

Foreword by Parker J. Palmer  
Author of *Let Your Life Speak*

# THE COURAGE WAY

Leading  
and Living  
with Integrity

Center for Courage & Renewal  
and Shelly L. Francis

## Praise for *The Courage Way*

“At a time when civil discourse reflects a lack of trust in leadership and when the integrity of our leaders seems in doubt, Shelly Francis offers us a path to renewal. Her insights into cultivating courage through daily practice provide a much-needed guide to authentic leadership aimed at prosperity and flourishing. Essential reading in today’s world!”

—Chris Laszlo, PhD, Char and Chuck Fowler Professor of Business as an Agent of World Benefit, Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management; Faculty Executive Director, The Fowler Center, Case Western Reserve University; and coauthor (with Judy Sorum Brown) of *Flourishing Enterprise*

“Leading with integrity and empathy requires vision and a connection to your deepest self. Yet leading people and businesses also requires immense effort and dedication that can isolate you, exhaust you, and even pull you away from your vision and deep connection. Enter *The Courage Way*, which offers tools, stories, and ideas to help you cultivate your vision and your ability to lead with courage, kindness, humor, and dignity. Shelly Francis illuminates the work of Parker J. Palmer with wit and grace.”

—Karla McLaren, MEd, author of *The Language of Emotions* and *The Art of Empathy*

“In this troubled world today, we need to check our moral preferences as leaders and commit to what we value and will defend. In healthcare, I have learned that the secret to quality is love. It is also justice, which is the manifestation of love in our public policies and conduct. *The Courage Way* offers stories and practices of how the hearts of leaders can stay connected with their moral compass and courage. It shows that what we create collectively arises from the wholeness and compassion we locate within.”

—Donald M. Berwick, MD, President Emeritus and Senior Fellow, Institute for Healthcare Improvement and former Administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

“*The Courage Way* will nourish that part of you that cares deeply about the world. A soulful approach for helping you harness your inner strength to become the kind of leader the world needs now—in every dimension of your life.”

—Jono Fisher, founder of [WakeUpProject.com](http://WakeUpProject.com)

“Everyone should read this gem of a book. *The Courage Way* is a powerful tonic for our challenging times. Keep it close at hand so you can savor its life-giving music again and again.”

—Dr. Gloria J. Burgess, distinguished scholar, professor of transformational leadership, and author of *Dare to Wear Your Soul on the Outside*, *Pass It On!*, and *Flawless Leadership*

*The Courage Way* forever expands the way we think about courage, bringing its many manifestations to life and proving that acts of courage, whether physical, moral, creative, or otherwise, have their seeds within each and every one of us. The poignant stories that Shelly Francis shares make the heroic qualities of courage more understandable and accessible than ever before. This would be an important book at any time, but at this moment, when America is divided and hurting, it illuminates the courage within that promises a way through. Read and re-energize!"

—**Billy Shore, founder and CEO, Share Our Strength, and author of *The Cathedral Within* and *The Imaginations of Unreasonable Men***

This is an important read for leaders at all levels. I am inspired by the promise and potential of leaders and organizations as forces for good, and this has never been more important in the world. *The Courage Way* shares time-tested tools, reflections, and guiding principles that every leader can learn and practice. This can move leaders and their organizations toward flourishing through creating human-centered cultures guided by strong ethics and integrity."

—**Richard J. Davidson, founder of the Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin–Madison, and coauthor (with Daniel Goleman) of *Altered Traits***

*The Courage Way* by Shelly Francis is a wonderfully written book for all those who wish to lead their personal and professional lives in alignment with what truly matters. Happiness is unthinkable without courage, yet until now, little has been written about how to muster this great virtue. The book is a must-have resource—inspiring!"

—**Andrea F. Polard, PsyD, founder of Zen Psychology Therapy and author of *A Unified Theory of Happiness***

What would you do with more courage? From that first provocative question to the last story of people learning to lead and live in deeper alignment with themselves, *The Courage Way* is a surprising and counterintuitive remedy for the heart-sore. My calling is to sit with those whose hearts have been broken open by their calling, by their deep desire to live life in synchronicity with their truest values, beliefs, wishes, and dreams. *The Courage Way* offers a way to do that gently, yet it fiercely offers ways forward. Shelly Francis and the Center for Courage & Renewal have again demonstrated their ability to lead each of us into a new way of being."

