

FINALIST

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Courage Burns On

Fire is uncontrollable and intangible. The flames have ceaselessly amazed mankind, entrancing our eyes and prompting the need to control the elusive blaze. In the same way, courage is incited like a fire in our own beings. This fire may range from a spark to a raging inferno, yet its size does not diminish its presence.

Fire can be ignited in numerous ways, perhaps through a lightning strike or carefully piled wood and matches. In the same way, courage is brought about within us, whether knowingly or unknowingly. It is incited from the moment we are born. We hold the courage to live, the courage to laugh, the courage to cry, the courage to care, the courage to be cared for, and the courage to love. This courage is sparked within the mind and kindled through the influence of others.

Courage spreads, like yawns spread, and smiles spread, and tears spread. We acquire the ability to experience similar emotions simply by viewing others yawning, smiling, or crying. In this way, courage spreads like fire. It ignites. The heat of courage envelopes and fuels the mind and body, just as fire is fueled through sticks and shrubs. Like the kindling consumed in fires, the smallest moments give fuel to this fire of courage: a little girl with cancer smiling for herself and the world around her, a woman putting on a brave and optimistic face each day despite her inability to see the environment around her through her clouded eyes, an observant boy inviting his usually lonely classmate to play with him and his friends. As we come together, our courage grows stronger in community with others.

Wind pushes fire, influencing its direction, and accompanying it higher into the air and farther through the fields. Just the same, good morals, a persistent attempt for what is right, and hope influence courage. Hope directs courage, stimulates it, and shapes it. The hope for a better life for his family inspires an unemployed man to continue looking for a steady job to support his loved ones. The hope to continue delivering food and clothes to improve the lives of the less fortunate inspires a young woman to take over her grandfather's volunteering now that he passed away. The hope to save a boy's life gives a girl the courage to stand up to the bullies who mistreat him each day. The whispering, supporting, ever-present wind of hope continues to uplift and enlarge the flames of courage throughout our daily lives.

Commonly, the immediate reaction to a flame is to extinguish it. Fire destroys and hurts, but it also warms. Fire is fought with water, to dampen and suppress the blazes. Courage is likewise endangered by internal and external forces. Battles are no longer fought with swords and shields, but words have taken the place of metal tools of destruction. Words have the power to motivate, deceive, enlighten, and hurt. Courage can easily be suppressed through words. A man is told he is useless and

not good enough, and the words stifle his courage to speak his mind. An elderly woman is told she has a month to live and the words seep into and suffocate her mind until her courage to prove the doctor's diagnosis wrong is smothered. Yet, helpful words incite courage. A simple "good job" from a stranger gives an artist the courage to pursue her career. Another smile from an acquaintance gives a boy the courage to continue living.

Still, fire is sometimes put out. It can be extinguished through a large amount of water or completely smothered. Courage can also be ultimately stifled, through illness of the mind or body, old age, or death. Yet, the courage one displays can leave an impact. Just as a forest fire clears the way for new plants, another's courage can inspire someone to have the same courage and continue their life for a good cause.

Today, courage burns on in each of us, though it may not present itself in legendary battles against dragons, it opposes negative forces nonetheless. Courage manifests itself and spreads. It is a positive force that gives us the strength to continue life and enjoy it, to spread courage and hope to fight for a better life. Courage is a fire ignited in us all, and invites us, no matter the race, stature, personality, or state of health, to act together for a better world.