

**FOR GOODNESS SAKE**  
Bravery, Patriotism and Identity

*Coline Covington*



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*firing the mind*

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To  
*those whose bravery has no witness  
other than their own heart*

*Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery  
over the Fates.*

—Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*

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## About the author

**Coline Covington**, PhD, BPC, received her BA in Political Philosophy from Princeton and then moved to the UK where she received her Diploma in Criminology from Cambridge and her PhD in Sociology from LSE. She worked for nearly ten years as a consultant with criminal justice agencies throughout England and set up the first UK mediation project between victims and juvenile offenders with the Metropolitan Police in London.

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*of Psychoanalysis* (1st edition, Routledge, 2003), *Shrinking the News: Headline Stories on the Couch* (Karnac, 2014), *Sabina Spielrein: Forgotten Pioneer of Psychoanalysis* (2nd edition, Routledge, 2015), and *Everyday Evils: A Psychoanalytic View of Evil and Morality* (Routledge, 2017).

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## Preface

It was a clear, crisp spring morning in London as I walked through Grosvenor Square to the US Embassy. Nearly a year before I had made the decision, reluctantly, to revoke my US citizenship. I knew I wasn't going to return to live in the United States, my country of origin, and my decision was based on practical financial reasons. Although I had had dual citizenship with the UK for many years, I identified myself as American, not British. I had been warned by a friend to expect an interrogation as to my reasons for wanting to revoke my citizenship—along the lines that I was betraying my country. The very fact that there was a hefty exit fee to pay to revoke one's citizenship suggested that a penalty was due. As I walked up the steps to the Embassy, I nervously rehearsed my reasons, aware of my defensiveness. Inside the Embassy, at the administrative counter, I was asked to swear an oath on the Bible or by my word that no one had forced me to revoke my citizenship. As I gave my oath, to my complete surprise, I burst into tears. The woman looked at me sympathetically and said, "Lots of people find this very distressing."

This moment vividly brought home to me the deep importance of what the country of my birth and my childhood means to me, and how very painful it was to give up my entitlement to belong. Although I was rationally clear about why I had made this decision, emotionally it made

no sense to me. I was grief stricken and angry that the draconian US tax laws for expatriates had led me to this. I also felt I was betraying an intrinsic part of my identity along with the values that I had held so dearly throughout my life. While many of us take our country of origin and what it means to us for granted, my act of effectively disowning my country made me powerfully aware that we all have some kind of national identity, whether we acknowledge it or not, and that this deeply affects not only our personal identity but how we see the rest of the world.

I continued to think about my reaction to this separation that I had instigated, and wondered if it had affected me so profoundly because I had also been estranged, by choice, from most of my immediate family for many years. Was I in tears about the loss of my own family? While this may have colored my reaction, I was aware that my feelings about my country were of a different order. Having come of age in the heady and turbulent time of Vietnam, Haight Ashbury, Nixon's impeachment, and Martin Luther King's fight for racial equality, I had absorbed the principles of the American Dream and held these passionately to heart. The liberal ideology of the time and place pervaded my youth and, most importantly, provided a structure for meaning—both for myself as an individual and for myself within a collective. Ironically, it was this democratic ethos that allowed me, in my last year in high school, to espouse the vision of communism, quoting from Mao's Little Red Book in my school assembly. Little did I realize then the luxury of freedom of thought.

While writing this book, the world has changed, in many ways unrecognizably. Liberal democracy has failed in its promises, and populism has erupted across the world. The prosperity of the nineties has primarily impacted international corporations and the small segment of the very rich who are getting even richer. The rest of us are becoming worried about our futures. As economic inequality begins to bite, "strongman" leaders are more and more appealing. They will make their countries great again! They will keep out immigrants! They will protect us from the rest of the world! There are few political ideals and many falsehoods. The only political subject that indisputably crosses borders is the weather and what we do, or don't do, about climate change. It feels like a particularly bleak time of "existential anxiety." It is also a time when we urgently need courage and imagination to shape a future that will enable us to go on living together and to honor what is best about being human.

