

Review of For Goodness Sake, Bravery, Patriotism and Identity. Coline Covington

Coline Covington has a prolific and high-quality output in her writing that combines the social with the psychodynamic and the academic with the clinical.

In this her latest book she continues the themes of her recent publication on the nature of everyday evil. In “For Goodness Sake” we are immersed in an unusually and refreshingly broad ranging journey into the nature of human responsibility as illuminated by the deep cultural and political crisis in the West. This is a highly textured and carefully thought through piece of writing that examines the nature of bravery as illustrated partly by clinical work and partly by cultural commentary informed by both psychoanalysis and the social sciences. Writing the book is itself brave in its attempt to understand the contemporary world holistically through the lens of what it means to act ethically and take responsibility. Her examples are drawn from many walks of life, several different cultures and across significant periods of time. She shows us the nature of the inner human struggle to act courageously in conditions of extreme conflict and uncertainty. In this she does not flinch from political observation and controversy.

Covington makes a series of helpful links between bravery and ordinary things that people do including the decision to go into therapy and the crises that emerge in therapeutic work that require major changes in value and direction in order that life can be lived differently. Her case vignettes are a real strength in this area and make accessible some of the issues of the struggle for identity particularly when an old identity has broken down. This is evocatively imagined and described by the slow-motion drama of a therapeutic engagement. I would have liked more of a sense from her as to which of her own therapeutic interventions were “brave”. Maybe the practitioner cannot speak of this without sounding and being narcissistic. It is clear she identifies bravery in her patients and that maybe is enough. Yet I found myself seeking a reflexive element in these otherwise closely observed examples of clinical engagements. Perhaps it is brave to dare to want to help someone break traditional boundaries and established rules and risking all by doing it. This is bravery in the dyad, the nursing couple, therapist and patient, the parent and child, or the sibling relationship. Perhaps it is brave simply to continue to be available for the encounter with the unknown that therapy represents and all the heartache, uncertainty and hard work that accompanies it.

I found the theme “Identity and what it means to be true to oneself” convincing in establishing the links between developmental processes, which are always incomplete and identity which evolves and changes throughout the life cycle. The idea that bravery comes largely from “being true to oneself” and hence part of a developmental achievement takes something of the mystery out of the idea of it as a special state and sets it in a more ordinary human framework. This is a great strength of the book and I take it as perhaps its main contribution

I felt however that something was missing at once cultural and in another way related to trauma and actual history or known social context. The cultural problem involves individualism and collectivism. The sense of self in a more collective culture is just different to one in a more individualistic culture, so the developmental achievement is also different. If my developmental achievement is to a form of identity with my group and family, then my bravery and capacity to act will be informed by that. The idea that the individual in a collective culture is in a state of fusion with their leader, family patriarch or group is a view,

but it is a western one. I had a discomfort to hear that group processes especially the large group are often places of discharge, acting out and splitting. In the West we never quite trust the group experience: we always must feel we need control it in some way. It is rare to hear a commentator lament what they can no longer experience because they have lost affective involvement in group life. Yet many of my friends from other cultures experience just that: a deep loss of that familiar touch and sensibility of group life, and a repeated puzzlement and sometimes outrage that we in the West are so careless about our own group involvements, which somehow only have meaning in terms of what we as individuals can get out of it. As James Grotstein put it “we learn to borrow the power of the group to mitigate individual weakness” (Ashback and Shermer 1987 pg x). In the West our involvement with groups is instrumental even as therapists.

In Chapter 2 the issue about “no choice but to act” helps to distinguish bravery from other decisions some of which are related to defences and splitting but some are not. Covington introduces the important problem of the bystander and underlines the key issue of the other and how much or indeed whether they matter. This becomes an important issue in therapeutic work of when and how to judge if offering containment for instance, deflects the patient from distinguishing between oppression or adaptation to and collaboration with it. This arena of how clinical wisdom plays out in extreme situations of victim perpetrator dynamics is a distinct subject. An example is Rothberg’s (2019) work on victim and persecutor dynamics. There are also a complexity of experiences hinted at by the word cowardice, which seems to orbit bravery as its sad opposite rather than being in its own right a complex and vibrant response to social stress. This raises the interesting clinical dilemma as to when withholding or choosing not to act is a containing gesture and when is it one that lacks courage.

