



EUDAEMONIA
Courage, with Madeleine Black

August 4, 2021

Kim Forrester (00:00):

Dear listeners, please be aware that the following interview may include references to sexual assault and sexual violence. Be mindful if you find these topics disturbing and take care of your safety and wellbeing. In our societies and in our media, we're often regaled with stories of heroic bravery and incredible daring. But every day in millions of ways, we are all asked to be quietly courageous in our communities, our homes, and our hearts. I'm Kim Forrester. You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast and today it's time to explore the incredible concept of courage.

Intro (00:45):

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax, and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester,

Kim Forrester (01:04):

Madeline Black is a Glasgow based author, public speaker and courage cultivator. Madeleine's personal story is one of sexual violence and trauma and, ultimately, healing, forgiveness, and profound personal courage. Madeleine shares her personal history in her memoir, Unbroken, in hopes that her experiences will help other victims of sexual violence and crime. It's an absolute honour to be connecting with Madeleine today, to learn about cultivating courage and to explore how we can each find the inner strength to heal, forgive, share our story, and thrive. Madeleine Black, welcome to the Eudaemonia podcast. It is just an honour to have you here today. How are things with you?

Madeleine Black (01:53):

Things are good. Thanks, Kim. It's lovely to be here with you

Kim Forrester (01:56):

These days, as I said in my introduction, I believe that courage is often linked to really bold actions and eye catching achievements. You know, we think of the intrepid explorer or perhaps the really outspoken activist, and we attribute courage to those types of people. But do you feel Madeleine that that is a fair representation of what it actually means to be courageous?

Madeleine Black (02:23):

Well, yes, those things that you spoke about are courageous. But I think if you have a real fear of something and you overcome that fear, that is hugely courageous. I was just away at the weekend and I was hill climbing with my middle daughter, Mimi, and the mist came down. And, you know, we always hear these stories about people that get lost just 300 yards off the path. And I think, "Oh,

how daft, how could they do that?" But believe me, it actually was really scary. My daughter was beginning to panic and get scared. And we met two other women that were shouting to us because they got lost. We met them earlier in the morning and one woman was really scared. You could see she was panicking. She couldn't breathe and she was so nervous she just wanted to stay still. But at one point the mist lifted and I said, "I can see the way down if we get to these rocks here. There's another path which we all got lost on earlier in the morning", I said, "We can find our way." This woman was terrified, really, like to the point of crying and she got down. And I think that's courage as well. So doing anything that scares you is stepping into your courage.

Kim Forrester (03:27):

Interesting. You talk about that story there - and it sounds terrifying to me, actually Madeleine, what you went through - but you are obviously in a group. You know, there was you and your daughter to begin with, and then you met up with these other ladies. And it's interesting because I think that courage can be very lonely, it can be very isolating as a concept. I think oftentimes we feel that we have to, sort of, stand alone and go within to find the courage that we need to have those confronting conversations, to step into the limelight, to do something that is really scary to us. So tell me, where did you draw your strength from to start telling your story and your history? Did you find it within or were you inspired by someone or something else external? Did you feel connected to something else that allowed you to tap into your courage?

Madeleine Black (04:20):

Yeah, I was totally inspired by other people; people that were speaking out and sharing their story with no shame. I thought, "Oh my goodness". So you know that I am a storyteller for the Forgiveness Project, and there was another woman who was just about to go to prison, to meet the man who had raped her. He was a serial rapist. He had broken into her home while her husband was in hospital and her little two year old daughter was asleep, and he raped her. She was going to prison to have a meeting with this man. And I just thought she was a warrior. And so when Marina, who is the founder of the organization, asked if I wanted to share my story on her website and she told me I could be completely anonymous, I just thought, "Well, if she can do that, then I can do this." So definitely, someone else's courage made me brave, without a doubt. And I saw that actually at the weekend on our hike because my daughter was beginning to panic and I could feel myself, you know, thinking "Don't panic because she's going to start crying any moment." But when these other women came, I saw the switch in her. She put all her energy into calming the woman down that was crying and it changed her focus away from herself. You know, to look outside of herself. So definitely, you know, I guess that's a couple of situations I was brave by somebody else. And when we're feeling scared and someone else is a little bit more scared than us, it can make us braver as well.

Kim Forrester (05:40):

Interesting. I wonder then, if we can't find it in ourselves to be courageous for ourselves, then maybe we can be courageous for others. You know, we can find that courage to step up if we think it's going to lift and inspire others. Have you found - since you tapped into your courage and started telling your story - do you feel that that courage has been contagious in some way? Have you heard stories of others who have seen your courage and have been inspired in the same way that you were originally?

