Where Do We Get Our Courage?

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, August 2017

By Rosalind Wiseman

*You don’t start a fight but if someone starts one with you, you finish it.*

My grandfather was the youngest of nine and the only child in his family that was born in the United States. And while he never said those exact words to me, the stories he shared about growing up in Pittsburgh were clear. You never back down.
You keep fighting no matter how tough the circumstances, no matter how small you are, or how large your opponent.

A few days ago I was preparing for a teacher training in Iowa when I saw the devastating events in Charlottesville. I watched as the 45th President betrayed all of us and what this country stands for. As I have found myself repeatedly in the last year, I was frozen. Waves of doubt washed over me and I wondered “Does my work make any difference?” Then, like the times before, I sighed and something in me, shook me out of my stupor and got me on my feet again.

I have often wondered why I get up and keep going. Is it because I am a mother, daughter, wife, sister, and neighbor? Is it because I work in education so I have the opportunity to contribute to the world in a meaningful way?

I keep going because to my core I believe the following:

- I believe our communities are based on a common belief that everyone’s dignity is an inalienable right.
- I believe we must be united to protect and treasure that inalienable right.
- I believe our purpose is to help our children critically and thoughtfully respond to the ideas and people around them.
- I believe in creating, valuing, and ensuring intellectually diverse environments so we can all learn new ways of looking at the world.
- I believe we must recognize the threat that stands before us and meet that threat with strength, purpose and courage.

But the fear, sadness and anxiety can feel so overwhelming. So what are the actions we can take? From my work around the country, here’s what I think is most important.

- We will not accept mockery. It doesn't matter that the President uses mockery as a default response. Just because someone in a position of power
abuses that power or is a poor role model, doesn’t give anyone else an excuse to do the same thing.

- We will reach towards each other and listen when we are angry and we will confront people who refuse to do the same.
- We will encourage dialogue where people can articulate and voice different opinions.
- We will assume people’s good intentions.
- We will not gloat over other people’s mistakes.
- We will hold other adults accountable when they demean another.
- When people gossip and trash another person, we will respond with, “That sounds really hard for that person. What can we do to help them?”
- We will admit when we make a mistake.
- We will apologize meaningfully—knowing that an apology is a gift that not everyone can unwrap right away.
- We will embrace the opportunity to have conversations and experiences that make us uncomfortable.
- We will commit an act of courage every day, no matter how small, to uphold the dignity of each and every one of us.

As a parent, what strikes me is the incredible balance so many of us have to find, squaring the seemingly trivial and mundane with the profound. Trivial: how to teach my 14 year-old son to be civil when I ask him to take in the groceries and not yell at him while I am trying to achieve this goal. Profound: talking to him about living in a world where people are driven by fear and hate.

As an educator, if you work with children, no matter what you teach, consider beginning your school year with the following:
I am your Math/ELA/History teacher but more important than any subject we cover is that every person here is treated with dignity and feels welcome in my class. That is my most important responsibility to each of you. And if you come to me with a problem, I will do everything I can to make it better. I may not know exactly how to fix it but I can be the bridge who gets you to the right person and I will be there with you every step of the way. But this class will be a place where people know that they belong.

We have to remember we are united in common purpose. We are building a defense against the hatred, anxiety, fear, self-righteousness and moral cowardice.

You don’t start a fight but if someone starts one with you, you finish it.

I didn’t start this fight but I will do everything I can do end it. My ancestors were Jewish immigrants from Poland and Germany. They did what so many families did and continue to do. They made better lives for their children. They were tough and stubborn. They faced evil with courage and determination and survived. My grandparents gave me the same qualities.

I just needed to remember where and who I came from. I am reminded and I will not stop. None of us can because what we are fighting for is too important.