Covington goes on to explore in chapter 3 the history of thinking that is specifically western about what citizenship is. This is set against the idea of the “plague” that spreads through groups and other collectives in times of change and crisis. In this image “true participation” in the Greek sense of the polis is always in tension with social plagues that come and go. I cannot help thinking these plagues even in the Western tradition are in fact social revolutions and we are getting here another kind of disavowal and splitting away from the social power and significance of collective social action which include both the protesting and revolutionary crowd and associated political movements. This tradition of collective bravery and action doesn’t get much of a look-in.

Much more positively, the later chapters, particularly those on whistleblowing, were riveting. The idea that the bravery involved for whistle-blowers entailed a deep loyalty to a constitution or a set of rules seems to link back to the issue of doing what is true to the self-given that this self is made up of internalised objects and relationships. These objects include loyalty to constitutions or sets of rules that are meant to govern behaviour. I would add loyalty to moral codes which is the stuff that both social integration and its opposite civil war are made up of. In getting to define bravery more closely, Covington describes how courage embodying the knowledge of fear and hope can form the ground for bravery that is risk aware and informed by an assessment of whether any action taken is life preserving and promoting.

In her conclusion she tells us that “Every act of bravery is an act of self-agency and, as such, a political act” (p. 209). Following Camus this also involves the counterintuitive idea that the

plague can only be fought with decency. The plague is essentially difficult to define but it seems to regularly infect individuals and societies such that we are tested over and over not to be victims or bystanders in passive alliance with perpetrators. She speaks of the shame involved in not acting and of the necessity to be vigilant. Her concluding lines could not be clearer: “As populist autocracies gain ascendancy in the world, and truth and dissent are silenced, we need to be especially vigilant in guarding against the cowardice of inaction and the complicity that costs us our conscience, our countries and ultimately our lives.” (p. 210)

As the dust settles, I am left with some thoughts that have to do with the relationship between trauma and history. It is notoriously difficult (and brave) to build complex interdisciplinary arguments that try to make coherent and hard-hitting calls for action that are needed at several different levels of survival: individual, social and transcultural (to name a few involved in human culture surviving). Some of her patients in this book were in long term processes of migration. These families move through time: some individuals must make radical breaks in order to cope with changed circumstances while other families change much more slowly. The internalisations of change and continuity may jump generations, social conservatism may grow out of generations that were deeply traumatised by their experiences of migration while others may live closer to rights-based values where social action is always close by as a companion. In each case it is only possible to understand which way to go and the why of it by deep social contextualisation, something that we as therapists are often quite poor at doing despite a commitment to the emotional detail in the grain of our patients’ lives. Often, we need more transgenerational historical detail to understand and embody a problem that an individual or group are suffering from. (Williams, 2021).

We have to ask whether we get to refer to abstract processes like large group dynamics when we have not been able to get the problem or material to settle better. Splitting, disavowal and identification with the group become substitutes for historically based reflection or multi-vocal and multi-cultural renderings of the varieties of truth that are in-play. The troublesome and complicated intersections of colonial and post-colonial thinking mean that we live in a world which may cause some to shrink away from the complexity of knowing and caring for others from other cultures and holding the hope that those cultures might also want to care for us when our hours of need come, which if Covington is right, are already upon us.

To reprise: a great wide-ranging book helpful for therapists and others involved in politics and decision making to read and be challenged to risk doing small and occasionally large things very differently. I am aware we are in an affective area that is highly territorial that can involve an invitation to fight and dispute. This is also a problem of our age fanned by the flames of social media and its associated algorithms. A possible parallel process in my writing this review is in my response to the apparent either/or of the deeply individualistic thinking that Covington maps so eloquently being in tension with the many successful collective and groupish projects in the world. We need to identify more positively with this in our own culture and learn from other cultures about how they approach and resolve conflict using group involvements of different kinds. This will help us decolonialise ourselves (to the extent that this is possible) and hence know our current strengths, weaknesses and potentials better.

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