# Introduction

As individuals and as groups we ascribe our identity, often unconsciously, to the patriotic values we grow up with and that guide our behavior. From childhood, no matter what society we come from, we aspire to the ideals of our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and our country—to our culture; we also begin to form some sense of our own inner conscience, what feels “right” to us. This is a complex idea and is not always the same as what is seen to be “right” within our social group—but it plays a vital part in determining our actions and in understanding the compelling power of our political belief systems. Being able to stand up and act on what we believe requires bravery; it gives voice to our patriotic beliefs and it also forms our identity.

*For Goodness Sake: Bravery, Patriotism and Identity* examines how the concepts of bravery, patriotism, and identity are intrinsically inter-linked through the question, “What does it mean to be true to oneself?” Those who commit acts of bravery attribute their actions not to empathy but to following their conscience or adhering to the moral ideals they hold up as a mirror to themselves. Most of us understand the power and the appeal of a “higher authority” that inspires us to live according to certain principles or values. This is commonly experienced in our religious beliefs, but it is also deeply felt in our political beliefs.

In my previous book, *Everyday Evils: A Psychoanalytic View of Evil and Morality*, I tried to illustrate how susceptible we are to adapting and conforming to changes in our belief systems, even when they contradict our own sense of what is “right.” Our adaptability to changing social norms is often at the root of what enables large groups to commit atrocities against others. We now see much more clearly, for example, how the societal ideals of Weimar Germany became transformed and perverted to serve the political aims of the Third Reich. Our social norms and beliefs, which we often imagine as set in stone, are in fact fluid and subject to social pressures that we are sometimes only marginally aware of. Hannah Arendt’s description of the “banality of evil” is as relevant today as it was at the time of the Holocaust. The highest ideals within a group can be used as an inspiration to respect our fellow human beings, or they can be perverted to exploit and dehumanize them.

Bravery is of such value to us because it embodies Kant’s imperative that man should not be treated as a means to an end but an end in himself. In this respect, bravery is the opposite of evil, and its greatest opponent. The individuals who dissent and go against the prevailing political forces are often those who stand against perverse ideologies and the atrocities committed in their name. Their acts of brave opposition come from their own personal and political beliefs. Members of the resistance during World War II, rescuers of victims, spies serving their countries—all risked their lives for the beliefs they held and in allegiance to some form of higher authority, whether in the form of patriotic ideals or individual conscience. These instances of bravery make us acutely aware of the moral and political nature of bravery and why it is such an important emblem in our world. Acts of bravery, perhaps more than any other action in our lives, assert what it means to be “true to oneself” and express the ideals we hold for ourselves of the person we want to be and how we want to live.

The question of what it means to be “true to oneself” is also at the core of my professional practice as a psychoanalyst; it is what marks psychoanalysis as a truly revolutionary process. Madness is not being able to be true to oneself or to have a tangible sense of self, that is, feelings and judgments derived from and consonant with our perceptions of reality. The work of analysis is to enable patients to discover that they have a self they can not only trust but be true to. This means being brave enough

to acknowledge and separate from dysfunctional relationships and from the mad parts of the mind that rob us of reality. Using examples from my work with patients\* of their own acts of bravery, I explore the themes of political identity, the influence of social ideals and ideology, the differences between betrayal and dissent, and our need to belong to and to identify with large, powerful groups that make us feel safe in the world. On a wider social level these themes are illustrated through the lens of current events. Although these events are necessarily dated, they depict the timeless dynamics of bravery in its different manifestations.

The book starts by laying the foundation for understanding some of the psychological processes that create our sense of belonging and enable us to risk our lives for the sake of our beliefs and principles. Our moral sense of what is right and wrong develops within a framework of personal experience and the cultural values we grow up with. Our conscience is guided by what Freud called our “superego,” that part of our psyche that judges and guides our actions within the parameters of what is considered right and wrong. The “superego” also binds us to the norms of the groups we belong to, whether it is our family, our community, or our country. When these norms change, or when they are experienced to be at odds with our own individual beliefs, this creates psychic dissonance, and can lead to dissent or madness or both. Being true to oneself is a fundamental act of self-agency.

