

On Courage

Wendy Sarkissian

The human condition in community engagement
no. 1
On Courage

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Bang the Table is a digital community engagement company with a strong social mission. Our purpose is to involve citizens around the world in the conversations that affect their lives and advocate public participation as vital for any well-functioning democracy.

Introduction

In this personal, evocative essay, Wendy Sarkissian offers readers insights into her more than forty years' experience and deep understanding of, at times, masked realities of enacting professional courage.

Wendy's work is an important passkey to the history of community engagement in Australia. Spanning four decades in planning and community engagement practice – in which, in the early 1970s, she finds her niche – the map of her working life stretches to the outer reaches of Australia. In her musings in *On Courage* – the first in our commissioned series interrogating the human condition in community engagement – the author reflects on her career and where the dots of her working life might connect.

Here, Wendy introduces her child self – affectionately called 'Wadi' – and, in alternating the point of view with her mature self, draws readers into definitions of courage: “how we inhabit challenges life presents us.” This retrospective glance does not look at the adult Wendy through the idealising eyes of a younger woman; but cuts to the quick of journey of courage – a courage born of the recognition of gender and emotions in the professional arena.

Wendy's reflections face the indignity of gender inequality – “a trouble-making feminist who should return to Canada thoroughly chastened.” But this is not the dismissive ire of an overlooked woman. *On Courage* celebrates the momentous and history-making; as the first woman to study planning in South Australia, and in her early career, the only university-educated woman in a staff of 700 at the South Australian Housing Trust. She unrolls the tale of her working life from Adelaide in late 1960s to her identification with 1970s second-wave feminism, as we follow her career from her late twenties to her forties and into her mid-sixties. Wendy paints the pleasures and joys of professional courageous acts; from her alignment with community art in the 1990s to having courage in giving voice to marginal communities. She warns of “deleterious impacts of ignoring the voices of ordinary people.”

But this deeply personal storytelling also communicates the purpose of sharing this experience. Wendy sifts her career for five guiding principles of courage in community engagement. Deliberating on the courage to persist, “daily courage”, “genuine risk” and when courage becomes “a voice of concern,” she moves from tangible, courageous acts to the philosophical as she takes us to the heart of courage. “Courage,” she writes, “requires vulnerability.” Courage is an emotional compass for her professional development.

An etymology. An emotion. Courage, Wendy reveals, is a life journey in listening to “the softest voices in communities.”

Sally Hussey
Editor

On Courage

I have come to believe that we can only discover the capacity and meaning of our courage in the context of our struggles, in how we face and inhabit the challenges life presents to us. In this, courage is an applied art of spirit. It is not something we can manipulate, but only live into.

Mark Nepo, 2007¹

¹Nepo, Mark, *Finding Inner Courage*, Red Wheel-Conari Press, San Francisco, 2007, p.13.

Adelaide, September 1970

Oh Wadi, I hope you don't mind me using your childhood name here. You are little more than a child with a whole professional life ahead of you. I am your older self, able to glimpse bits of your future. I'm here to open your imagination to some of the challenges you'll face as your professional life develops. Challenges to your courage.

So, you've decided to be a town planner? Well, you are going to have a big life. And your career choice will certainly test your courage. Starting today, actually. Now you're only 27 and you've applied to study town planning at Adelaide University. You do not know now that you'll be the first woman to study town planning in South Australia. Here's what will happen. You'll apply and be given a special 'planning' assignment by the Dean to demonstrate your abilities (despite having two Arts' degrees). You'll do the assignment and suffer the indignity of your husband – an academic – being made to certify that he did not help you with it. Then, a year later, when you top the Master's class, the *Adelaide News* will send around a journalist and photographer

to record this momentous event. They want to photograph you stirring a pot in your kitchen to show that you are still a “real woman”.²

You resist. And more resistance is to come. Will you have the courage to persist? You bet! That little test is only the beginning.

Soon you discover that community engagement is your thing. You have found a niche where you can be both passionate and effective. Initially, at the South Australian Housing Trust, you call it ‘tenant participation’. Same, same. And it will become your career focus.