—**Jerry Colonna, Cofounder and CEO, Reboot.io**

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# The Courage Way

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*For the Courage Collaboration,  
thank you for your voices and your courage on the ground.*

*For Wil and Rus, Grace and J.J.,  
may you always bring your true self to your life's work.*

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# Foreword

*Parker J. Palmer*

**I**n the early 1990s, with the generous support of the Fetzer Institute, I planted the seeds of what would eventually become the Center for Courage & Renewal—seeds that grew rapidly under the wise, visionary, and grounded leadership of my friends, colleagues, and cofounders, Marcy Jackson and Rick Jackson.

The idea behind our work is to help leaders show up more fully in the workplace—and in every dimension of their lives—with their identity and integrity in hand and intact. To put it another way, we help leaders “rejoin soul and role” in order to gain transformative leverage on the work they do, the institutions in which they do it, and the larger world. As the great social movements have demonstrated, the human soul—or identity and integrity—is an Archimedean point of leverage from which people have moved the world, whether or not they are “positional” leaders.

When I planted those early seeds with the help of the Fetzer Institute, I had no idea that by 2018, they would grow into

- Three hundred well-trained facilitators in the United States, Australasia, Canada, Latin America, the United Kingdom, and Spain, with allied work in South Korea
- Thousands of Courage & Renewal programs of many descriptions
- Tens of thousands of leaders in a range of professions whose lives and work have been transformed by those programs
- Hundreds of thousands of individuals and institutions who've benefited from those transformed leaders

Nor did I ever imagine that someday there would be a book called *The Courage Way* written by Shelly Francis, my good friend and very able colleague for the past five years. As the Center's marketing and communications director, Shelly has been our chief "story collector," helping us understand what we do, reminding us why we do it, and sharing our story with others.

No one is better equipped than Shelly to write about the components of the Courage Way and to illustrate how transformative they can be, using stories of some of the leaders who've been changed by Courage Work. The book you're holding in your hands is evidence aplenty to back that claim.

I published my first book in 1980. From that day forward, I've been committed to "putting wheels" on my ideas. I did not want to put words on the page and let them lie there passively hoping that someone would read them and, in a few cases, apply them. I wanted to create vehicles with those words—vehicles such as workshops, retreats, and other programs that people could use in pursuit of personal and communal ends, drawing on their own inner resources and the support of a community of peers.

Thanks to hundreds of colleagues and supporters, that's exactly what we've been able to do over the past quarter

century—not only with my ideas but with the ideas of many others who have joined in and contributed to the Courage & Renewal cause.

Leaders in many fields—education, health care, business, nonprofit, philanthropy, and religion—have been nurtured by the ideas and practices embedded in Courage Work. It takes courage to “join soul and role” in organizations that make it unsafe to show up with integrity and act in alignment with it. But when we find that courage, our lives become more whole, our work reaches deeper, the people we serve are better served, and, in ways large and small, the world becomes a better place.

As you will learn from this book, Courage Work takes many forms, depending on the setting. But whatever the form, it is rooted in the principles and practices of what we call a Circle of Trust—a way of creating the conditions where people can do inner work in community. The components that go into creating those conditions—the components Shelly has so deftly named and explained in this book—have a proven capacity to touch and transform leaders and the work they do.

When I’m asked for an “elevator” example, the story that most often comes to mind involves a circle that I facilitated some years ago, composed of twenty-four physician leaders of medical residency programs.

During a large-group discussion of a poem about fidelity to purpose, one of the participants said, “I work in a health care system that has me on the edge of violating my Hippocratic Oath several times a week.”

One component of Courage Work is deep listening, so no one jumped to respond to this man’s comment. Instead, people made silent space for him to listen more deeply to himself. Out of that silence, this physician leader spoke a second time: “You know, that’s the first time I’ve ever said that to a group of professional peers.”

There was more silence, then this man spoke again, now in a quieter and more somber voice: “The truth is, that’s the first time I’ve ever said it to myself.”

