

A Missed Moment at Thanksgiving

Years ago, I was at my friend Gary's home for Thanksgiving. The cranberry sauce was making its way around the table when his quiet, observant brother leaned toward me and said: *"I heard about that professor giving you a hard time in your English class. That's rough. What's been going on there?"* I was surprised, not just that he knew, but that he cared enough to ask. For a moment, I saw an open door, a chance to share how my professor's harsh critiques had shaken my confidence and how I felt like I didn't belong in college. But instead of stepping through that door, I deflected. I quipped, *"I never had much respect for those English people anyway. Their food is bland, and they drive on the wrong side of the road."* Laughter erupted, the conversation shifted, and the moment dissolved into the background noise of Thanksgiving. But I never forgot it. That unassuming moment became the standard against which I measured all the other connections I had sacrificed at the altar of comfort. I never got to tell Gary's brother how much that small act of kindness meant.

That missed connection taught me something profound: Our instinct for self-protection often leads us to sacrifice the very thing we most deeply need: genuine human connection.

The Loneliness Epidemic

A Harvard study found that 36% of Americans feel profound loneliness, even in human history's most digitally connected era. We have more ways to connect than ever, yet many feel profoundly alone. Why? Because what's missing isn't more contact, it's more courage. The courage to be seen as we truly are. The courage to risk rejection. The courage to love without guarantees.

The Paradox of Love's Nature

Here's the paradox: The very thing we *desperately crave*, love, is also what *terrifies us most*. It's easy to love from a safe distance. But true love asks us to show up, to risk our hearts, and to choose connection over comfort. Think about loving someone whose political views challenge yours or loving yourself when you've made the same mistake for the fourteenth time. That's when love becomes less of a feeling and more of a choice.

The Moments When Love Transforms Us

And here's the truth: The moments when it's hardest to love are precisely the moments when love has the greatest power to transform us. It's like strength training: lifting easy weights doesn't build muscle. Love grows strongest when we choose it in the face of challenge.

And as Rumi wisely said:

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."

How Do We Cultivate the Courage to Love?

Loving courageously isn't something we're born with; it's something we practice. It's like training for a marathon or learning a new skill.

Here are **four practices** to help us cultivate the courage to love:

1. Practice Being Present

Presence is the foundation of love. Without it, we're distracted, disconnected, and unable to truly see each other.

Practical ways to cultivate presence:

- Slow down and breathe before engaging in a conversation.
- Listen without planning your response; absorb what the other person says.
- Make eye contact and use open body language.

- Be comfortable with silence; some of the most powerful moments happen in stillness. Presence requires courage because it means being fully *here*, open to whatever arises, joy, pain, uncertainty, and all.

2. Ask to Know What Truly Matters

Instead of assuming we know what someone needs, we ask. Asking creates space for authentic connection.

Practical ways to ask with love and courage:

- Instead of “*Are you okay?*” try: “What feelings have been moving through you today?”
- Be curious, not fix-it focused; ask to understand, not to solve.
- Listen fully before responding; sometimes, people just need to be heard.

3. Choose Healing Over Holding On

Holding onto pain feels easier than healing. But at some point, the weight of resentment becomes heavier than the original wound.

How to actively choose healing:

- Recognize what you’re holding onto. Ask, *What belief or pain am I unwilling to release?*
- Shift the focus from blame to growth. Instead of “*Why did this happen to me?*” ask, “*What can this teach me?*”
- Practice forgiveness, not for them, but for you. Forgiveness doesn’t condone the past, it frees your heart to move forward.

4. Take the First Step Back

Love isn’t about waiting for someone else to make the first move. It’s about choosing courage over pride and connection over distance.

How to take the first step:

- Send a simple text: “*I was thinking about you. How have you been?*”
- Own your part, even if it’s small: “*I’m sorry for my part in what happened. I miss our connection.*”
- Speak from the heart, not from the past: “*I value our relationship, and I’d love to reconnect.*”
- Release the outcome. The first step is about love, not guarantees.

The Story of Derek Black and Matthew Stevenson

Derek Black was a rising star in white nationalism. But at college, a Jewish student named Matthew Stevenson did something radical: He invited Derek to Shabbat dinner. Week after week, instead of arguing or shaming him, Matthew and his friends engaged Derek with kindness and conversation. This act of courageous love transformed Derek; he eventually renounced white nationalism and became an advocate for racial justice. This is the power of love chosen, not just felt.

The Ripple Effect of Courageous Love

I started this talk with my missed connection at Thanksgiving, one small choice to deflect rather than open my heart. And I wonder: How many moments have I missed? But I also know this: Choosing love is never too late. Imagine a world where we all took one small step and chose love over fear, presence over distraction, and healing over resentment. That world begins with us.

What step will you take today to love with more courage?

Affirmation: “*I have the courage to love, and I become love.*”

When we choose love, we don’t just change our lives; we create ripples of transformation far beyond what we can see.