What Is Spiritual Courage?
Not long ago a perceptive friend told me that I didn’t quite look right in my official Cathedral portrait. She was afraid of hurting my feelings and she was right. For the picture the photographer took me up to the balcony and asked me to stand very close to the edge. Naturally enough the look on my face is that of someone who is trying to smile but really feels deeply afraid of falling.

We know what physical courage is. It is staying calm and being effective in the face of threats to our body. This might be surfing double overhead surf at Ocean Beach, catching a football at kickoff, a soldier running on the field of battle or a gymnast or dancer or yogi going beyond the limits that usually contain us. Most often it has to do with how we face a medical emergency.

But what is spiritual courage? I believe there are two kinds of spiritual courage. The first is bravery in the face of spiritual forces that are so powerful that we want to look away. Being really present in the face of death or terrible suffering requires a kind of courage that we don’t often encounter. Most of us in one way or another avoid what we know might upset us. This leaves us unprepared for the time when we have to honestly face our mortality. It also closes us to a lot of life because suffering is all around us, and helping each other is part of what makes us whole.

The second kind of spiritual courage has to do with the power of spiritual symbols. When it comes to spirituality we need symbols because we are dealing with matters that are so far beyond us. We cannot say exactly what we mean by God, forgiveness, joy or reconciliation and so we use powerful symbols to draw us nearer to those realities.

The definition of a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. These symbols are necessary for getting at the deepest truths of our humanity and they have extraordinary power. The second kind of spiritual courage comes from not being afraid to redefine these symbols for the sake of a deeper truth.

It may not seem like a big deal to you but when I was a child growing up there were no female Episcopal priests. In North America it was only in 1975 when women first began getting ordained in the Episcopal Church. One of my colleagues Ellen Clark-King became a priest in the first year that women were ordained in England (in 1994).
These women helped to change the meaning of a symbol (the priesthood) so that we could realize a deeper truth – that all people are made in the image of God and can effectively represent the church or serve it by pointing to God. The symbol is so powerful that change was especially hard.

These women suffered terribly as pioneers. At first people refused to take communion from them or to invite them to their churches. These women were abused verbally and even physically. People were unkind to them until their work of changing the meaning of that symbol began to be accomplished. It has been one of the greatest blessings of my life to be able to work with these women who are my heroes.

In how you speak and practice yoga and how you live, you are defining what spirituality means in our time. I pray that you will have the courage to not look away from death and suffering, that you will not insulate yourself from what it means to really be alive. I also pray that you will not be afraid when you meet opposition in your work for the sake of a deeper truth.

Yoga Quotes:
You haven't yet opened your heart fully, to life, to each moment. The peaceful warrior's way is not about invulnerability, but absolute vulnerability--to the world, to life, and to the Presence you felt. All along I've shown you by example that a warrior's life is not about imagined perfection or victory; it is about love. Love is a warrior's sword; wherever it cuts, it gives life, not death.
—Dan Millman
Way of the Peaceful Warrior

Healers are spiritual warriors who have found the courage to defeat the darkness of their own souls. Awakening and rising from the depths of their deepest fears, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Reborn with a wisdom and strength that creates a light shines bright enough to help, encourage, and inspire others out of their own darkness.
—Melanie Koulouris

1 God is always present but we often do not notice. The role of the priest is to be someone who in his or her words and body points to God.