Fear Itself

This book is a fascinating examination of a common and profound human failing. Published on October 14, 2014 by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D. in This Is America

Review of Cowardice: A Brief History. By Chris Walsh. Princeton University Press. 292 pp. $27.95

The idea of cowardice, which is widely regarded as the most common and profound human failing, has preoccupied Americans for centuries, especially in times of war. About 500 Union soldiers were court-martialed for cowardice during the Civil War and other offenses, including desertion and self-mutilation, were associated with cowardice. Recruitment posters in World War I played on the shame of cowardice. In the middle of World War II, General George Patton accused two soldiers who claimed they were suffering from battle fatigue with cowardice and slapped them. And in the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson repeated that he would be branded a coward if he withdrew American troops from South Vietnam.

In Cowardice, Chris Walsh, associate director of the College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program at Boston University, provides a fresh and fascinating examination of the use of the term on — and off — the primal theater of cowardice, the battlefield. Drawing on research in evolutionary biology as well as an informed interpretation of American history and literature, Walsh analyzes the relationship between courage and cowardice, the tendency to characterize men and not women as cowards, and the distinction between physical and moral cowardice. Most important, Walsh argues, provocatively and persuasively, that over the past century the idea of cowardice has faded in significance, especially in military settings, and reappeared with somewhat different connotations.

Natural selection has not eliminated cowardice, Walsh points out. Fear is a natural, adaptive, and at times prudent response to danger. Seeking to avoid ridicule or punishment, moreover, individuals often override their inclinations, do not act in cowardly ways, and retain mating opportunities. And, according to evolutionary biologists, cowardice can be useful in species survival. When their colony is attacked, for example, “brave” aphids sacrifice themselves in large numbers for the common good, while the “cowards” who flee live to propagate — “to fight another day.”

Emphasizing that cowardice is a socially constructed concept, Walsh helps us understand the new ways it is used in contemporary public discourse. Shell shock and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), he points out, have medicalized conduct that otherwise might have been considered cowardly. A reaction against the bloody twentieth century has increased sympathy with conscientious objectors and war resisters. In the United States, Walsh suggests, the volunteer army prompts many
citizens to refrain from judging the behavior of soldiers in combat; we call them heroes, he writes, “and leave it at that.”

And yet, according to Walsh, the last decade has witnessed an uptick in denunciations of cowards and cowardice. President Bush referred to the 9/11 terrorists as cowards. Following the Boston Marathon bombing, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 103, paid for an electronic billboard, placed on an expressway leading into the city, which flashed a message that included a hashtag, “#Cowards.” When Bill Maher claimed on his TV show, Politically Incorrect, a week after the attacks, that staying in an airplane when it hits a building, “say what you want about it, is not cowardly,” and added the Americans who lob cruise missiles from thousands of miles away are the cowards, viewers and sponsors went ballistic and the show soon went off the air.

Maher was right, Walsh implies. There is no evidence that the terrorists acted out of fear. Calling them cowards, however, satisfied a desire to express contempt for them by using the nastiest term of abuse short of an obscenity. And if they were cowardly, they were scared, vulnerable and weak, no match, ultimately, for Americans who were “Boston Strong.”

Although the dangers of the misuses of cowardice are abundantly clear, Walsh concludes that it would be a mistake to allow the concept to “dissolve in the blood of its history.” After reminding readers of the findings of psychologists that people often hide inconvenient or threatening information from themselves so that desire can trump duty, he deems evasion of the truth “the most pervasive and profound form of cowardice.”

At the same time, however, “the idea of cowardice, properly understood,” may provide the incentive to stimulate deeper confrontations with ourselves and our inadequacies. By invoking cowardice, Walsh suggests, we might be better able to overcome the self-anesthetizing tendency to convince ourselves that we need not – or cannot – do our duty to ourselves or to others (including those we love) because it not feasible or possible, “when really we’re just afraid to try.”

From our sometimes smug vantage point, Walsh reminds us, it is relatively easy to identify (and judge) acts of cowardice committed in the past. But, he asks, “what failures will future generations recognize in our present age, what duties did we faithfully shirk, and in doing so compromise ourselves, and bring harm to others, the planet, our descendants?” Used in this context, cowardice isn’t only “a dangerous, harmful idea, it’s a bracing one too.”