

Week 50: The Courage to Fail

One night, several summers ago, as dusk descended and the shadows began to stretch across the local park district pool, my oldest son, Aidan, did his cycles on the high dive. Sometimes he's happy to do so quietly and anonymously. This time, he wanted us to watch (of course, what he really wanted was a little applause, and we were happy to oblige).

As he waited his turn in line, the little boy before him slowly climbed the rungs and timidly edged his way out to the end of the board. He stood there, looking down. His knees bent and then straightened. He put his arms out and then clutched them in, hugging himself. And then he scrambled back down the ladder and to the back of the line.

My heart ached for the little guy.

My son was up next. He jumped off and swam over to us, where we were clapping like he was Greg Louganis. I asked him about the little boy ahead of him, and he told me the kid was just too afraid to make his first jump off the high dive. I cringed and asked a question I already knew the answer to: "I hope the other kids were kind to him?" My son grimaced and shook his head slightly, "No, they weren't. They called him 'chicken' and 'baby.'"

Chicken.

Baby.

The shaming words of kids who are fighting for their own sense of worth, kids who have come to believe their worth exists *in comparison* to everyone else, kids who believe they look *better* if everyone else looks *bad*. I watch my children do it to each other—they compete for love and belonging, as if my love for them is a finite resource and only one of them can have it. I watch playground bravado—the "athletes" shame the "nerds" for their lack of physical prowess and the "nerds" shame the "athletes" for their poor scores on the spelling test. I watch as friends and foes and peers send the continuous message: you aren't good enough—I'm better than you, which makes *me* good enough.

Kids clutching at their own self-worth by slapping at everyone else's.

I'm a big kid now, and at my age, we don't call each other "chicken" or "baby." Yet the peer competition, while subtler, is still intense: murmurs about how this person parents and what job that person lost and who so-and-so spends time with and why Jack's beliefs are wrong and how frequently Jill posts to Facebook. Life feels a little bit like a minefield—at every step we risk stepping on someone else's landmine of shame. At every turn, the lie waits for us on the tongues of friends and foes and strangers: "You aren't good enough."

And it shuts us down.

We quit taking steps. We quit putting ourselves on the line, because it is scary and we think fear is a sure sign we're not up to the task. And so our words stay bottled up and our hopes are suffocated and we bide our time, just trying to get through the days and weeks and months and years without getting stung too badly...

On that beautiful summer evening as we threw on towels and headed home to the air conditioning, my son gave me an update: "Daddy, that boy got up on the board four more times tonight, but he never jumped. Every time when he came down, the kids made fun of him. The lifeguard finally told him he would have to wait and try again tomorrow." And then my son said something else that made my heart tremble.

"Daddy, that boy was really brave."

That boy was really brave. Because he had the courage to keep trying, even as his friends and peers tried to shame him into not believing in himself. They tried to tease the lie right into him, "You are a chicken, a coward, you aren't capable of living your hopes, you aren't capable of jumping into who you want to be."

That boy was really brave.

Because courage is ignoring the jeers and feeling the fears. Courage is returning to the edge of our comfort zone and choosing the place where our fear dwells, because we are worthy of another chance at life. Regardless of what the critics say.

Many of us have spent our lives listening to the voices of our peers. We've been unwitting victims of the implicit playground and household and workplace competition for worth. I think many of us have had the lie teased right into our hearts and minds. But I also think many of us have a breathtaking amount of courage buried just beneath our shame. I think many of us are standing at the bottom of the high dive ladder, and we are dying to climb it, to defy the catcalls of the other "kids" and to walk to the end of the board. Will we jump?

Does it matter?

Because the real question is, *will we keep climbing?* Will we keep putting ourselves in the position to jump into our hopes and dreams and everything we might be. Remember, we are defined not by the *criticism we receive* but by the *courage we live*. And nothing is more courageous than trying again, amidst the failure and the mess and the fear, when everyone else is telling you to quit.