



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

we can do these hard things

“You can do this hard thing”

—Carrie Newcomer

About a month ago I attended a wonderful concert by Carrie Newcomer. Carrie has a beautiful voice; her songs come straight from her heart and cover the range of human experience. One of her newest songs has a refrain “*You can do this hard thing.*” She said the phrase came from two sources, a talk by novelist Barbara Kingsolver and observations of Montessori teachers who use it with their students.

“*You can do this hard thing.*” The phrase is so encouraging, acknowledging the difficulty of a task, but filled with confidence in the competence of the individual. How lovely it is to have it said to us, but more importantly how crucial it is to say it to ourselves and what is more, to believe it.

Open any newspaper, turn on any news broadcast and prepare to be overwhelmed by the things wrong in our world—from environmental issues (global warming, pollution, environmental degradation) to human (intolerance, hatred, violence, poverty, hunger, poor health care, poor educational systems . . .) If we are paying attention it is hard not to despair about all that is wrong with our world.

Sometimes we want to turn away and ignore the issues, focusing on our own little world, simply enjoying the bounty all around us. There is certainly nothing wrong with enjoying our lives and appreciating all that we have, but it is important to remain conscious of the big picture. We cannot afford to be blind and run from the problems. We must remain *conscious*—without giving in to despair or being overwhelmed and paralyzed.

How do we remain conscious and avoid despair and overwhelm? The words of Mother Theresa come to mind. When asked how she continued to minister to the poor in Calcutta knowing the magnitude of the problem and the lack of hope for making more than a dent in the situation, she replied, “Our job is not to be successful but to be faithful.” We must choose an issue that we care about and be faithful in working towards a solution. The solution may be slow and not even possible in our lifetime, but we can faithfully do our part, no matter how small.

Our values will determine what issue will be most important to us. We cannot take up every cause, but we can respond to the cause that calls loudest for our attention. We can assess our gifts and resources and offer them in the service of change. I receive many pleas for help in the mail. The causes may be very worthy, but when they are not causes that I have chosen, I am so grateful that others have taken them on and are working for change.

Working for change requires *courage*—doing things even when we are afraid. We must have the courage to step out and make our values known, to do things that may not come easy or natural. We may experience negative consequences; people may not agree with us or even become angry with us. We need to be grounded in a community, supported in our actions by those who care for us, even if they don’t agree with us. Just as likely as the negative consequences are unforeseen gifts that appear: maybe we develop a skill we hadn’t recognized, perhaps we meet others on the path who become fast friends, and most of all we feel the satisfaction of having done something for a cause that is bigger than ourselves.

Finally we must have *compassion*—compassion for ourselves when we fail to live up to our standards and also compassion for those who either don’t act or act against us. We must remember they are doing the best they can and following their values. We do not need to be enemies even when our views conflict. Compassion, respect, open mindedness and deep listening may lead to a new and even better solution than what we might have imagined.

Consciousness, courage, and compassion will help us take the stands we feel called to take. We can do these hard things, one step at a time. ❦❦❦

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