

# Building the Capacity for *COURAGE*

by **Brendan Miniter, Superintendent**  
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A few years ago, I came across a piece of scholarship that changed how I think about leadership and, I dare say, will likely change some of your thinking as well.

The scholarship was by a business school professor named Jim Detert and it dealt with a seemingly simple subject: courage. One might have assumed that courage was an area of scholarship that had long been picked clean by researchers. After all, haven't there been numerous acts of courage throughout history? The books alone that focus on courageous action would fill the old-school shelves of the Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress.

Stunningly, what Dr. Detert found is that the scholarship on courage is in short supply. That is, the scholarship that delves into where courage comes from is not as well developed as most would assume. His response was to help fill that void, and his research turned up a few surprising things. I'll focus on just one aspect of his findings that stood out to me.

What he found is that courage isn't something that you are just born with and that simply rises to the surface at a crucial moment. While it seems clear to me that spontaneous courage exists, on the whole courage is something that can be learned. Courage is something that a person can get better at over time.

In thinking of courageous acts, we tend to focus on a big moment when everything is on the line and a leader is willing to risk it all for a moral cause. What we often overlook, however, is that long before such a moment, that leader learned how to marshal his or her courage. He or she honed the crucial ability to act courageously in the moment. It usually starts small. He or she will take a stand when there is little to lose and thereby grow more comfortable with the risks required to act with courage. Over time, a person who acts with courage will find that their capacity grows, and that many of the risks that seemed impossible to endure are in fact smaller feats to overcome than previously assumed. What's more, such a person often finds that courage brings its own rewards.

***“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”***

- **Winston Churchill**



The lesson I drew from delving into Dr. Detert's scholarship builds on two other beliefs I carry with me. The first is that, regardless of your position, you are in a position to lead. Every person is (or should be) leading themselves and adding to a positive culture around them. The second is that we all have a responsibility to grow our capacity to respond to the demands placed upon us. If everyone is a leader and all of us should be increasing our capacity to lead, then we should also be working to ensure that we are increasing our capacity for courage.

Courage, of course, takes many forms. And taking risks or challenging others for the sake of confronting them is not synonymous with courage. Courage, in the context I mean it, also entails standing for a good outcome, for the advancement of civil society, or the betterment of an institution that is worthy of defense. To mumble the word "courage" is not to give yourself a license to be a pedantic or obstructionist. Sometimes real courage requires taking a humbler approach and risking one's ego in order to serve others. Sometimes what takes the most courage is to stand pat when the rest of the crowd runs. And sometimes, of course, courage requires driving forward when others fall away.

Here then, I would ask, are you working to enhance the courage component of your leadership practice? Are you building your capacity for courage and developing the ability to know when to use that new capacity? I suspect that building the capacity for courage is something that is often overlooked. History, of course, is littered with people who fell short when a moment of moral courage came upon them. History is also filled with those who found their courage when it mattered the most. Here at Great Hearts, I hope our students and our staff learn lessons from both as they build their own leadership practice.

**Great Hearts Texas Superintendent Brendan Miniter** grew up in the Hudson Valley of New York and in middle school began supporting his own education expenses by working on a farm pruning trees. He then paid his own way through college, having to withdraw twice from George Mason University for lack of funds. He eventually went on to earn a BA in History with a focus on the study of the American Revolution while competing on the university track team.



After college, Mr. Miniter worked for a decade at *The Wall Street Journal* as Assistant Editor of the editorial page and then moved to Texas in 2011 to be Senior Editorial Director and then Director of Historical Scholarship of the George W. Bush Presidential center. Most recently, Mr. Miniter has served as a Vice President, Editorial Page Editor and General Manager of the ePaper at the Dallas Morning News, and a member of the executive team that steers the strategic vision of the public company. Throughout his years in journalism career Mr. Miniter has written about the importance of a strong education, one that has been based in the classics and moral formation.

Mr. Miniter holds an MBA from the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia; is a member of the Willis M. Tate Distinguished Lecture Series Board of Directors; and is a recipient of a significant award for his work against human trafficking. He joined Great Hearts Texas as Superintendent in the fall of 2021. He is married to Paulette Miniter, a UT Austin alum with an MA in Literature from Skidmore College and JD from the University of Virginia. She is the daughter of Vietnamese refugees and shares Brendan's passion for education.

