

Courage through small things

Maya Angelou says that we develop courage by doing small things. "You wouldn't want to pick up a 100-pound weight without preparing yourself."

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I have a constellation—a group of wise people with whom I work and play. I learn from them and hope that I can be like the moon, reflecting some of their brightness. Some succeed as writers, lawyers, academics, pastors, and CEOs. Some thrive in being good humans, spiritual leaders, and parents. Some are great artists and creative souls.

Keeping this constellation close by is important. I check in with them through Facebook messages and texts. Sometimes we call. On rare occasions, we actually see one another.

These days, my constellation is growing dim. Not that any of these people are less brilliant in what they're doing. It's just that when I see them, I notice their feet move slower, their ambition feels duller, and a cloud of exhaustion surrounds everything they do. Cynicism no longer seasons our humor; it's the main course. I would chalk all this up to middle-age malaise, but my constellation is made up of people from different generations, so it can't be that.

I feel it too—that fog that seems to come from overexposure to headlines news and far too many days of sustained rage. My world fills up with information over which I have no control. My soul-nurturing habits have been lost in that murky air.

For instance, every morning, I used to get up and write. I don't know if you would call me a "morning person." I didn't actually want to talk to anyone in the morning and God forbid if anyone ever tried to play the television or radio within my earshot. But I was really happy when I sat in those small hours and let the stream of words flow from my fingertips. Then later on in the day, I would read the news.

Now I get up to read the news first, because some disaster always lurks right around the corner. I must check on it, I must be furious about it, and I must protest it (even if that "protest" is mere slacktivism, a fiery declaration on Twitter). Then I write later in the day. But as the sun grows hotter, my mind gets scattered. There are many more things I must attend to, pulling at my sleeves for attention.

All this means that I have surrendered my best, creative hours to Trumpian anxiety.

I remember the last time that I felt this way. It was during the great recession, when the real estate bubble burst and the stock market took a tumble. My church, which was dependent on endowment income, felt unstable. I was living within the D.C. beltway, where the real estate situation seemed not like a pinprick to a bubble, but more like a cannon ripping through a hot air balloon. Then we would watch as the war in Afghanistan kept raging with no stability in sight. The stock market, the real estate, the wars—everything felt too much out of my control, too big for me to handle.

Then I started reading a lot of [Bill McKibben](#) and he reminded me to focus on the small things and go into them deeply. He was talking about the environment and local economies. So I started tending the vegetable garden in my lawn, pulling the weeds and nurturing the soil. I began thinking about my own health and the well-being of our family. I tended to my creativity. I didn't forget about the national news,

but somehow focusing on the small things helped me to face the larger ones.

I need that reminder again today. I am exhausted by the cruelty. A fifteen-year-old girl was assaulted at a party in the eighties. Decades later, she has the courage and fortitude to tell her story to a wall of men who were hell-bent on disbelieving her. And now our [President mocks her](#) while thousands of people cheer. And, to make the matter even more of a gut-punch? The President's loudest, strongest supporters are [white Evangelicals](#). This is what the religious landscape of our country looks like—so utterly devoid of compassion. I'm angry, but then my fury morphs into exhaustion.

Maya Angelou says that we develop courage by doing small things: "You wouldn't want to pick up a 100-pound weight without preparing yourself." The wise poet speaks to me. I've spent the last two years trying to pick up a 100-pound weight, focusing on the rage du jour, and any sustained study, research, discernment, or work has been derailed as I've run to the defense of whatever Trump has tweeted on a particular day. I've watched as sustained movements against gun violence, racism, poverty, or sexism get obstructed--not by enemies of the causes--but by allies whose quick attention span has moved them to the next hot issue.

So now, I'm feeling the need to sustain my focus on one thing, something much smaller. After all, we can't fight every front at one time, and we must take time to gather our courage.