In Chapter Two we see how being true to oneself is at the core of bravery and is the common factor in each act of bravery. Within any atrocity or life-threatening situation, there is the silent presence of the brave individuals who act and stand apart from the crowd, who risk their own lives by rescuing others and, in other ways, by voicing their dissent. The actions of these exceptional individuals raise questions as to why they were able to do what they did and why other people don't. But if we look closer at the histories of these individuals, what we discover is that they may not be as exceptional as we think. Acts of bravery also take different forms in different contexts and often remain unrecognized and private. Clinical material of a young male patient, a war hero struggling to separate from his refugee parents, illustrates the role of the ego ideal, insofar as it is consonant with innate morality, as the primary factor

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\*Case studies have been disguised for the purpose of confidentiality.

motivating acts of bravery. The compulsion to act bravely is primarily attributed to conscious, in other words, being at one with oneself. Those who act bravely do not feel they have a choice because not to act is experienced as a betrayal of self. As such, bravery is a fundamental assertion not only of the self but also of a moral order necessary to sustain the self.

Acts of bravery are commonly recognized within group behavior and especially within the context of war or civic duty. The brave soldier is the archetypal example of the individual who risks his life for his country and protects the values of the group. Most societies have long traditions of heroic individuals who come to represent the “ideal citizen” for their group. What is striking is that this “ideal” rarely differs in its basic composition, regardless of the political and social structures within which it applies. Chapter Three points out that the concept of the “ideal citizen” who places the values and survival of the group above personal interests is, for example, as relevant in modern-day North Korea as it is in the USA. What is perhaps more revealing is to look at how bravery has also come to be associated with self-agency and dissent. Plato’s writings about the life of Socrates highlight the juxtaposition between acts of civic and personal bravery. Socrates was renowned for his martial bravery in rescuing Alcibiades in the battle of Potidaea in 432 BC and for his civic courage in refusing the demand of the tyrannical junta in 404 BC to arrest an innocent man. At the end of his life, scapegoated for the coup of 411 BC and found guilty of opposing the democratic constitution of Athens, Socrates decided to accept the death sentence rather than challenge the laws of his city. However, he notably argued in his defense that rather than being punished, the state should reward him as being “a gadfly stinging the conscience of the city” (D’Angour, 2019, p. 135). This story exemplifies the complexity of what the image of the “ideal citizen” means within different contexts and what happens when personal values oppose political ones.

The question of identity and belonging arises when there is a break or dislocation in one’s life. At these moments, we are faced with choices—not only between past and present, between membership in one group or another, between geographically staying and leaving—but a more fundamental choice that concerns our identity; who we see ourselves as being, what it is we believe in, and how we are perceived by others. The implicit defining relation between place, belief system, and identity is



suddenly laid bare. This caesura creates a mental space within which we become acutely aware of how much our identity is linked to a complex network of loyalties, beliefs, and communities, and the traumatic impact of losing these ties, leaving us in a state of diaspora while opening up the possibility of re-defining our identity. This liminal state and its effect on identity are explored in Chapter Four.

The experience of being uprooted from one's country is illustrated by a patient who struggled to bridge his past with his present and to make sense of the rupture in his own identity and his family's history. This rupture is particularly difficult when there have been dramatic political and social changes within one's country of origin. Our primary attachment to our country has profound implications on how we understand our identity, especially in the context of globalization and the erosion of national borders. With the traditional structures that form identity under threat, making people feel insecure about who they are in the world, it is not surprising that there is a rise in nationalism and a wish to return to the past.

The concept of heroism is universally linked with the act of sacrificing one's life for one's country or the survival of one's group. In warfare, physical courage is praised and held up as both a manly and a patriotic virtue. The idea of dying for a cause, whether it is in the service of one's nation, one's religious beliefs, or ideological tenets, is seen as the acme of bravery—a hero's death. And yet we assign very different values to the soldier who dies while trying to save others, whether it is in Vietnam or Afghanistan, in the name of democracy and the terrorist suicide bomber who dies trying to save the souls of others in the name of Allah. In each case, the hero achieves immortality through his death. The causes may not in fact be so different in their visions of a righteous and moral society and the bravery that is required to realize these ideals. Similarly, our human need to find meaning in our lives, expressed in terms of trying to aspire to the ideals we have of ourselves derived from our social norms, may be just as consonant with fighting for democracy as it is with fighting for Allah.

