



## Courage In The Small Things

*Today, I spot courage in the everyday lives of people like you and me*

**By Dennis Coyne**

**W**e lawyers like language. It is the currency of our trade. We listen to the stories of our clients, and retell those stories in the language of the law. In doing so, we use our legal training, our life experience and our imagination. Language is the glue that holds it all together.

For many of us, our love of language extends to a love of reading, in whatever genre we find most satisfying. For me, that's poetry.

Poetry has been described as a raid on the inarticulate. That's how I know poetry. For example, in the opening lines of her poem, "Courage," Anne Sexton observes:

It is in the small things we see it.  
The child's first step,  
as awesome as an earthquake.  
The first time you rode a bike,  
wallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart  
went on a journey all alone.

Until I first heard the opening lines of "Courage," I had always thought of courage in the context of a news account of a firefighter rescuing a child from a burning building, a passerby rescuing a woman from a mangled automobile, or the lifeguard saving the life of a swimmer caught in the undertow. I thought of courage in the lives of just a few people, doing things that merited mention on the evening news. I didn't think of courage as a quality of life, in the everyday lives of people like you and me.

But today, I spot courage in the everyday events in life. I see courage in lawyers who have been disrupted by the closing of their law firm, and now seek new employment. I see courage in those who have stepped-up to leadership positions, embarked on new ventures, decided to work part-time, or take a sabbatical. And I see courage in the lives of clients who confront aging, illness and death.

Is there a benefit to spot courage and identify it in the everyday lives of ordinary people like you and me? I think so.

Many of us would like to live life in some other way, to be able to author a new chapter, or take a new initiative in our lives, but we fear. We think we lack some critical skill or talent. For example, we see others as courageous, enough to make changes in their lives, but not ourselves. So we stay as we are.

How would you respond if I asked you: "Are you courageous?" If you don't think of yourself as having courage, perhaps you have not heeded Anne Sexton's observation that we see courage "in the small things."

In my work as a coach, my challenge is to spot courage in the lives of my clients so that they can see themselves as courageous. For example, Jennifer says that she works far too much of the time, and that

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she's worn-out by the demands of being a lawyer. People appreciate her and rely on her as the go-to person in her department. A resource for others, she always finds time for yet one more task. And not surprisingly, Jennifer is well compensated for working so hard. Yet as the years pass, Jennifer tires of the long work hours. She wants more of a life of her own. Being successful but unhappy is no longer good enough. But she doesn't know how to decline work. In fact, she describes herself as a gerbil, racing on an exercise wheel.

Yet one day, Jennifer mentions that she declined a request to do some work. There were others in the office capable of doing it, and she directed it to them. It wasn't easy for her to do that. In fact, it was hard. As she comments on this, Jennifer pays little attention to that modest event, and quickly turns to other topics.

I note the event for I have been waiting for Jennifer to break her relentless pattern of wasting herself with work. I challenge Jennifer to see the new behavior for what it is—an opening to a new role for her in her office. It took courage for her to redirect the work the first time, and it will take courage for her to do it the next time. But if Jennifer is able to see the courage in her actions, she might just be able to summon that courage again.

I am glad for the poets in the world who can provoke, perturb and inspire us to see what would otherwise remain hidden in the busy lives we live. I am especially grateful to Anne Sexton for helping us see courage in the small things we do. In doing that, we will be emboldened to live, day-by-day, more courageous lives.

Perhaps the closing lines of "Courage" will even prove true for us:

Later,  
when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
those you love will live in a fever of love,  
and you'll bargain with the calendar  
and at the last moment  
when death opens the back door  
you'll put on your carpet slippers  
and stride out.



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