

The Life of Coward

by Stephen DeVoy

The two parents were blessed with a new boy and they named him Coward. They had wanted a girl, but they loved him all the same. Coward was a sweet boy with a baby face and a pleasant smile. They took Coward home to his brothers and sisters and they too were pleased. The brothers were happy to have a new brother and the sisters were happy to have a baby to dote over.

Coward's dad was determined to raise Coward to be just like him - a successful corporate man. The father would instill in Coward all of the values he loved - obedience, servitude and patriotism. As Coward grew, his father taught him that God came first, country came second and family came third. There was no space for self. "God, country and family!" his dad would say.

Coward was jealous of his brother Dexter. Dexter was smarter than Coward. Dexter was less loved by his father than Coward but more loved by his mother. While Coward looked up to his dad, Dexter looked up to his mom. While Coward learned to respect authority, Dexter learned to despise authority. While Coward sought praise from his mother and father, Dexter was satisfied with his own self esteem and did not seek approval.

Coward, like his parents, became a Christian. Dexter became an atheist. Coward, like his parents became a capitalist. Dexter became an anarchist. Coward measured his value in terms of what others deemed it to be while Dexter did not spend much time on estimating his value - he assumed it irrelevant.

Coward Grows Up

By the time Coward finished high school, Dexter was almost finished with college. A war was brewing and there was talk of a draft. Dexter, despite his differences with his brother, loved his brother. Moreover, Dexter loved everybody and saw in everybody value derived not from what they had or who they obeyed, but derived, instead, from being a human being. And so it happened that as the specter of war raised its head, Dexter opposed it and Coward supported it. Dexter had grown to see the world as it is, a network of greedy and dishonest men playing chess with the lives of better men, sending them to battle and death, for the advancement of power and conquest. Coward had grown up to see the world as his parents saw it, a hierarchy of individuals and institutions constructed in terms of their merit (e.g. the degree to which they were blessed with the false values of obedience, servitude and patriotism) and selected by a "divine" process codified in law. Coward didn't really love anyone, he just learned how to admire obedience, servitude and patriotism, so it was of no surprise that Coward supported the war.

Coward's parents grew more fond of Coward than Dexter. After all, Coward reflected their values of obedience, servitude and patriotism while Dexter reflected the values of honesty, liberty and justice. Coward would make patriotic statements and his parents would be pleased. Dexter would use "unfair" tricks, commonly known as "facts" and "reason" to prove that the war was not patriotic and was, instead, based on greed, manipulation and deceit.

When the draft came, Coward began to have second thoughts. After all, he might just die in the war. Coward, however, did not speak up. He valued the praise of his mother and father and he saw that those such as Dexter who spoke out against obedience, servitude and patriotism were unloved, un-praised and the target of open derision. Coward and Dexter were drafted.

Coward is Drafted

When Coward and Dexter received their draft notices, their mother and father were proud that their sons would fight for the beloved homeland. This pride was interrupted when Dexter refused to serve. Dexter burned his draft papers, spoke out against the war, went AWOL and became a fugitive. Mother and father disowned Dexter. "Our honor would be saved by Coward," they thought.

In training, Coward began to wonder if Dexter was right, but he did not speak up because he knew his parents would be prouder of him if he served and did his duty. When Coward arrived at the war zone, he discovered a world unlike any he had known. Death was around him, the civilians under his boot in the foreign land had fear entrenched in their eyes, the cities were homes to the dislocated - orphaned children on the street, wives in search of dead husbands and the stench of death. It is in this foreign land that Coward was issued a weapon and sent off to kill.

During his first battle, Coward remembered the words of his God, "Thou shall not kill." As he fought his way across the battle field, he found himself face to face with the enemy, looking in to the enemy's eyes. In the enemy's eyes he saw himself, a frightened young man thrown into the jaws of war. They were all just like himself. "Thou shall not kill," echoed in his head. "We're proud of you son," echoed the voice of mother and father in his head. He raised his gun and shot. He saw, in the eyes of the soldier he killed, his own eyes as they would have been had they traded places. The enemy soldier lay bleeding on the field, tears streaked down the enemy soldier's face and the enemy soldier died. Coward was stunned. "How could I kill a man?" he thought. This would not be the last man he would kill.

Dexter, on the run, began to wage his own war, only Dexter chose words and not weapons. Dexter became vilified by the press. They called Dexter a coward. Dexter lost his family, his friends, his comfort, his safety and his reputation. Despite all of this, Dexter stood strong. He defied the government and he defied the war. He took to defacing bill boards with anti-war slogans. Under the cover of night, he would paint is anti-war statements wherever he could, always sure to place a circle "a" next

to the statement.

When there were protests, Dexter wore a black mask to hide his identity. Whenever the police would arrest someone at a demonstration, Dexter and others would attack the police and drag the arrestees away from the police into safety. As the anti-war movement became more militant, Dexter began to organize others. In time they became known as the resistance.

Meanwhile, Coward continued with the fight, and though his God taught him not to kill he continued to kill because he lacked the courage not to kill. Given the choice between doing what is right and what is safe, Coward chose the latter. Coward won many medals for his soldierly actions. He was obedient, servile and patriotic. Dexter won nothing for his heroic resistance to war and tyranny. Unlike Coward, however, Dexter was not looking for personal gain.

Coward Dies

And on the same day, half a world apart, the two brothers died in battle. A new recruit from the enemy army found himself face to face with Coward. In Coward's eyes he saw himself. He remember the words of his God, "Thou shall not kill." He raised his rifle and shot Coward. Coward fell to the Earth, his body shattered and felt the life draining from him. He heard an inner voice, the voice of his father, say, "I am proud of you Coward." Coward's own voice replied, "Fuck you, Dad," and he died.

Dexter was in battle with the police. A cop looked into Dexter's eyes and saw the enemy, not himself. The cop shot Dexter. Dexter fell to the Earth, his body shattered and felt the life draining from him. He heard an inner voice, the voice of his father, say, in a mocking tone, "Was it worth it, Dexter?" Dexter's own voice replied, "Yes, Dad, it was worth it," and he died.

On the mantle in the former home of Coward and Dexter, there is a photo of Coward in his uniform. Laid out next to the photo are a row of medals. The family always talks of Coward the hero. They never mention Dexter.

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