When I heard those words, I knew I had witnessed a pivotal moment in one leader’s personal and professional life. He had heard a truth from within that he could not argue with or push away, the way he might have if some “systems expert” had critiqued his workplace. The critique he heard came from his “inner teacher,” and it put him on the horns of a dilemma: *Do I try to sweep under the rug what I just heard myself say, as if I’d never heard it? Or do I take that inner voice seriously and try to transform my workplace into one that supports rather than threatens my Hippocratic Oath?*

The Courage Work this physician did helped him find his courage as a leader. He returned to his job, identified colleagues who shared his concern, and, working together over a period of months, they were able to establish a penalty-free zone for the reporting of medical errors—a major systemic step toward helping hospitals “do no harm.”

I hope that this story gives you a glimpse of what I mean when I say that Courage Work touches not only leaders but also their workplaces and the people they serve. Because of this book, you need not attend a Courage & Renewal event to be touched this way. Shelly has done a masterful job of extracting the principles and practices on which our programs are based, and of showing—via well-framed ideas and vivid stories of real people in a variety of leadership roles—how they have been and can be applied by individuals and groups in workaday life.

A final thought before I get out of the way and let Shelly carry on. One of the most important notions we deal with in Courage Work is this: no matter how much devotion and courage leaders bring to important tasks, their jobs are never

done. We will forever stand in “the tragic gap,” the gap between the hard realities around us and what we know to be possible because we see it with our own eyes from time to time.

Part of the Courage Way is learning to stand and act in that gap—which means resisting our ingrained cultural conviction that we must be “effective” if we and our work are to count for anything, that “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the *only* thing!”

We all want our work to be effective, of course. That’s why we put so much time and energy into it. But if effectiveness is our only norm, we will die in despair, or drop out long before we have made our fullest contribution. Think of anyone you regard as courageous because he or she lived a life devoted to high values like love, truth, and justice. Now ask yourself whether he or she was able to die saying, “I’m sure glad I took on that task, because now everyone in the world can scratch it off their to-do list forever.” The answer is obvious.

In order to continue working on vital tasks that will never be accomplished, we need a norm that does not replace but supersedes “effectiveness.” The name of that norm, I think, is “faithfulness.” Faithfulness to our own best gifts, faithfulness to the needs around us, and faithfulness to those points where our gifts might contribute to meeting some of those needs: that should be the ultimate measure of work well done and a life well lived.

It takes courage for leaders to persevere, to stand and act in the tragic gap, taking small steps day in and day out to create and sustain organizations where trust, integrity, and authenticity can flourish. If we are to make this world a better place, we need a lot of leaders who are willing and able to walk this way for the long haul.

Welcome to a book that offers guidance, inspiration, and practical support for people like that—for people like you.

# Preface

## A Word from the Voice Between the Lines

My job is to keep the meaning completely embodied in the work itself, and therefore alive and capable of change. I think that's how an artist can best speak as a member of a moral community: clearly, yet leaving around her words that area of silence, that empty space, in which other and further truths and perceptions can form in other minds.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

If you found this book, it also found you. What in your life right now resonates with the idea of courage and leading a life of integrity?

This book found me, too, by way of two other books. The first was *Let Your Life Speak*. The leader of a women's writing

group I was in introduced me to this book by Parker J. Palmer around 2002. His words “self-care is never a selfish act” helped me overcome cancer-caregiver burnout. Ten years later, the same writing teacher and friend let me know of a job opening at the nonprofit Parker founded, called the Center for Courage & Renewal, which she saw on his Facebook page. I landed the job!

A couple years later, I was in a used bookstore when a yellowed paperback copy of *The Courage to Create* by Rollo May jumped off the shelf. “How can we acquire creative courage?” says a line on the cover. I say that creativity is my caffeine, but also that creativity once saved my life. Seeing that word paired with courage, I had to take the book home. My inner artist was hungry.

I say that this book now in your hands also found me, because I am the person who raised her hand to compose something that would take on a life of its own.