Courage: a preamble

But before I alarm you with my prognostications, let’s look at courage. It’s an emotion, of course. But it is much more. It originates in the Latin word, *cor*, and aligns with the French word *coeur*. For heart. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it alternately as “the ability to do something that frightens one; bravery” and “strength in the face of pain or grief.” But, for you, courage is going to be much more than its etymology.

Poets love courage, Wadi. They always seek transcendence, meaning, and relevance. So you hear poets like Mark Nepo saying things like this:

“Only the quiet, daily courage to be can let the air soften our hearts again.”³

² ‘Wendy Tops the Men,’ *Adelaide News*, December 1972.

³ Nepo, Mark, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have*, Red Wheel-Conari Press, San Francisco, 2011, p.332.

“Without the courage to face each other and hold each other, we remain broken and adrift.”⁴

“There is no substitute for genuine risk.”⁵

What I want to share with you is that the heart is a muscle that will atrophy if it is not used. And while courage *is* your heart and located *in* your heart – it’s much, much more. It’s not heroism and it’s certainly not recklessness. It requires vulnerability. A heart full of courage is a personal engine, a driving force, a professional ethic, a mantra, a whole personal and professional identity.

⁴ Nepo, *Finding Inner Courage*, p.276.

⁵ Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, p.42.

Principles of Courageous Community Engagement

Principle 1
Never attempt courageous work alone

Later, Wadi, you will discover that your whole life will become an apprenticeship in courage. And you will quickly learn one important principle: *never attempt courageous engagement work alone.*

In your first job at the Housing Trust, operating from an office that was formerly a closet, you were the only university-educated woman in a staff of 700. You failed to convince the Chief Architect to listen to the evaluations of tenants reported in your resident satisfaction surveys. You were operating alone. You lacked credentials. It was easy to discount your opinions. Reviewing your report, the Chief Architect told you how things worked (he – the ‘expert’ – knew best) and he binned your report. That, and other punishments, should have convinced you that you desperately needed accomplices (or allies). Witnesses, at a very minimum.

I’m here to tell you that what that man said is not how things work and that your whole professional life will reveal that listening to – and reporting on – the hesitant voices of single-parent tenants in public housing in Adelaide in the late 1960s was a courageous act.

Luckily, not long after that dismissive conversation, a principled young activist, Greg Crafter, and dynamic Premier Don Dunstan⁶ will notice and trust you – and allow you to move from the cloakroom to the Housing Trust boardroom. By that time, you will identify as a feminist and, although time-consuming, collaborative and collective work with other women – mainstays of second-wave feminism – will empower you.

In 1977 and 1978, your lobbying for representation by women and tenants on the Housing Trust Board will succeed – eventually.⁷ You'll feel emboldened and supported in your courageous encouragement of TV viewers to post their knickers to Hugh Hudson, Minister for Housing,⁸ to convince him that 'women wore the pants' in housing in South Australia. That's because working with you will be 'the collective': scores of women working for better housing for economically disadvantaged women.

While, initially, you will feel alone and exposed, a flurry of letters to the Editors in daily newspapers⁹ the following week will reveal wide support within feminist and activist communities. The manager of one women's shelter will exclaim that I had been cast as a "stirrer",

⁶ Greg Crafter was an Australian Labor Party Government Minister between 1979 and 1993. Don Dunstan was Premier of South Australia from June 1967 – April 1968 and June 1970 – February 1979.

⁷ Three of seven Board members of the South Australian Housing Trust are now women.

⁸ Hugh Hudson was Deputy Premier of South Australia in 1979 and Australian Labor Party Government Minister between 1970 and 1976.

⁹ Letters appeared in the *Adelaide Advertiser* and *Adelaide News*.

“a trouble-making feminist who should return to Canada thoroughly chastened.” They called the Minister’s response “a typical male chauvinistic shrugging of the shoulders.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Wendy Sarkissian appeared on *Today Tonight*, 21 December, 1977. See also Oxenham, Helen, ‘Interview with Wendy Sarkissian,’ 1994, held at State Library of South Australia/National Library of Australia, Accession no. 45016494.

