

Bitches, Battle Axes and Boadicea's: Awakening Our Fierceness

A whole troop [of Romans] would not be able to withstand a single Gaul if he called his wife to his assistance. Swelling her neck, gnashing her teeth and brandishing her sallow arms of enormous size, she begins to strike blows mingled with kicks as if they were so many missiles sent from the string of a catapult.

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Honoring Our Bitch

Go ahead, be a bitch. It's a good thing, nothing to be ashamed or scared of. I've wasted way too much of my life attempting to prove that I'm not a bitch. I have been nice when a saint would have lost it. I have been unduly proud when people said that I'm not a bitch but another woman was. I have called other women bitches in a disempowering way. I'm truly sorry for the way I've abused the word. I would like to see the word "bitch" elevated to its proper place in the English language, transformed from sexist epithet to a word of adoration and awe.

Bitch is actually a wonderful word and state of being. Just as a stud is a potent and valuable male, bitch is the ripe female equivalent in the dog kingdom, er, queendom. As we all know, its human use is usually derogatory because it's a word exclusively used in reference to strong women.

Now strength is a relative term. A man called me a bitch once when I very politely declined to let him cut in front of me in a grocery line. I suddenly understood the absurdity of trying to maintain a non-bitch stance in the world. No matter what,

someone will think I am one, so, what the hell, I might as well enjoy the perks of being an actual bitch.

"Bitch" is used as a verbal weapon, a way to keep "uppity" women in line or to keep women who are thinking about being uppity from opening their mouths. "You wouldn't want anyone to think that you're a bitch, now would you? Better not say anything," is how some of the logic goes.

OOOOOOOOHHHHHH, how scary to be called a bitch. Isn't it amazing that so many of us have given the word so much power?

I'll never forget the "Rhymes with Rich" headline about Leona Helmsley. That's acceptable journalism? Of course, the word they were asking us to supply was "bitch." I dare say it would not occur to publishers and editors to have Charles Keating, the infamous cheater of the savings and loan debacle, on a cover with a headline saying, "Rhymes with Sick." The mass media reserve gender-related put-downs for women.

To call someone a bitch as a put-down is to presume that there are bitches in the world and there are "non-bitches"; that the proper way to be a female human being is to be a non-bitch.

What is a non-bitch? She is like the unicorn, a myth, a fantasy that men have dreamed up. A non-bitch is a woman who personifies compliant beauty, who never gives a fella any trouble. She is always nice and understanding, never angry, doesn't argue, doesn't protect herself, her property or her children. She is always complimentary, remembers every detail about everything, never hurts feelings intentionally or unintentionally, always serves others first, always smiles and does what everyone asks of her, all the time, with no complaint. I'm sure I've left something out but since I'm a bitch, I don't pretend that I don't make mistakes.

The old-fashioned, put-down usage of bitch is like a girdle; it holds women back and in, and in a most uncomfortable and unhealthy way. No one really wants to be stuffed or squeezed into anything, whether it's an undergarment or an archaic form of so-called feminine behavior. Everyone despised girdles, but it wasn't until a few courageous women started refusing to wear them that the rest of us could wiggle out of them forever. (It's amazing to me that bra-burning would become the tired symbol

of women's liberation; it should have been girdle-burning. It's even more amazing to me that there has been a recent girdle "revival." Now that's a stretch.)

I hereby proudly declare my bitchness and invite others to do the same. Join me. Everyone in the world has bitchness in them, women and men, girls and boys. Why would we collude in the absurd idea of aspiring to not be something that we all are? There are things to complain about, there are things to be angry about, there are problems to take action on that require the bitch in all of us.

The more who proclaim, nay, celebrate their bitchness, the less bitchy we'll all seem and the bitchier we can all become. If you don't like that idea, take a hike because I don't care. I have better things to worry about. Ahh, that felt good — just like taking off a girdle after a long day. Try it.

Old habits die hard. I admit I still flinch if someone calls me a bitch. But I must remember to be proud that I am no longer invisible and, therefore, pleasing to everyone and anyone. And I think of my favorite real-life bitch, my dog and companion. Now there's a role model.

She's faithful, loving, valuable, warm, nurturing, intelligent, affectionate, and capable of ripping someone who attacks me or my loved ones to ribbons. She's a bitch and, except for the way she drools and sheds, I want to be just like her.

