

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



Courage and Occasional Success Moving Forward

"Success is never found. Failure is never fatal. Courage is the only thing."

— Winston Churchill

I have come to believe that most teachers I've known over the years are not necessarily courageous in the way that we often think about courage. We often learn about spontaneous acts of courage while watching the news or reading a story in the newspaper, and we are occasionally inspired by those who risk life and limb to go above and beyond.

These events are very special and important to share but the discussion I'd like to share with you this month doesn't necessarily require super feats of human strength or death-defying acts of courage. It might seem somewhat mundane but what I really want to share are some thoughts about how each of us thinks and can plan about moments of courage and how each of us can incorporate courage into the way we teach.

It is sometimes sad to admit that teachers are indeed capable of being "creatures of habit." Despite the nature of what we teach and the creative potential we see in kids in a classroom or rehearsal venue, we don't necessarily view what we do as a way of showing courage. For some, showing courage is nothing more than changing up our normal routines from time to time. There are also those who routinely look for opportunities to bring new ideas into their teaching and in those instances, it does take a certain degree of courage to "take risks" now and then.

Taking a risk

We know that acts of courage are not always spontaneous moments and that planning, being pro-active and anticipating the needs of our programs can often require a certain degree of courage. As music educators we are supposed

to be wired in a way that encourages creativity in most everything we do.

Unfortunately, some folks will never deviate from "conducting business as usual" (no pun intended). For reasons ranging from laziness, fear of the unknown, boredom and more, some among us will never take the opportunity to go beyond where they've already been (albeit sometimes with a certain degree of success). Why? Because it's the path of least resistance and if it worked in the

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past, there must be something to it. Well, not necessarily.

In classrooms where courage is practiced routinely by the teacher, there is often an atmosphere of anticipation (and occasionally a certain degree of apprehension or just plain fear). Students are encouraged to be active participants in the process and there is much more of a shared experience.

It's tough to take risks, i.e., working on challenging music in an ensemble, raising the bar of expectations, etc. Why? Because practicing courage changes the narrative from the same old predictable outcome to what if we're able to pull this together through hard work or what if we fail? Of course, this implies that your students are active and willing participants, doesn't it? P.S. Just keep remem-

bering that experience, good or not so good, isn't necessarily a bad thing. We do learn from failure, don't we?

Seize the moment

With the arrival of spring not too far off we look to a time of renewal and blooming but it's also a great opportunity and time to push the envelope for those with the courage to try. Practicing courage requires planning for a variety of possible outcomes (sometimes not all positive) and also risk-taking (however controlled it can be). That said, it can also be a great way to plan for the remainder of the school year and if it is possible to enlist the majority of your students, it can be a great opportunity to rise above the same old, same old.

In the end we are left with the impression that showing courage is not something that necessarily comes out of nowhere. Instead, if we practice and contemplate courage and if we plan for how we will show courage as teachers by thinking about courage pro-actively, we just might wind up showing amazing feats that could change the trajectory of our programs this year and in the year(s) to come.

Getting back to the original conception of Music in Our Schools Day here in New York and now that it has evolved 51 years later into Music in Our Schools Month at the national level, we must give credit to those who were dreamers and courageous enough to promote the importance of music education, period. All it takes is a spark. Be courageous and bring this same spirit to your program and let's see if together we can make every day moving forward, music in our schools! ||

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear; not absence of fear."

— Mark Twain