

EXISTENTIAL COURAGE
and the fairy tale of
LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

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Abstract

This article is based on a presentation given during the inaugural 2025 conference of the Existential Movement, “Into the Wild Woods: Existential Responses to Turbulent Times”. The title of the conference immediately brought to my mind my favorite fairy tale, “Little Red Riding Hood”, who very courageously went out in the wild woods to take food to her grandmother. The theme of existential courage is one that has always attracted my attention. In this article the effort is to discuss existential courage and its relationship to a few other existential givens, such as, freedom, authenticity, meaning and finitude in order to highlight its importance. It will also explore the relationship of courage to will and love and the importance of early relationships for its development.

Key words

Existential courage, will, freedom, meaning, authenticity, finitude

Introduction

A few months before the announcement of the conference I was discussing with an artist friend of mine about her upcoming art exhibition that is based on her favorite childhood fairy tale. She mentioned that Jung believed that the favorite fairy tale of our childhood reveals something about ourselves and our worldview. She had asked me at the time, what was my favorite tale from my childhood. I immediately replied: “Little Red Riding Hood”. She then asked me why I thought this was an important fairy tale for me and I said: “I really admired her for her courage going out into the wild woods all by herself”. We then, on several occasions joked about me and my little red riding hood. When the conference was announced I was intrigued and ready to present my favorite childhood fairy tale and the connection to Existential Courage.

As I started reading the story again, I realized that the tale was very different from what had stayed in my memory. I did not recollect the wolf eating the grandmother or endangering the little girl, neither did I remember about the hunting man saving her and killing the wolf. What was most prominent in my memory was her courage to go out in the wild woods despite the fear of meeting with a wolf in order to take food to her grandmother. How interesting! Our memory selects and stores the information that is important to us and focuses on what is valuable and gives meaning to our life at the time. I thought of Ernesto Spinelli's (2005) book *The Interpreted World: An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology* and how we subjectively interpret and make sense of our life, actively constructing our self-concept and worldview. No doubt our early relationships play an important role in our construction but we are not passive receptors of external stimuli. The process of creating and continuously evolving our self-construct has always fascinated me (Georganda, 2007).

The issue of freedom and the desire to be free to write my own history despite my limitations, as well as my awareness of the finitude of life, were first and foremost in my mind since I was very young. I guess focusing on the courageous elements of the fairy tale was no coincidence. Facing life and facing death both require this kind of existential courage discussed by Paul Tillich in *The Courage to Be*. The paradox of freedom and thrownness is one that has puzzled me for many years and prompted me to write about it in several articles (Georganda, 2016, in press). Courage and will always seem important for tackling the issue of freedom and authenticity.

This was the primary reason that led me in 2023 during the 3rd World Congress of Existential Therapy held in Athens to organize a symposium with the theme of Existential Courage. Emmy Van Deurzen had written in her abstract: "Existential courage is the key to the art of living and the sine qua non of overcoming any human crisis. What does it actually involve and how can we cultivate our courage so as to stop fearing challenges and difficulties?" In another presentation Gideon Menda described: "Is there any difference between "courage" and "existential courage"? is it our own ground of existence that dictates or enables us to practice existential courage throughout life? Can one live without any existential courage at all? Becoming (existentially) courageous is indeed a process one potentially goes through life. Like authenticity, the ability to assess it is only personal". On the other hand, Yaqui Martinez-Robles had warned us: "Courage can be a noble aspiration, but it can also easily become a new self-demand or social requirement to cover the commandments of an ideal. Existential courage is not exempt from these risks. We human beings can, in subtle or obvious ways, turn possibilities into duties in which we try to fit. Is it possible to escape from this paradox?" Finally, as the chair of the symposium I had posed a few questions myself: "What is existential courage. Why do we need it in everyday life? Is there a relationship between fear and courage. How can we live up to the moment and be courageous? How do we find the courage to proceed in difficult times? Being courageous is an act of will. For Erikson (1963) the "virtue of will" is the favorable outcome of our struggle between autonomy and feelings of shame and doubt. How are our childhood experiences related to courage and will?"

These are some of the questions that were raised and discussed during the symposium, and I will attempt to address in this paper. The fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood served as a trigger and a symbolic representation of how we face challenging and fearful situations. Having a purpose that is of value, like providing for our loved ones, can often make us overcome our fears. Courage is not the absence of fear but our willingness to face up to the dangerous and fearful situation despite our fear. Fear is a normal and necessary reaction to danger. What seems important is both our ability to appraise the realistic proportion of fear to the situation at hand as well as our ability to transcend our fear when necessary.

Courage, Freedom and Authenticity

"Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous." Thucydides, around 400 B.C.

