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Raising Courageous Kids – An Author Interview

By Lisa M. Hendey

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Author Interview

Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism

By Charles Smith

In the newly released book Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism (Sorin Books, July 2004, paperback, 224 pages), author Charles Smith offers parents a treasure chest of resources for recognizing and nurturing the qualities of courage and heroism within their children. Looking at developmental stages between birth and adolescence, Raising Courageous Kids provides parents with practical, realistic guidelines for arming children to meet challenges with courage. As an added source of inspiration, Raising Courageous Kids features numerous "Mighty Heart" stories of children who have risen to the level of real-life heroes through tremendous acts of courage. I am happy to share the following interview with author Charles Smith and strongly recommend that parents, teachers, grandparents and anyone playing a role in the raising of a child or young teen read this book and begin to implement its principles.

LH: Best wishes on the recent publication of your sixth book, Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism and thank you for participating in this Book Spotlight interview. In the acknowledgments for this book, you express appreciation to your own family for their support. To begin, could you share with our readers a little bit about your own background, family, and career as an educator?

CD: My father died in the Army Air Corps shortly after WWII when I was thirteen months old. My mother and I lived for two years with her parents, my wonderful grandparents. My grandfather was a storyteller, writer, and radio producer. I still find his imagination and creativity an inspiration. My mother remarried, and I spent the rest of my childhood in Detroit where I attended St. Suzanne grade school and Catholic Central High. I graduated from the University of Dayton with a degree in psychology. I met my wife Betsy at Barney Children's Medical Center in Dayton where I worked as a play therapist with severely and chronically ill children. After I graduated from Purdue with a Ph.D. in child development I joined the faculty at Texas Tech University where I taught preschool and eventually served as Director

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of their Child Development Center. For the last 26 years, I have been a parent educator with the Kansas State Research and Extension Service and a professor in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University. My wife, son, and daughter, each in their own way, have inspired me by their courage.

LH: You write that the events of September 11, 2001 prompted the writing of this book. Why do you feel that the message of *Raising Courageous Kids* is so important at this point in time? What is the main message you hope readers would take away from the book?

CS: I began working on *Raising Courageous Kids* the day after 9–11. I was emotionally overwhelmed by the courage demonstrated that day. I had to understand why the firefighters went up the steps of the WTC while thousands of office workers rushed to safety. How could the passengers on United Flight

93 rise up against their captors? Why did a young office worker lead many to safety from high in the WTC only to return to rescue more, eventually perishing in the collapse? I knew that these amazing acts of courage were not spontaneous acts of combustion. They were part of a tapestry of a person's life composed of threads that could be followed far back into time to where they originated during childhood.

We live in an age that requires remaining steadfast in the face of danger and fear. My hope is that this book will increase public discourse about the meaning of true heroism and the origins of courage. I hope the book inspires parents to recognize and nurture the beginnings of courage in their children.

LH: While the book is not a "how to" or program per se, you offer eight "Steps" for courage development from the birth of a child through early adolescence. Could you briefly describe these steps?

CS: Courage begins during infancy and early childhood with the emergence of willpower. A baby pushes herself from the mattress to look around. A toddler gets up after falling down. A two-year-old tells his dad, "NO! ME NOT go bed!" A wise parent recognizes the precious spark of willpower even while insisting that it's the child's bedtime. Children need parents who convey the strength of their restrictions.

The presence of love in a young child's life builds caring. Our devotion invites children to care about other people. To reach out to others in their time of need, children have to have the ability to care. Research on Carnegie Hero Medal recipients and rescuers of Jews during WWII reveals a common conviction in the value of human life.

During the preschool years, children begin to develop the ability to recognize and evaluate danger, which I call vigilance. Brain structures responsible for understanding context and the assessment of risk grow stronger.

Children also learn to regulate and moderate their fear arousal through composure. Imagine a preschooler climbing up a slide for the first time or a first grader jumping off a diving board. These little victories over fear are stepping stones to greater accomplishments as children grow older. Composure

reduces the danger of panic, which only increases risk.

During late preschool and the early elementary years, children can learn empathy, which involves both awareness of how the lives of others differ from their own and compassion toward their suffering. Caring and empathy both work together to contribute to valor.

Children can also begin to form a moral foundation that builds integrity. Their internal code is more like a gyroscope that points to true north than a wind vane that simply points to where the wind blows.

Accepting accountability for the consequences of one's choices demonstrates a commitment to justice and the capacity for honor. Children can learn that they make choices that have an effect on others.

The final step is the capacity for valor, the ability to elevate courage by a noble purpose. A young teen may intervene when someone is being attacked or facing some other danger. They do not simply stand back passively, but neither do they act recklessly without regard for their own safety or that of others.

Each of these eight steps combine in movement more like a dance over time than walking up a flight of stair steps. The eight steps build on each other and continue to grow throughout childhood.

LH: I loved and was tremendously inspired by the "Mighty Heart" profiles shared in the book. Can you say a few words about the origin of these stories and their role in the book?

CS: First, I think it's terribly important to emphasize that there are two very different forms of courage. One form of courage is displayed in emergency situations where quick thinking and rapid risk management is important. The Mighty Heart stories illustrate this form of courage. The other form of courage is more persistent and enduring in situations where risk and danger continue over time. A child with cystic fibrosis who faces the struggle of difficult physical therapy and manages the fear and worry that accompanies the constant danger to her life is an example of persistent courage. Enduring or persistent courage is just as noble as the more dramatic and newsworthy emergency forms of courage. The great risk in emergency circumstances is panic. The great danger in persistent circumstances is depression.

