



What does it mean to be a Courageous Citizen?

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

We don't have a political problem in the United States. We have a spiritual problem. Any faith that professes a moral and ethical code of "no harm" to others or to oneself can resolve our problems. Christian, Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist are the common great faiths of the world and in the USA. The Buddha offers a resolution with the fourth precept called Skillful Speech. If we held ourselves, our media, and our politicians to the essence of this precept, which is to not cause division or harm with our speech, our nation would thrive and prosper beyond our imaginations.

It was the fall of 2008. I had just finished moving into the downstairs apartment of my neighbor's home and was gazing out the window at my house which I had just put up for sale. I felt like my life were the words to a Country Western bar song. My successful career as a commissioned construction salesman had come to a screeching halt. No one was remodeling their homes. And commercial contractors were not building. I was working in a feed store for \$12.00 per hour. My girlfriend and I had separated. I had no dog and no horse. Not having a dog was not a problem because I never owned a dog, but not being able to ride my girlfriend's extra horse was a huge problem. I was close to retirement and my blood pressure was high.

I was suffering.

At my last doctor visit before deciding to sell my house due to being unable to make the payments, he prescribed medication and somewhat off the cuff said, "why don't you try doing meditation or yoga or something like that? I've heard that really helps!"

Well, I tried it and it did help.

It was into this set of circumstances that the Buddha came into my life. The sad outcome of the typical country song did not prevail.

That was about seventeen years ago. You'll be happy to know I didn't lose my home. Construction sales and remodeling came back. I bought my own horse named Comet, a bright faced, gray Arab who was perfect for the hundreds of miles of trail riding near my home in Cool, California. And, my girlfriend and I did get back together.

I also developed a regular meditation and yoga practice which I love doing to this day. This also resulted in volunteering to be part of a meditation group inside Folsom Prison back in 2014 and I've been there ever since.

But what does this have to do with being a "Courageous Citizen" you may rightfully ask? As it turns out, the Buddha had a lot to say about our current culture war because *We The People*, are suffering.

In his own words the Buddha said, "[I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering](#)". Fear not, this will not be a screed on becoming a Buddhist. Although it would delight me if that happened it is not my intention. I simply wish to point to one aspect of my

spiritual practice that makes good sense toward ending the suffering of the divisiveness in our nation.

Consider the [following quote](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous Vietnamese monk who recently passed away.

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.” This is the Fourth Precept as taught by the Buddha.

Imagine if these words were part of the swearing in ceremony for any elected representative anywhere in the United States of America. Also, imagine if any person employed by the media anywhere in our country were required to also take this oath before being able to accept a job.

In my humble opinion we, as citizens of the United States of America, are “clicks” for politicians and the media used to evaluate our passions which sometimes do not reflect our best interests. In my opinion, the frantic greed to get elected and stay elected is more the full-time job of most of our representatives than serving our true and vital needs. And, the science of keeping our attention in the news and in social media under the guise of being well informed is the “drama” that is wearing us down with the fear that worse things are to come. The words “existential crisis” are so often used by politicians that they have lost their meaning.

No matter if you are Red or Blue, this is suffering.

And, this angst spills over into our personal lives. Long time friendships come to an end over who you voted for. At family gatherings, you hope no one brings up politics because at the last Thanksgiving, things didn’t end well. Your coworker assumes you share the same political views and won’t stop talking about the news as he or she was driving to work that morning.

Arthur Brooks, in his book “Love Your Enemies” describes this condition as the “[culture of contempt](#)”. This contempt is a felt experience in our bodies as well. We feel a tightness in our stomachs or shoulders and neck. Emotionally, we are more anxious and some are seriously depressed as a result of all the bad news. The more we listen, the more our biases are reinforced and the more our perceptions seem “right” and the opposing view wrong. Politicians on both sides of the aisle say ridiculous things and a debate in congress intending to advance a bill for our benefit stalls to a standstill. It would seem that if you want a lesson in the opposite of the virtues stated in the Fourth Precept all we have to do is turn on the news.

For those who may not have a spiritual practice of some sort to act as a refuge from this storm, politics has become their religion. The sanctuary is the living room, the altar is the wide screen

TV, and the congregation is the social media attending that day. The priest is the favorite news or podcaster and the bible is the books we read that reinforces our views.

So, what would the Buddha say about all this? Let us briefly explore some background about Buddhism to answer this question.

Buddhism is not a monotheistic religion like the faiths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The Buddha never asked to be worshipped as a God. Some people do worship him in this way but it is out of respect for his teachings that rituals and ceremonies have developed over the centuries. The Buddha, in essence said, “this is what ended suffering for me. Try it if you like. See if it works. If not, try something else”.

Embodied in the fourth precept is the elegance and simplicity of the Buddhist Teachings, the Dharma, as it is called by those who study them. These teachings are summarized in the foundational concepts of Buddhism and are called the [Four Noble Truths](#) and the [Eightfold Path](#).

I won't go in to detail about these teachings. If you're interested you can find plenty on Google or your favorite AI chat bot. For the sake of examining and defining what it takes to be a courageous citizen, I will stick to the words in the Fourth Precept.

“Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I strive to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.

What does it mean to be “aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech”? It would be to recognize that using words as weapons to harm others only causes harm. Not only to the other, but to ourselves in the process of using them. What would it take for you and I to stop this kind of speech? In other words, what would skillful speech that didn't cause harm look like? Investigating this notion and vowing to resolve it would take courage.