True courage is the ability to stand firm and affirm life despite the overwhelming sense of existential fear. This courage is not just about physical bravery but is an inner strength that allows one to live authentically in the face of finitude and uncertainty of existence. Tillich (1970) in his book *The Courage to Be* distinguishes between different forms of fear. The most profound is the fear of non-being, which includes fears of death, meaninglessness, and isolation. Courage is often needed to embrace freedom, particularly when it involves stepping into the unknown or uncertain. The freedom to choose, to act, or to be oneself requires the courage to face the fears and anxieties that come with making choices that might be outside of the norm or lead to consequences we can't predict. For example, an individual must have courage to challenge societal norms and live authentically, even when this brings discomfort or opposition. Freedom, in its truest sense, is the ability to choose between different paths or actions. This ability to make decisions, however, often comes with the responsibility of facing the consequences of those decisions. Courage is required because freedom involves taking responsibility for one's choices—whether they lead to success or failure.

In the context of personal growth, freedom involves the courage to live authentically. To be true to oneself without the fear of judgment or conformity and to claim ownership of our choices, which Van Deurzen and Adams (2011) describe as authorship of our life. Furthermore, Rollo May argues in *Love and Will* that both love and will are crucial in achieving personal freedom. Without the courage to act upon one's will and make choices based on authentic desires, an individual may remain trapped in societal expectations or psychological fears, thus losing their freedom. Living authentically involves standing firm in our values and principles, even when external pressures try to sway us. The courage to maintain our integrity and self-understanding allows us to truly experience freedom, rather than merely conforming to others' expectations.

Historically, courage has been a key factor in the fight for freedom on a larger, societal scale. Whether it's the courage to challenge oppressive regimes, stand up against social injustices, or fight for the rights of marginalized groups, freedom often requires individuals to take risks, face threats, and endure hardship. Without the courage to speak out and act, political freedom is difficult to achieve or maintain. Courage is essential for

overcoming both external oppression and internal fears that prevent individuals from recognizing and asserting their freedom. As seen in many social movements, the courage to stand against unjust systems often leads to greater freedom for oneself and for society. In addition to external forces, freedom can also be hindered by internal constraints like self-doubt, fear of failure, or insecurity. Courage allows individuals to overcome these internal barriers and take actions that move them closer to their goals and desires. This internal liberation leads to a sense of true freedom. As Rollo May discusses in *Love and Will*, freedom is not just about external liberties, but also about the internal will to be free—free from self-imposed limitations, psychological blocks, or societal pressures. Courage is the force that enables individuals to break free from these constraints and pursue their authentic desires.

Freedom often involves taking risks, and courage is the ability to face and accept those risks. The fear of failure or loss can prevent someone from exercising their freedom, but it is only by facing those risks head-on that true freedom can be experienced. This is especially evident in personal decisions like changing careers, moving to a new place, or changing relationships—choices that involve both freedom and courage. Every choice made in freedom carries consequences, and it requires courage to accept those consequences, whether they are positive or negative. This willingness to embrace the full spectrum of freedom—along with its risks—is central to living a free and courageous life. Ultimately, courage and freedom are inseparable. Courage provides the strength to make difficult choices, face fears, and live authentically, while freedom is the space within which these courageous acts can unfold. To live a full, meaningful life, one must have the courage to exercise their freedom, and to experience true freedom, one must have the courage to confront the risks and challenges it entails. Both qualities, when integrated, allow individuals to live lives of self-determination, authenticity, and growth.

In a recent article (Georganda, in press) the importance of authentic historicalness was presented. Heidegger (1978) in *Being and Time* argued that humans exist in a temporal structure—we are shaped by the past, live in the present, and project into the future. To live authentically, we must be able to embrace our history and make it our own. The connection between courage and authentic historicalness is a deep and intriguing one. To engage meaningfully with history—not just as a record of past events, but as something that actively creates our identity, the way we are, respond, and act takes courage. Authentic historicalness requires courage because history is often uncomfortable. It reveals mistakes, injustices, failures and traumas alongside progress and triumphs. Making peace with our thrownness and all it has brought to our lives is a very difficult and demanding process. It requires the strength to look at the truth of our life and the willingness to persevere in the face of pain and adversity. Psychotherapy can play an important role in the unfolding of our story and our ability to claim ownership of our life.

Courage, Meaning and Finitude

Courage and meaning are deeply connected in the human experience. The courage to face life's challenges, confront existential questions, and navigate uncertainty is often what allows individuals to find or create meaning in their lives. One of the most

fundamental aspects of finding meaning in life is being able to confront hardship, suffering and finitude. Whether it's dealing with personal loss, societal struggles, or existential dilemmas, courage is what empowers individuals to persevere and find meaning through these experiences. Viktor Frankl (1963), in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, emphasizes that even in the most painful and challenging circumstances, one can find meaning if they have the courage to continue and search for purpose. Courage allows individuals to transform suffering into something meaningful. Rather than being defeated by pain, courage enables the person to endure it and find a higher purpose in overcoming it. This transformation is often what provides individuals with a sense of meaning that transcends the immediate difficulty they face.