Most of the Mighty Hearts described in Raising Courageous Kids are young recipients of the Carnegie Hero Medal. They serve as examples of the incredible capacity for courage and heroism that can reside in young people under the age of eighteen. The challenge all of us face, regardless of age, is to combine courage with the capacity for vigilance. Only tragedy can result, for example, when someone who does not know how to swim jumps into a raging river to rescue a drowning person. I use the phrase, "Be smart with your heart." In other words, don't run away when someone needs help or when you might be facing danger. But do the right thing in a smart way.

LH: What role do you feel faith plays in the raising of courageous children?

CS: When a child or adult is afraid, the choice to boldly go forward to do the right thing is made possible by hope. Even the passengers on United Flight 93 acted in hope to stop the horror of what the

terrorists intended, if not to save their own lives. The child who pushes herself down the slide or jumps off the diving board for the first time is acting in faith. Every act of courage is a risk. The outcome is in doubt. True faith and trust in God can give strength to weak knees. The test of fear is also a test of faith. Are we willing to do the right thing, the smart thing, and place ourselves in the hands of God? The stories of sacrifice and nobility demonstrated by Jesus and the saints were an important part of my Catholic upbringing.

LH: For parents with older children (ten to fourteen), is it too late to begin emphasizing the importance of facing challenges with courage?

CS: I think there are two parts to your question. First, what action should we take with older children and second, what can we expect to accomplish.

I'll start with the second question. A child who has never experienced the devotion of a loving adult is at risk for becoming a sociopath—a person who is incapable of feeling guilt and shame and has no conscience. This outcome is extremely difficult to change because early experience has had profoundly negative effects on brain physiology. Other children may have experienced this love, but were never encouraged to stand up for themselves and face fear. A child who has had a lifetime of running away out of fear is going to have a very difficult time with finding the heart to face and manage risk during the teen years. Is it possible to make a difference with this child? Yes. And that brings me to the second question.

Regardless of the probability of being successful, we should ask ourselves, "What is the noblest thing to do?" Would that be to give up? To retreat from the challenge? No. We have to assume that anything reasonable is possible. We don't know what lies within the inner core of this young man or woman that could be touched by our efforts. The word "inspire" comes from the Latin for "breathing life into." We have to believe that we can inspire any child, while at the same time accepting the difficulty of the task. This is our own test of courage, to hold on to hope and do the right thing even when the risk of failure is high.

LH: Are there additional resources you could recommend that might assist parents in fostering heroism in their children?

CS: I would like to invite your readers to visit my new website at:

<http://www.raisingcourageouskids.com>

There are many resources for them to examine at the site including several informative PDF files. They can also view my speaking/travel schedule, read about the book, and send their comments to me.

Teachers of 11–13–year–old children might be interested in the Everyday Hero curriculum guide I created at

<http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/programs/hero/>

Raising Courageous Kids has several outstanding references that I think parents and teachers might enjoy reading.

LH: Thank you again for your time and for this wonderful book, Raising Courageous Kids. Are there any closing thoughts you might wish to offer?

CS: Thanks for the kind words about the book and for the opportunity to visit with your readers. I would love to hear from them about any questions they might have about the website or the book.

Our greatest monuments to those who take risks and make sacrifices on behalf of others are not made of stone, steel, and glass. They are not found in parks, on city streets, or in public buildings. The greatest monument is an enduring shift in the human spirit, a transformation made possible by the caring of others.

For More information or to order Raising Courageous Kids visit
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1893732762/digitalcropper-20>

Lisa M. Hendey is a mother of two sons, webmaster of numerous web sites, including
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"EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RAISING KIDS..."

By Terry L. Sumerlin

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"EVERYTHING I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RAISING KIDS..."

While it's not entirely true that "everything I need to know about raising kids I learned behind a barber chair," it is true that I've learned some things.

I was reminded of these things, after hearing a sad statement from a conscientious dad. He said that he and his son are now on different paths. I asked how old his son is. "Twelve," he answered. I thought of how close I am to Jon, our 22-year-old son, and how it would hurt me to think we were "on different paths" when he was twelve.

But, I also thought of the many kids who come through our doors and of the many parents who seem to be getting it right. Thus, I've developed sort of a "Barber-osophy for Raising Good Kids." Here are a few such "Barber-osophies":

1. Be in charge. It doesn't seem possible that a 4-year-old child can control a 40-year-old parent. However, I've seen it happen, and it makes you wonder who is the child and who is the parent. It also makes you wonder if child abuse doesn't sometimes take the form of a parent who won't take charge.

2. Reduce the choices. While this is relative, depending on the age of the child, it seems that children who always have a choice regarding such things as treats and privileges tend to be ungrateful, unhappy and undisciplined. Sometimes it might be more appropriate if the choices are reduced to something I read on a friend's refrigerator: "This ain't Burger King. You take it my way or you don't get it at all."

3. Be careful about showcasing the child. There are far too many kids who receive no positive attention from anyone. There seems to be a growing number of parents, however, who make every interaction between their child and themselves a public event, a look-at-me-and/or-my-child situation. Thus, the child begins to think that the world revolves around him (her).

4. Expect the best. Parents who expect the first haircut to be "a piece of cake" are often rewarded. Similarly, by our words and actions we must always let our kids know we believe in them and expect the best from them. It propels them toward success.

BARBER-OSOPHY: Though there are no perfect parents or perfect children, it's easy to spot the parents who are genuinely trying to get it right.

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Terry L. Sumerlin, known as the Barber-osopher, is the author of "Barber-osophy," is a columnist for the San Antonio Business Journal and speaks nationally as a humorist/motivational speaker.



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