Principle 2
Always evaluate your work

As you get older, fortunately, Wadi, you'll get wiser. And you'll discover a secret: when you present courageous community engagement as community art (or, more fashionably, community cultural development), it's easier; people are more forgiving. Nobody ever attacks an artist for being 'artistic'. So, you partner with a mad community artist and together in 1990, you showcase the Gods of Melbourne's Arterial Roads in an astonishing 'archetypal' workshop sponsored by the State Government of Victoria (VicRoads) ironically called *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Your traffic engineer client plays Zeus. Other squabbling gods embody the roles of the wide range of users of Melbourne's arterial roads.¹¹ That amazing experience will reveal your next guiding principle: *always evaluate your work*.

¹¹ Sarkissian, Wendy, Dunstan, Graeme and Kelvin Walsh, "The Gods Must Be Crazy": A Role Play Simulation within a Search Conference,' Chapter 12 in Wendy Sarkissian and Kelvin Walsh (eds), *Community Participation in Practice: Casebook*, Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy, Murdoch University, Perth, 1994.

In the case of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a systematic evaluation revealed results not as effective as you and your colleagues thought. The dramatic archetypal role play had a powerful effect but perhaps not the desired effect. Nevertheless, for all participants, the role play was the most memorable part of the day-long workshop. And for you and your colleagues, it was a milestone in courageous community engagement.

Principle 3
When all else fails, try to be funny

In that experience, you learned the next principle of courageous community engagement: *when all else fails, try to be funny*. Humour is a quality that anyone can relate to. The hilarity of the spontaneous utterances of the irrepressible and fractious Road Gods will stay with you throughout your life. Taxidermus (the God of Taxis) lecturing Bicyclops (the Goddess of Bicycles) to “keep your bikes off the footpath” was as funny as the burly man embodying Hestia (Goddess of the Hearth) begging Pantechnicon (God of Truckies) to drive safely to protect her children.

Principle 4

*The more courageous the community engagement,
the more pedantic and formal the reporting*

Building on collaboration, evaluation and humour, you will arrive at your fourth guiding principle for community engagement: *the more courageous your community engagement initiative is, the more pedantic and formal the reporting*. You will discover that everyone hates being toyed with. In the case of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a detailed analysis of the role play's lessons will reveal shocking asymmetries in power relationships regarding arterial road systems. Some loud voices were dominating the conversation (taxi and freight lobbies, for example), while other voices, at the margins, the borderlands, were effectively silenced. By giving dramatic voice to those at the margins and highlighting areas of disagreement, you will shock observing participants into recognising the significant and deleterious impacts of ignoring the voices of ordinary people about neighbourhood road issues. So, Wadi, you will discover a sort of paradox: to be effective (and really empower people – and not just have fun yourself), you need to be very careful. Courageous and careful at the same time.

After a while, you'll find that your courageous responses will become second nature because careful reporting has also become second nature.

You'll learn to loosen up and hold things a bit more lightly. You'll find yourself laughing as two teams of senior consultants (architects, planners, surveyors, engineers, landscape architects) make a 'Yin Yang' cake in a teamwork exercise to represent their cooperation on a huge suburban planning project.¹² And you will see your colleagues turning to smile back at you as they put the cakes into the ovens. They'll be more than colleagues by then. You will be nearly forty years old by this time. They will be staff in your own planning office.

Of course, dear Wadi, your community engagement processes will not always run smoothly. You will encounter shocking moments of betrayal at the hands of those whose values you thought were aligned with yours. Activists you respect will betray you and (temporarily, at least) break your spirit. You will receive harsh punishments from institutional clients: blacklisting, banning and lies. But these will be like small coves or tidal creeks in the big, strong river of your professional courage that surged from its headwaters in your basic optimism and travelled along its course, offering up endless opportunities for courage.

Gradually, you will learn that a small, light craft and gentle navigation are what's needed. And your valued

¹² Sarkissian, Wendy and Kelvin Walsh, 'Teamwork and Collaborative Planning for a New Suburban Development in Melbourne: The Case of Roxburgh Park,' Chapter 2 in Sarkissian and Walsh, *Community Participation in Practice: Casebook*.

colleagues, sometimes singing, paddling, steering or even bailing out. The River of Life will draw you along in your quest for courageous engagement opportunities. Along the way, you'll discover (and reaffirm) your own trustworthiness as you learn about the redemptive qualities of a principled professional life. And the paradoxes and ambiguities it reveals. Sometimes you ('the agent') will have difficulty keeping your promises in community engagement contexts because your client ('the principal') won't let you. You'll learn that that goes with the territory – just as to be in the river, you must get wet.