Finding meaning often requires living authentically, which can be an act of courage in a world full of pressures and expectations. It takes courage to reject conformity, resist societal norms, and pursue a life based on one's own values and passions. This authenticity allows individuals to find deeper, more personal meaning in their existence, because they are no longer living in response to external expectations but in alignment with their true self. Courage enables individuals to live in a way that aligns with their personal truth, regardless of how others may perceive them. This authenticity leads to a greater sense of meaning because individuals are not living in denial of their true desires or values. Meaning often emerges through the pursuit of something greater than oneself, whether it's a passion, a cause, or a relationship. Courage is necessary to actively pursue these endeavors, especially when they require sacrifice, effort, or overcoming obstacles. In this pursuit, people often find a sense of meaning that transcends their individual experiences. Life, particularly in modern society, often becomes focused on survival and achievement (work, success, and material wealth), but meaning is often found beyond these concerns. The courage to step away from the relentless focus on these external measures of success and instead focus on the things that bring true fulfillment—such as creativity, connection, or service to others—is where deeper meaning resides.

One of the most profound ways in which courage relates to meaning is in our confrontation with death. The awareness of mortality can either paralyze us with fear or motivate us to live more meaningfully. Courage allows us to accept death as a part of life, and by doing so, we are often able to live more fully, finding meaning in the limited time we have. The courage to face our own mortality can lead us to think about our legacy and what we will leave behind. This reflection often inspires us to pursue meaningful goals and relationships that will endure beyond our lives, adding a sense of purpose to existence. Courage is also about actively creating meaning in one's life rather than waiting for it to appear. It involves making choices that are aligned with personal values, taking risks to pursue one's passions, and engaging deeply with the world around us. As existential thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre argue, meaning is not a preordained fact of existence but something that must be created by individuals through their actions and choices. The world may seem chaotic, indifferent, or even absurd at times. It takes great courage to find or create meaning in such a world. Courage is about embracing the freedom to define what matters, despite external chaos or internal doubts.

To be human is to be finite, to live within the boundaries of time, to know that every breath brings us closer to an end we cannot escape. This knowledge, though unsettling, is the birthplace of courage. Courage is not the absence of fear but the resolve to move forward

despite it, to affirm life even in the shadow of death. Finitude reminds us that we are limited, our bodies will age, our knowledge will remain incomplete, and our time will run out. Yet, it is precisely this limitation that gives life its urgency, its meaning. If we were infinite, there would be no reason to act now, to love now, to create now. Courage is the force that allows us to embrace our mortality not with despair, but with purpose. It is the quiet strength to rise each morning, knowing that nothing lasts forever, and still choosing to give ourselves fully to the moment.

There is a particular bravery in facing the unknown—the finality of death, the unpredictability of life. But true courage is not merely enduring these truths; it is engaging with them. It is the willingness to love, even knowing loss is inevitable. It is the choice to seek truth, even when certainty is impossible. It is the decision to live, not in spite of finitude, but because of it. For in the fleeting nature of existence, courage is what transforms limitation into meaning, fear into action, and the inevitable end into a life fully lived. Courage and finitude are bound together in human experience. To exist is to be finite, to live with the awareness that time is slipping through our fingers, that every beginning carries the weight of an inevitable end. And yet, it is this very limitation that makes courage necessary, even beautiful. It is this awareness of finitude that leads us to “oistros”, to zest of life (Georganda, 2020b) and helps us transform the fear of death to creativity and eros for life. Being present in the moment and cherishing every single breath we take, for however long it lasts.

Courage is not the refusal to acknowledge our fragility; it is the decision to stand firm in the face of it. It is the artist who paints knowing the canvas will one day fade, the lover who opens their heart despite the certainty of loss, the thinker who questions even when no final answers can be found. Finitude casts a long shadow, but courage is the light that allows us to walk through it, undeterred. To live courageously is to embrace life with all its impermanence. It is to risk, to hope, to create meaning even in the face of nothingness. Some might see finitude as a reason for despair, but it is also what makes every moment precious. If time were endless, urgency would disappear, and with it, the fire that drives us to truly live. The courage to face finitude is, in many ways, the courage to be—to accept the fragile, fleeting nature of existence and, rather than shrink from it, to meet it with open hands. In the end, courage is not about overcoming finitude but walking alongside it. It is the quiet strength that whispers: "Yes, I am temporary. Yes, I am limited. And still, I will live boldly."

Courage, Love and Relationships

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.” Lao Tzu, around 400 B.C.