At first this book project was an outgrowth of our organization’s endeavor to evolve its own purpose. What is our theory of change? How have we equipped, inspired, and sustained leaders for these challenging times? Are they better able to find meaning in their work by reconnecting who they are with what they do? Does that inner strength help them deliver a service or product that will make a difference for their organizations, their employees, and the customers or clients they serve? We sensed a ripple effect from stories folks told us, even though we know we provide only some ingredients in the complex mix of why and how people access their courage to lead. We wanted to dig further.

So I set off to gain insight through interviewing a broad range of people who have participated in our programs to see how they are applying Courage & Renewal ideas to their lives and leadership. In one-hour interviews with more than 120

people, one-on-one and sometimes in groups, I asked about Courage principles and practices they still use. I asked what was hard, what was different, what was better.

My job was to stitch together their stories with the underlying wisdom of Parker Palmer spanning his nine books, plus twenty-five years of our applied learning with leaders. I now know Parker not only as an author but also as a colleague and friend. I know him and love him as a regular guy and a wise elder. It was an honor to meet people who have experienced and now embody the ideas he writes about. It was daunting to decide how best to paint the whole picture.

During the writing process, as director of marketing and communications for the Center, I've also been testing these practices in my day job and inside my head, heart, and life. I had many "case study" hard days. The backdrop of book-making over three years included the natural life-span changes in our nonprofit organization: a retirement and a search for an executive director, almost a full turnover in both staff and board, and nearly doubling the size of our facilitator network. Add to that the elections of national leaders, polarized politics, ongoing wars, desperate refugees, the opioid epidemic, homelessness, too many shootings, too many suicides, natural disasters, man-made disasters, and two record-rainfall winters here in Seattle. All became metaphors and living proof that the world needs more courage everywhere every day. I've been paying attention 24/7 to how our practices can give me—and others—more courage and trust in life and at work.

Even though one of our touchstones says "Speak your truth using 'I' statements," I've aimed to stay mostly out of view in this book. It's not my leadership memoir. It's not the story of how the Center itself has grown or changed as an organization. Yet our learnings are here—informed by the voices of authentic leaders.

We're not here to insist that you must attend our Courage & Renewal programs, although you are welcome. We make no promise that your life will be changed by the time you read the last page. This book contains ideas to consider and stories of others further along on the path. Consider it a mix tape, a playlist, a snapshot in time. Consider it an invitation to more conversation. Consider my voice your companion.

Ideas are just words on the page until people bring them to life. It takes courage to create a meaningful life of integrity. It also requires good company. And practice. And space to ponder questions like this:

*What would you do with more courage?*

**It takes courage**

to teach  
to lead  
to serve  
to heal  
to speak up  
to stand out  
to look inward  
to right wrongs.

It takes courage  
to walk your talk  
to stand your ground  
to make waves  
to ride waves  
to find wholehearted ways  
to be known as vulnerable  
to love after loss  
to love, period.

It takes courage  
to say "I was wrong"  
to say "I don't know"  
to say "Let's find out"  
to take enough time  
to seek better answers  
    instead of quick fixes  
to give yourself fully  
to try making a difference  
when the outcome is not  
    guaranteed.

It takes courage  
to choose wisely and well  
to go against the grain  
to go into the wind  
to point your boat  
toward your true north  
to lead others forward  
to have faith in the future  
and be fully present today.

It takes courage  
to trust in the process  
to be part of the process  
to process your parts that  
    are shadows  
to embrace your shadows as  
    part of your self  
to also embrace your beauty  
    and light.

It takes courage  
to know yourself well  
    enough  
to choose where your energy  
    comes from and goes  
to trust it's possible  
to trust what courage can do  
and give yourself time to  
    find out.

It takes courage  
to give yourself time to  
renew  
to give yourself over to grief  
to give silence a chair at the  
table  
to give doubt a chance to  
show other options  
to give the world your best  
self and ideas  
without giving up on your  
soul.

It takes courage to  
be your whole self  
so you can  
do your best work  
so you can  
be the change you want to  
see  
so you can  
do what your worthy cause  
most needs you to do.

It takes courage  
to ask “*How* shall I be”  
so that I can do [what?]  
so the world can be  
better  
for all.

Leadership takes courage  
and gives courage, too.

And courage takes trust.

—SHELLY L. FRANCIS