Honoring Our Age, Anger and Outrage — A Battle Axe Asserts Her Rights for Herself and Others

Another name for a woman, usually an older women, who refuses to submit to males just because they are male, is "Battle Axe," a throw-back term for a female warrior. She makes cutting remarks, she cuts through the bullshit. The woman who questions male authority is attacked for being unfeminine, and thus, becomes "undesirable." She is rejected and ridiculed by those who don't want to change the rules of the dominant culture, both men and women.

A woman who is not automatically submissive to men is called angry, castrating, a dyke, a feminist, humorless, a battle axe. Isn't it interesting that the assertion of one's rights is such a threat to so-called masculinity? The reason for this is that in our culture, like most others, boys are born into automatic authority and girls into roles of submitting to that authority. One's rights don't automatically take away rights of others. However, automatic privilege based on gender is very threatened by the assertion of rights. Men are privileged in every culture, even if they are relatively unprivileged compared to other groups. No matter what class, the male has automatic authority based on gender, and considers himself to have authority over all women regardless of age and class, even if in reality, he doesn't. The penis is quite a handy organ!

A lot of men and women haven't been able to understand that, just as men feel proud of authority, maturity and manhood, there are women who are (or who are working toward being) proud about mature womanhood and would like the respect that comes with age. Thus the objection some women have had to being called a "girl," regardless of their age or level of professional attainment. But many women are unwilling to object to being called a "girl," since there are so many more pressing life-and-death issues on the woman's-issues burner. However, the underlying belief in men's right to call women whatever a man damn well pleases, "girl" included, is not "semantics." It's a matter of control. Many women have maintained power by simply proudly embracing "girl."

Women who assert rights are often accused of being angry. "Angry" becomes an epithet. In reality, anger is genderless, and is nature's gift to let us know that our boundaries, physical or otherwise, are being trampled.

The following essay, by Randy Mamiaro, is one of the best and only tributes I've seen by a man who honors a woman's anger. "Inside the Helmet" exemplifies the spirit of the men who teach full-force self-defense, the men who put their bodies on the line so that women can learn to fight, literally and figuratively.

Inside the Helmet

By Randy Mamiaro

I had the happy opportunity recently to have a good friend as a student in one of Impact's advanced courses. Although she is a graduate of the basics course twice-over, I had not previously worked with her and so had no expectation one way or another of what the coming fights would be like. We began with rear-takedown scenarios. As I braced her body with padded arms and guided the two of us to the mat she tucked into stance and yelled a very loud and energetic, "NO!" Good start, I thought, and the series of solid elbow strikes and heel-palm blows which thudded against my helmet confirmed that my friend had indeed learned her basic techniques well.

She spun about into side-kick position; through the nylon mesh of my eye-holes I could see the tread pattern on the sole of her upraised shoe. I felt my muscles relax automatically as I prepared to absorb the momentum of her kick. Her foot shot out. POW!

What hit my thankfully well-padded noggin wasn't a human foot. It was a nuclear-powered battering ram! Thank God for foam rubber because — no doubt about it — that one kick would easily have knocked an unprotected person unconscious. For training purposes I kept "Boris" (that's the name of my mugger character) moving to receive another couple of side-kicks and a devastating trio of ax-kicks. Every one of those kicks hit like a bomb blast. Every one, individually, was a certain knock-out blow. All of our graduates have the capability to successfully defend themselves. All of them can render an assailant unconscious. However, not many hit with such power that every kick is a guaranteed knock-out.

Where, I wondered, was this intense energy coming from? My friend's technique is good, but it's not perfect. I'd call it average. Nor is she a buffed-out athlete with a strong and sinewy Linda Hamilton physique. There was more to those kicks of hers than could be explained by physics or physiology alone. No, the fuel for those strikes had to be something nonmaterial. Each kick was invested with an emotional content that, at the time, I could only think of as anger.

Yet, the word anger doesn't describe accurately what I felt in those kicks. I found myself floundering for the proper terminology so, as I'm wont to do in such a predicament, I ran to my thesaurus and my *Webster's*. My dog-eared *Seventh*

Collegiate Dictionary has this entry for anger: "1. a strong feeling of displeasure and usually of antagonism." Well, that certainly falls short of describing the vehemence behind those kicks. The second definition isn't quite right either: 2. Rage. Furthermore, rage is described as implying a loss of self-control in my friend's fight. She hit accurately and deliberately. She did not flail in a blind rage. Hmm... wrath. That's closer, since it suggests an intent to revenge or punish, yet it too seems inadequate. Definitely too biblical.

