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The Way of Courage: Speak Up, Speak Out

In 1996, Elissa Montanti visited Bosnia. At the time, she lived in Staten Island and suffered from a debilitating anxiety disorder. "I was shown a letter from a boy who had lost two arms and a leg when a land mine blew up," she recalls. "The letter this boy had written said, 'Somebody help me, please get me new arms and a leg.' " Moved and inspired, Montanti recruited airlines and hospitals and within twenty-four hours had gotten enough aid to bring the boy to New York. "I was single at the time and had two dogs, so he stayed with me for four months, and while I was giving him back his limbs, my anxiety started to disappear. I had been asking God to help me with my anxiety, and little did I know that help would come in the form of a letter from halfway around the world."

Today the nonprofit foundation that Montanti has created, Global Medical Relief Fund, offers medical care and prosthetic limbs to refugee children from war-torn places like Bosnia, El Salvador, Liberia, Niger, Iraq, and Somalia. "The courage of these kids is absolutely amazing," says Mon-

tanti, who seems innocently unaware of her own courage in visiting war-torn places and rescuing these children. "A little boy I just brought here lost his sight *and* arm. I reached out, and twenty different specialists saw him. His sight was too far gone for a cornea transplant, but he got a new arm and when the newspapers asked, 'How do you feel now?' he answered with a big smile on his face, 'Now I can search my way.' This is courage." The first boy she helped, Kenen, now lives with Montanti and her husband and is, she says, "an example for all the children I bring here. They look at him and say, 'If he can do it, I can do it,' because he's a triple amputee." Many of the children return each year as they grow, to have their prosthetic limbs adjusted. "People ask me if anyone can do this. Yes, anyone can do this who has love in his or her heart. That's all it takes."

Courage Love That Forces Change

Courage is love as action—love on her silver steed, forcing change in the world, rising to challenges, negotiating life with skill, and confronting others with care and wisdom. The qualities that courage draws upon—hardiness and resilience, as well as the ability to bend and alter course when faced with difficulty, to commit oneself to a cause, and to find inner power during times of pain—are *all* associated with mental health. We need a deep, tensile strength to face the tough times in life, to speak out persuasively against injustice, and, above all, to love others wisely and well. To love at all is a risk that requires courage—we risk our safety, letting ourselves be raw and vulnerable; we accept our share of compromise and weather disappointment and despair; and above all, we are willing to confront a loved one even if what we need to say is not easy or kind.

Courage takes many forms. For some, it means changing the world, even risking one's life to do so. For others, it requires standing up for oneself, speaking out in your own relationships about what you need, setting boundaries. For still others, it's the bravery to face each day in spite of difficulties, either psychological, physical, or economic. For all of us, it means developing the resilience and optimism to handle tough circumstances and emerge stronger and wiser. From the landscape of the world to our interior landscape, courage is a necessity—and can be a powerful way of giving, as you'll see.