Love demands courage because it requires the willingness to be vulnerable, to face the uncertainty of human relationships, and to risk rejection or disappointment. It is not about seeking pleasure but about engaging in deep, authentic connections. According to many existential thinkers and psychologists like Rollo May and Viktor Frankl (1973), love is one of the most profound sources of meaning in life. It takes courage to love deeply, to open oneself to others, and to give of oneself without guarantee of return.

Love is not always comfortable or easy, but it is a source of deep, lasting meaning because it connects individuals to something greater than themselves. Meaning is often found in human relationships and connections. Courage is necessary to form these connections, to be vulnerable, and to care for others. By doing so, individuals enrich their lives with purpose and significance, creating meaning that is shared and nurtured through relationships.

One of the central ideas of Rollo May's book *Love and Will* is that they are deeply interconnected. Will without love can lead to selfishness or domination, while love without will can lead to passivity or a loss of personal agency. Both are needed to lead a balanced and meaningful life. Love allows individuals to transcend the self and connect with others, while will provides the power to act and create change. The will is tied to the concept of freedom, but true freedom is not simply the absence of constraints. It is the ability to choose authentically and responsibly, which requires both love and will. Love gives purpose and direction to our freedom, while will gives us the power to act in that direction.

Love and courage are inseparable. To love is to risk—to open oneself to another, knowing that loss, change, and uncertainty are inevitable. Love is not safe; it asks us to be vulnerable, to step beyond the walls of self-protection and offer our hearts without guarantee. And that is why love requires courage. Courage is not merely about facing fear in moments of danger; it is about standing firm in the face of emotional uncertainty. It is the willingness to trust another person, to let them see us as we truly are, flaws and all. It takes courage to love deeply when we know that everything in life is fleeting—that people change, circumstances shift, and nothing lasts forever.

But this is precisely what makes love so powerful. If we only loved when we were certain of the outcome, it would not be love at all, it would be a transaction, an agreement based on conditions and guarantees. Love, at its core, is an act of faith. It is the courage to say, "I will give myself to this, even though I do not know where it will lead." Love is not only about the grand, romantic gestures; it is also found in the quiet, everyday acts of bravery—the patience to endure difficulties, the strength to forgive, the resilience to choose someone over and over again. It takes courage to stay, to work through misunderstandings, to hold on when things get hard, and to let go when love asks us to. To love is to be brave. And in the end, perhaps love itself is the purest form of courage—the courage to be seen, to be known, and to give ourselves fully to another, no matter the risk. Sometimes, love requires the courage to let go. Whether it's letting go of a relationship that has become toxic, allowing a loved one to pursue their own path, or releasing someone to grow or heal in their own way. Letting go is an act of love that acknowledges the importance of freedom and growth. It's difficult to release someone you love, but sometimes love requires us to let go for the other person's well-being or for our own peace of mind.

Some further thoughts

Although the value of courage for living a full and satisfying life was never doubted in my mind several questions have puzzled me. Where do these qualities of being come from?

Are we born courageous? Is love inherent? Can we train our willpower? What can we do as individuals and therapists to enhance or inspire these qualities in ourselves and others? My effort for an existential-developmental understanding of human existence and growth (Georganda, 2020a, 2022) always had as an aim the possible discovery of how childhood experiences may be playing a significant role in the development of these qualities. Especially Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory, Mahler's (1975) separation-individuation concept, as well as Erikson's (1980) psychosocial development, when synthesized, seem to create a pattern that is very useful for our understanding. It is possible that a secure attachment, with what Winnicott refers to as a "good enough mother", can create a bond that makes a young infant develop a sense of trust and security in others and in life. This basic trust that Erikson relates to the development of the virtue of hope can provide the faith that Tillich discusses. Faith, for Tillich, is not about certainty, but about trust and the courage to affirm life in the face of doubt. The creation of this basic form of faith in the consistent presence of another early on may provide individuals with the necessary strength to face life's adversities and find the resilience to stand up to challenges.

Furthermore, the secure attachment of a good enough mother to her newborn may also imply a basic form of care and love for the infant that is experienced as a prototype of a loving relationship. This provides a reasonably selfless model for being there with another that may be adopted and implemented later in life by the infant. If the mother's ability to care and be present for the newborn can then be followed by her willingness to let go of the bond and encourage the infant to separate and become herself/himself by making their own choices, we will experience the second important element of Erikson's virtue of will. The virtue of will is the favorable outcome of the struggle between autonomy versus feelings of shame, doubt and I would add fear. It is possible that our willpower is exercised from early on by being able to make age-appropriate choices and face consequences. The presence of this good enough mother that lets us make mistakes and learn from them while encouraging our natural tendency to act fosters our ability to be courageous and authentic. Having such strong foundations enhances our ability to be free, courageous and stable in the face of adversity. These are just some thoughts about how our knowledge and wisdom from the past can foster our ability to navigate our life through these turbulent times that we are currently experiencing in our world.

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