Ah-ha! Finally, here is the word: OUTRAGE. "The anger and resentment aroused by injury or insult" or, I dare say, by an outrage. That was the source of power in my friend's thunderous kicks — outrage! Of course. Knowing this woman, I know that, oh yes, she gets outraged. She is that too rare being known as an activist, someone who sees the wrongs and ills of the world and refuses to be merely appalled, or scared, or saddened by it all. She gets bloody damn well outraged. Then she tries to do something about it, bless her.

Darth Vader says to Luke Skywalker, in synthesized basso profundo, "Let go of your anger. Only your anger can make you strong!" But that is the Dark Side of the Force talking. Want to stay on the side of the angels? Use outrage, become outraged! Any thug, any robber, any rapist can be angry. Anger is amoral. Good people get, or should get, outraged. Outrage is anger born of a sense of justice, of belief in right and wrong.

I don't know for sure what generated outrage in my friend during her fight. I do know that she tapped into that outrage and it made her strong. Very strong. Stronger than simple anger could have made her, stronger than determination or the will to survive. I wouldn't presume to guess the source of her outrage, and I certainly wouldn't presume to tell someone else what they should become outraged over.

I can tell you what makes me outraged. Children being kidnapped outrages me. Alcoholic parents who beat and heap verbal abuse on their children because of their own insecurity outrages me. Parents who commit the ultimate betrayal and commit incest on their children, breeding their own victims, truly outrages me. Fraternity boys who think that because a woman attends a house party she's fair game for gang rape, or the serial rapist who attacks more than a dozen women before

being caught outrages me. Women who fear all men because no man in their lives ever treated them with respect or even common courtesy; men and women emotionally crippled because they never had an opportunity to learn that they have a right to their own integrity and self-worth; criminals convicted of rape and assault who serve maybe one or two years of a sentence then are freed to rape again; all this outrages me. Unfortunately, I could go on and on. And *that* outrages me!

Outrage is not unfocused anger, blind and wild rage, or boiling but impotent ire and frustration. It is the unleashed energy of victims who refuse to be victims any longer. It is a focused, unstoppable laser beam of anger directed against those who would violate our rights, generated by those who know they are right. It is your outrage which kicks out the mugger; your arms and legs, kicks and heel-palm strikes are merely the conduits of that power. Take it from someone who has been on the receiving end of that power: technique by itself is nothing, but technique energized by your outrage is unbeatable.

Honoring Our Bravery — The Boadicea In Us All

The woman on the cover of this book lived. Her name was Queen Boadicea. There is a statue of her in London, not far from Parliament, next to a bridge over the Thames. The statue depicts her driving a two-horse chariot with two young women riding on the chariot behind her. She is large, she is fierce, she is determined to avenge the rape of her daughters. She was a Queen on the British Isles who died in 62 A.D. as she led her troops against the Romans.

Boadicea is the embodiment of bodaciousness, a modern slang word, which according to the *American Heritage Dictionary* means: "Intrepidly bold or daring; audacious. (a blend of bold and audacious)" I don't buy their definition. I'll bet the slang was created by kids who looked up at the statue of Boadicea, and were awed by her. Question the authority of a dictionary? How bodacious.

Look at the *American Heritage Dictionary's* description of Boadicea: "Died A.D. 62. British Queen; led an unsuccessful revolt against the Romans." What an appalling definition that takes a less than flattering "spin" on an incredibly important

leader. Dictionaries are written by human beings after all. The human being who wrote about Boadicea could just as easily and truthfully have written: "Died A.D. 62. British Queen notable for her courage against great odds. Attacked a legion of Romans with very few troops." Most likely, there were no women on the dictionary staff to take an editorial stand in favor of Boadicea.

If you make room for Boadicea in your heart, there are three aspects she can awaken in you: the determination to avenge the wrongs done our daughters, the vision to pave the way for a better life for them in the future, and the willingness to take action against great odds.

Honoring Our Cowardice Through Courage

We value valor, bravery, courage, risk-taking, and the ability to withstand pain and suffering in our boys. We don't have the same expectations of our girls. We exclude them from the courage ethic to their detriment. We allow them to be cowards without breaking through to the other side of cowardice: courage. You can't have one without the other.

