right argument. There is nothing worse than a person who always is right morally. And he shows it.

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We are dealing in American with a horrible danger to which we have to call attention. Do you know that our American women are becoming a general universal threat? Merely because they try so hard to be right? Go into any average classroom and look at all these bright, intelligent students – who are girls. And all the toughs who don't want to come to school and don't want to study. Look at all these mothers who try so desperately to be good and their husbands and their children don't have any chance.

This right morally and right logically is very often an offense to human relationships. In order to be right you sacrifice kindness, patience; if you want, tolerance. No, out of this desire for rightness we don't get peace, we don't get cooperation; we merely end up by trying to give the others the idea of how good we are when we can't even fool ourselves. No, to be human does not mean to be right, does not mean to be perfect. To be human means to be useful, to make contributions, not for oneself, but others. To take what there is and make the best out of it. It requires faith in oneself and faith and respect for others. But that has a prerequisite; that we can't be overly concerned with their shortcomings, we have no respect, neither for ourselves nor for others.

We have to learn the art, and to realize that we are good enough as we are 0 because we never will be better, regardless of how much more we may know, how much more skill we may acquire, how much status or money or what-have-you. If we can't make peace with ourselves as we are, we never will be able to make peace with ourselves. And this requires the courage to be imperfect; requires the realization that I am no angel, that I am not superhuman, that I make mistakes, that I have faults; but I am pretty good because I don't have to be better than the others. Which is a tremendous belief. If you accept just being yourself, the devil of vanity, the

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golden calf of my superiority vanish. If we learn to function, to do our best regardless of what it is; out of the enjoyment of the functioning we can grow just as well, even better than if we would drive ourselves to be perfect – which we can't be.

We have to learn to live with ourselves and the relationship of natural limitations and the full awareness of our own strengths.

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