Chapter Five focuses on the psychological roots of why we need to find meaning in our lives and the importance our belief systems have in relation to defining our identity. Our need for meaning is intrinsic to being human, but the way in which this is actualized may either be

toward respect and recognition of the individual or it may negate the value of the individual in obeisance to a higher power. Kant's moral imperative to "treat others how you wish to be treated" is applied to bravery as a means of differentiating between the ersatz, or perverse, and the authentic act.

Bravery is often traumatic and can become addictive as a way of managing the trauma. This is the dark side of bravery, fueled by the guilt of rescuing some while others have perished. Chapter Six highlights the seductive aspect of heroism that can tip the rescuer into taking extreme risk to the point of recklessness and death. Although acts of bravery are normally described as "selfless," the glory of bravery can enhance the rescuer's narcissism. When this happens, the rescuer's judgment is likely to be impaired and this is a crucial step toward dangerous miscalculations. Then the act of bravery becomes more of a gambler's game producing its own adrenaline in a dance with death. This omnipotent state of mind is an emotional defense that is common with soldiers and journalists who have served on the front lines of war; it both heightens immediate sensate experience and it enables the actor to transcend a sense of self. But there is a high price to pay, as these scars remain painful for life. The chapter concludes with the reminder to heed our fear as it is what enables us to survive and ultimately to help others survive.

Being true to oneself is not only expressed through physical acts of bravery, it is also expressed in voicing one's beliefs, challenging what one feels is wrong, exposing corruption, and opposing destructive group behavior. Chapter Seven examines these vocal forms of dissent, the whistleblowers who risk their lives or their well-being to uphold their principles, the journalists who speak out against injustice, protestors challenging political decisions, and interest groups, such as the "Me Too" campaign, that fight discrimination and racism. Perhaps the most hidden and sometimes most powerful act of dissent takes place in the privacy of psychoanalysis. Within this personal sphere, patients need great courage to face their most profound fears, their shame and guilt, and their love and hate. For many patients this may mean changing their lives radically, eschewing old belief systems, embarking on relationships that are new and unfamiliar, and severing ties with dysfunctional relationships. Enabling patients to be "true to themselves" is at the heart of psychoanalysis; this is what creates true change.

The final chapter picks up on the theme of change and the loss that accompanies every change. Using the example of Odysseus' struggle to resist the nostalgic lure of the Sirens' song while sailing home from Troy, we see what a powerful force drives us to the illusory safety of the past as a way of not having to face loss and an uncharted future. The political wave of populism that is spreading across the world exemplifies this psychological regression in which the charismatic all-protective dictator is chosen in the wish for security and certainty. Recreating an imaginary, idealized past is preferable to the liberal democracies that are perceived to have failed with the rise of global economic inequality and new corporate nations. We are at a turning point in history and to weather the journey forward, like Odysseus, we need to be able to resist our fantasies of the past, to acknowledge what has been irretrievably lost, and to be able to discriminate between what is true and what is false and what we can control and what is beyond our control. Each wave as it approaches, whether it is globalization, totalitarianism, or climate emergency, will present a different complex of problems and challenges. How we broach these challenges will inevitably affect our belief systems and our political identity.

These chapters present different facets of bravery and I hope, cumulatively, they demonstrate that every brave act is not simply an assertion of individual self-agency but also a political act. Bravery expresses the values that are most important to us as humans in relation to each other. We cannot act in good conscience without acting on behalf of others. Although many acts of bravery may occur in private and are never witnessed, they do not occur in isolation; bravery by its very nature affirms our respect of the other and their significance to us. At this point in our history, when political power is so much in flux and global problems such as climate change are threatening our everyday lives and our expectations of the future, it is crucial to be brave for ourselves, for others, and for goodness' sake. This book is in homage to those who have been brave enough to risk their well-being and their lives in order to protect the future. We can only hope to follow their example.

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