What is “the inability to listen to others”? That would mean not interrupting and not using “gotcha” tactics to “win” the argument. It would mean listening patiently and clarifying assumptions. It would mean being aware of our biases. It could mean that we should study the book “[Nonviolent Communication](#)” by Marshall B. Rosenberg or other related books or courses on the subject.

And, how do we vow to strive to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others, and to relieve others of their suffering? We need to be around other people who are also striving to make this happen.

The good news is that this is what Braver Angels is all about.

Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I strive to learn to speak truthfully using words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope.

In my opinion, most of our media and politicians do not adhere to any form of this concept. Nor do most of us in our daily lives. What would it take to promise each other to adopt these ideas?

I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord or that can cause the family or the community to break.

To uphold the simple truth of these words in our daily lives would take daily practice and great courage.

I will make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

Our egos certainly get in the way of upholding this last part of the Fourth Precept. Again, it takes courage to patch up a nasty comment, especially if we made it!

A form of courage can also be found in going against the current. Of speaking out in spite of a lack of peer approval. One might say it takes no courage to speak out in a group of like-minded souls. It also takes no courage to violate each of these elements. In fact, it's much easier not to keep this vow in the current cultural climate we are in.

The Buddha found that suffering is sometimes inevitable. This is the essence of the [First Noble truth](#). The [Second Noble truth](#) asks us to examine the cause of our suffering. The Buddha teaches that suffering is caused by clinging to something or pushing it away. So what is it that we are clinging to or have such an aversion for that causes us to suffer so much in politics?

Our media and politicians are experts at using fear to lead us into attachment to our political ideologies and to abhor the opposing view. This is called clinging to our fixed views. The Buddha explained that it's ok to have fixed views. What causes our suffering is how we act out our attachment or aversion to our views or the ones we oppose.

Winston Churchill is famous for saying to the British citizens at the height of Nazi aggression towards their homeland during WWII, that "there is nothing to fear but fear itself". For courage to exist, one must be afraid of something. But what is courage? As defined by [Webster](#), "courage is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty".

In my own case, and because I have taken the vow of the Fourth Precept, I am afraid of violating that vow. And in doing so, I am afraid of unintentionally harming others by not saying what I mean to say. My emotional reactivity oftentimes gets ahead of me and I say something unkind or not exactly what I mean to say. It comes out backwards and upside down. Have you ever had that experience? I'm also afraid that I might not be able to listen to others deeply. To really hear the source of their pain. To try to understand that the causes and conditions that caused them to have their political views are as founded in integrity and well-meaning as my own. Often times I want to interrupt so I can state my view or respond to their statements that I "know" to be untrue.

I am afraid I will not always try to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring happiness and hope and to relieve others of their suffering. I am not talking about the syrupy

sweet kind of speaking and listening that this may sound like. I am talking about the bold act of compassionate and skillful speaking and listening that was found in many of the speeches given by the founding fathers during the difficult days of writing the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution. I am talking about the words of Martin Luther King in his renowned civil rights speeches. I am talking about our current day speakers and writers like our own John Wood and Maury Giles, and author Monica Guzman. I am talking about the kind of listening that it takes for someone to feel like they have truly been heard even if they know I don't share their views. Thich Nhat Hanh once said that deep listening is the greatest act of love. I am talking about the kind of listening that it takes to be a good debate chair and for a member to say, "Wow, that was really a well moderated debate!"

I am afraid that I may not always speak truthfully because I don't know all the facts but to "win" this argument I'm going to say what I hope to be true anyway. As a result, I'm afraid that I am participating in gossip, or spreading news I don't know to be absolutely certain. I'm afraid that I may condemn things of which I don't know enough about or that I may unknowingly say something that could cause division or discord or cause the family or community to break.

And finally, I'm afraid that I may not always strive to resolve a politically ideological conflict, no matter how small.

To be certain, in order to follow and uphold the Fourth Precept, I could become a basket case of guilt and shame. This vow would be extremely difficult for even a saint to follow all the time. This is where the rest of our spiritual practice comes in to play. By including all of the elements of each of our particular faiths we can hope to attain some wisdom about managing our relationship with the ideals of our specific spiritual practice. For me of course that includes the words of the Fourth Precept.

As a result, I have a compass to guide me in the right or most skillful way to speak which can guide me away from stormy weather and into a safe port.

This brings me to ask a final question or two? What kind of citizen do you wish to be? No matter what country you live in in this world, you are a citizen somewhere. Again, some help from Webster. "[Citizen](#)" is defined as "a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to a government and is entitled to its protection". I found this interesting because it aligns with the philosophy of the founding fathers. In [the Declaration of Independence](#), it is proclaimed that we have unalienable rights as human beings and that the job of our government is to protect those rights and ensure we can pursue our lives in an atmosphere of liberty, happiness, and safety.

John F. Kennedy famously said in his [first inaugural address](#), "It's not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country". To repeat, the definition of "citizen" says that we owe something in return for the protections that we are given by the government that allows us to live our lives in relative peace and comfort compared to so many other truly oppressive nations in this world.

And what is that something? For many of us, it can be found in the definition of courage as I have previously explored and will repeat here. “Courage is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty”.

So to answer the question, “what does it mean to be a courageous citizen?” I would respond by saying that for each of us there is a different answer to that question. For me, the fear of not speaking skillfully is where I need to muster the most courage.

The causes and conditions over a lifetime that created our political ideologies are as varied as the individuals who hold them. The intersection of divisiveness in our nation is where these conflicting ideologies meet. Much of what drives these conflicts is fear. This fear defines the doorway through which courage must enter. For each of us, in order to define “courageous citizenship” we will have to explore the answer to one simple question which holds the key to that door.

“What are you afraid of?”

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