



Photo: Wendy Lees

## Professional success, private failure?

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If you're a certified Moral Courage Mentor, you're responsible for role-modeling healthy ways to communicate about contentious issues. And not just in public. In private, too.

But even I don't meet that expectation every day. In fact, I've often asked myself, "Do I have a shred of cred teaching others about communicating across divides when I couldn't do it in my own marriage?"



Photo: Wendy Lees

Let me explain.

I once sneered at my wife, “You think you can bulldoze anybody. Nobody calls you on your behavior, so you feel entitled to keep pushing and threatening and intimidating. Well, I see through you.”

This happened several days after she demanded a divorce. On the night she broke the news to me, I told her that I hoped we’d be “the friends in dissolution that we couldn’t be in marriage.” Yet here I stood, leaning in, jabbing my finger, loathe to let her get away with old patterns that needed to be exposed.

Or, at least, that my ego needed to expose.

As a teacher of Moral Courage, I’m constantly struggling with two impulses: to speak truth to power and to do so in ways that reconcile divides rather than widen them. Both have to happen for justice to prevail. But damn, does it ever feel good to do one without the other — to flip the bird without caring about reconciliation.



Photo: Wendy Lees

That’s precisely what I was feeling at this moment: righteous. After two weeks balled up in my bed, mourning the loss of several dreams at once, I’d earned this outburst. And God knows, she deserved it.

But my dopamine hit came and went. She left the room and I had nothing to show for my “bravery.” After all, my lecture did nothing to change her behavior. Quite the opposite: It made her more defensive, less inclined to see where she erred in our relationship, and extra eager to punish me as she got the hell out of this excuse for a marriage.

Mere seconds after she closed the door behind her, my conscience caught up to my ego, and then overtook it. “Are you a fraud?” I asked myself. “I mean, you educate people that when we speak truth to power, we should remember that the most pervasive power is the human ego. You ask them to develop a little humility. Where’s your humility?”

My head pounded. If I didn’t stop thinking, I’d spiral. I popped a sleeping pill, crawled back into bed, and closed my eyes to one final thought for the day: “Be like water,” the martial arts master and philosopher Bruce Lee advised. Roll with the current. Go where it takes you. Don’t merely wish away the obstacles in your path. Wash over them.

Because the only way around is through.



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The next day, allowing myself the vulnerability that comes from feeling deeply, I sought the help of friends and family.

“Look,” my brother-in-law said, “as a mere mortal, you’re going to slip up. Sometimes, your ego will get the better of you. That’s just a fact of life. But here’s another fact: You’re wrestling with your mistake. You’re not complacent about it. That’s why you’ve got integrity teaching people to become courageous.”

You’re not complacent. Translation: To be worthy of trust, I don’t have to be perfect. I have to be persistent. Effort equals sincerity.

I buy it. Here’s why.

The world crawls with complainers. I’ve learned that the way to weed out the mere performers from the genuine contributors is to ask them to do something.

Which doesn’t mean that those who do will do it right, or even well. We’ll forever be stumbling toward our better angels because integrity is hard. In that reality lies a gift to me: The ego-fueled fumble with my wife serves as a stark reminder to empathize with humanity at its most annoying.

When I'm inclined to throw my hands up in the air, I have to remind myself that fallibility (mine as much as everyone else's) is the human condition. I can feel irritated, even outraged, and still understand that we humans are works in progress. Integrity means persistently evolving in how we relate to one another.



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A week later, I texted my wife an invitation. "Want to see a movie with me tonight?" She suggested we go the next night. "Want to get dinner somewhere beforehand?" I further proposed.

"Sure," she replied. "Why are you being so nice? Should I worry?!"

I texted my wife a question of my own. "Even though we weren't meant to be spouses, do we have to be enemies?"

I'll find out the answer when, or if, she speaks to me again. Mine isn't the only pain in play.

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**If you're a certified Moral Courage Mentor who'd like advice about living the skills that you're teaching, register for the bi-monthly "Ask MC Anything" event. If you're not a certified Moral Courage Mentor but want to become one, learn more at [moralcourage.org](https://moralcourage.org).**