"Oh, Sally, don't climb that tree, you'll fall and hurt yourself." Yes, she might. So what? Not that I would want any child to break bones. Stanley might hurt himself too, but the gain of risk-taking is the building of heart. Bones break, but so do hearts and spirits when you limit people and assume that they can't handle life. People are disempowered when they don't get a chance to take risks or to test their mettle.

Bravery is actually gender neutral. Physical ability to protect oneself from harm is gender neutral. Systematically training boys to be brave and strong and training girls to be passive and weak is a tragedy that affects everyone. Courage is required of boys and girls, women and men for survival, mental and physical health, and the well-being of our world community.

Many women are guilty of falling back on socially-acceptable "helpless female" behavior when it comes down to hard situations, whether it is climbing a tree, making a difficult phone call, asking for what we need, telling someone to back off or checking out a suspicious sound at night. But it's important that all grown-ups — female and male — come to

terms with a fact of life: It not only takes courage to risk your life, it also takes courage to live a free and equal life. Women in dangerous occupations teach us that. Female police officers, soldiers, pilots, astronauts are pioneers who dare to take the all-too-real risk of injury or death. Fulbright Scholar Amy Biehl gave her life in South Africa. Her brutal murder at the hands of a "One Settler, One Bullet" mob came about because she believed in doing whatever she could to end apartheid. Amelia Earhart presumably died following her dream, her heart.

We forget that women actually come from a tradition of courage. For millennia women died regularly in childbirth; thus, marriage and pregnancy were acts of great courage. Sleeping with your husband could literally result in death. Countless colonial and pioneer women threw caution to the often-deadly winds, shoulder-to-shoulder with their loved ones. Native American women died defending their families and tribes. Slave women endured unspeakable torture, rape and inhumane conditions; many who escaped slavery came back to liberate others at great risk. Mexican and Central American women continue to risk their lives, crossing a border to make a better life.

The examples of courageous women are as varied and numbered as there are people. Many women must brave deadly neighborhoods every day. We have no shortage of heroic female role models if we only look. We must take inspiration from these women as we commit ourselves to developing our own bravery. It is only by being role models ourselves that our daughters, nieces, and granddaughters can learn first-hand how to become brave women.

If you look at the origin of the word courage, you find that it means "heart" in the romance languages, from the Latin for heart, *cor*. "Coeur" in French, "corazon" in Spanish, "cuore" in Italian. To have heart, to give heart, are phrases that evoke qualities that most people love and admire. No one likes a coward; even cowards hate being cowards. Yet we train our girls to lose heart, to back away from scary or risky things; we literally "dis-courage" them from experiencing their ability to transcend fear.

Many of us say, "She has balls," if the "she" does something courageous. There is no female equivalent to "balls" that

automatically references a woman's risk-taking. "Balls" equals "brave." I've started to say, "She has ovaries," or "She has gonads," when I speak of a woman's valor. Since gonads is a scientific term that refers to both testes and ovaries, it's entirely proper to say of a girl or a boy, "What gonads!"

We expect boys to face their fears. Parents literally "encourage" them to participate fully in games and activities that involve risk, physical as well as tactical. We can develop courage in young girls by allowing them to do the same. Far too many girls are discouraged from getting dirty, getting hurt, wrestling, out-witting boys, experiencing their strengths and limitations. Girls who have limited experience with athletics have a slim hold on what their bodies can or cannot do. Girls who experience physical activities and athletics gain an understanding of how powerful they really are.

Courage and cowardice. We all have both regardless of gender. Courage requires that a person be responsible for the consequences of his or her actions. Cowardice is a backing off from personal responsibility. Consequences build character, especially when we have noble expectations of the person who is acting or reacting to whatever circumstances have been handed them in life.

It's always been hard to take stands. There were big chunks of time in my life when I used to not even know what I thought about a lot of things or what to say. I can't say that I was abnormal. I observed women, relatives and strangers, who would literally go dumb around men-folk. Courage to think and speak. That is a very big deal for an entire group of people, women, who have largely had to depend on the men in their lives for esteem. That old outside esteem comes and goes. Self-love regenerates forever. And just as fear breeds fear, the good news is, courage breeds courage. Bodaciousness breeds bodaciousness. You could say that courage is spiritually contagious. You could also say that being a bitch, a battle axe or bodacious is being true to the spirit.