Principle 5

Stay in your body

Some days, you'll feel the "pulse".¹³ Your courage lives in your heart and especially in your 'high heart'.¹⁴ There, if you breathe into it, you'll learn to experience something that feels like "Yes". Or "Aha". You will come to sense when a proposed courageous act of community engagement is warranted when, to rephrase Stanley Keleman, "your body speaks its mind."¹⁵ That pulse is similar to "The Flow".¹⁶ An appreciation of 'the flow' will come later in your life, as you enter 'the zone' and discover that nothing but courageous instincts arise when you enter into community engagement. As you come to your senses, courage will emerge as your first nature. You will become the River.

¹³ Leonard, George, *The Silent Pulse: A Search for the Perfect Rhythm that Exists in Each of Us*, Gibbs Smith, Layton, Utah, 1986.

¹⁴ The 'high heart' chakra is located between the throat and heart chakras. Often associated with courage, it is regarded as an important activator of higher consciousness.

¹⁵ Keleman, Stanley, *Your Body Speaks its Mind*, Center Press, Berkley, 1981. See also Hook, Ron, 'An Interview with Stanley Keleman,' *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*, v.53, no.1, Spring 2017, pp. 42-50.

¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper and Row, New York, 1990.

Along the way, you will certainly encounter obstacles and disappointments, my Wadi. You will discover that some people passionately hate even a whiff of courage. Some will try to kill courageous community engagement initiatives. Some will never be convinced. Others will envy you. Some will join in. By following your five guiding principles (*allies, evaluation, reporting, humour, and being in your body*), you will find a way to navigate new rapids. Because it will not be about you – but about the lives of people in the communities you’re engaging with – your ego will not despair or betray you. Your heart (now a muscle well exercised) will keep you afloat in the deeper, wilder water.

While courage and community engagement will rarely be about your ego satisfaction, my Wadi, you will certainly experience joy. One balmy winter night, standing in a Queensland park, while a crowd of 3000 chanting adults and children beg a trusted colleague (that mad community artist again) to torch a huge cardboard representation of the stigma that community had experienced for decades, you will weep openly. You will be nearly 60 years old then. Your heart will burst with joy.

Oh, Wadi, your courage will take you on a long, bumpy and marvellous journey. And a joyous one. And, when you sense the River, when you get a feeling *for* the River, it won’t be such a lonely journey any longer. But there will be moments when you will be alone with your *coeur* – your heart. Puzzled, vulnerable and frightened.

At those times, you will find that a lifetime of listening carefully to the softest voices in communities will have honed your listening skills. Then you can listen to your own heart. And, astonishingly, you will listen *with* your heart. Which is after all, Wadi, the definition of courage.

Books on Courage

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About the Author

Dr Wendy Sarkissian is a planner, advocate and author, and widely regarded internationally as a leading social planner, facilitator and trainer. She is expert in housing, community engagement, social planning and professional ethics. She seeks spirited ways to nurture an empowered and engaged citizenry. Wendy is an award-winning author including co-author of *Kitchen Table Sustainability: Practical Recipes for Community Engagement with Sustainability* (2009), *SpeakOut: The Step-by-Step Guide to SpeakOuts and Community Workshops* (2009) and *Creative Community Engagement: Transformative Engagement Methods for Working at the Edge* (2010).

Wendy holds a doctorate in environmental ethics (Murdoch University) and a Masters of Town Planning (Adelaide University). She is a Life Fellow of the Planning Institute of Australia and designs and manages complex community engagement processes in high-profile developments, as well as in small rural communities. She is also Adjunct Associate Professor at the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute and previously Adjunct Professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

About the Editor

Sally Hussey is Bang the Table's Managing & Commissioning Editor and Senior Writer. She has a rich background in the publishing, academic and cultural sectors and is completing her PhD at the University of Melbourne, Australia.



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