Madeleine Black (06:11):

Every single day, literally, I am contacted by someone that's watched my TEDx, heard me on the radio, read my book, and told me if they hadn't read my story or heard my story, they would never have told dot, dot, dot. In fact, when I did my TEDx Glasgow, it was to an audience of 2000 people - in the days where we had audiences, live audiences. And, you know, I was terrified, but it was also really liberating just to stand there and tell my truth. There was so much going on in my body. And afterwards I was contacted by a head teacher who was there with a group of students from a local high school. And he told me that one young girl, about three minutes after I'd finished speaking, was just crying. And she turned to her teacher and said, "Me too", you know. "My uncle had raped me" when she was just a few years ago. "Like three years ago", she told him. She was ... so she would have been about 13, 14. And I've since gone to the school and I've met her and I've been to the Christmas concert. She's an amazing singer. And she said, if she hadn't heard me, she'd never have shared her story. And you know, that just really is my evidence. That's all I need to carry on doing what I'm doing because, yeah, absolutely somebody else helped me to find my voice and I really just intend to pay that forward. I helped her find her voice. She will now go on and help someone else. So it's a massive ripple effect, really.

Kim Forrester (07:35):

Well, courage really then is an expression of compassion in many ways - where we can help one another out. And courage, also, in the way that you teach, it seems to me to be closely aligned with self-compassion, self-love, or at least self-care. You know, it's about caring for ourselves and engaging our courage to, as you said before, liberate ourselves in many ways and facilitate greater well-being. Do you agree that there is a link between courage and self-care? And if so, what comes first, Madeleine? Is it the self-care or is it the courage?

Madeleine Black (08:13):

Well, we have to see how we are mistreating ourselves. And, you know, I had this sexual violence experience when I was 13, but it was then what I did to myself afterwards - the impact that I told myself that I was this worthless, contaminated, dirty, less than person - they never did that to me. I did that to myself. And I loathed myself, I hated myself for years. But I had to wake up to that. Until you see it, you're just caught by your behaviors and your reaction, your response to any kind of trauma. So once I saw that, I just realized. "I have to stop this". You know, "No one else is going to stop this for me. I have to be to myself, speak to myself as if I would speak to one of my children or one of my friends." When I really saw how I was running myself down constantly, that was the self-care, that was the self-love, because for years I hated myself. So I had to really learn to like myself, let alone love myself. So that's been a big journey. And then once I saw that I'm, actually, I'm not the trauma, you know, I'm not what happened to me, I'm not the events in my life. All of us are so much more than what happens to us. We, you know ... the real essence of who we are, I don't believe, can ever be touched by what has been done to us. And once I saw I'm okay, then that's when my courage came in. So yeah, I think the self-care is definitely just a beat before the courage, but they are very linked.

Kim Forrester (09:43):

You mentioned before our beautiful, shared connection with Marina Cantacuzino of the Forgiveness Project. We've both had the great pleasure of connecting with her at various times. And she often says, or she said to me on the interview I did with her, that forgiveness is often an ongoing process,

right? Where sometimes we have to revisit the trauma and we have to re-forgive the perpetrator. And I do wonder Madeleine, if courage is the same. You obviously had to find the courage to tell your story through the Forgiveness Project; you had to find the courage to get out on stage and deliver your TED talks. So once we found the courage to speak out - or it might be that we need the courage to come out or reveal ourselves in some way - is it a matter of, you know, wiping our hands, and we saying, "Yep, we've done that. We can move on"? Or can we expect to find moments where we are having to revisit our choices and re-engage our courage?

Madeleine Black (10:46):

I guess it's going to be very different for every single person really, isn't it? You know, I'm really in a place where I really, really feel that I am okay at the moment and I don't really get too triggered. Or, you know, I've done so much work. I've had tons of therapy and I have amazing self-awareness. But it still can surprise me sometimes. I remember being invited to see a play called Asking For It, which was based on the book by an Irish writer. Phenomenal woman, Louise O'Neill. And it was over in Ireland and I went to the premiere, which was brilliant. You know, on the night that I was gang raped, I spent a lot of the time counting. There was a border running around the top of the wall which was made out of bows and I counted the bows, you know, just over and over and over again. There were 44 bows. And in this play, the stage was, like, made up of windows. And at one point there was a rape scene in this play - it's about the gang rape of a young woman in a little Irish village, who then it goes on social media so, you know, she just then gets a bad name. It's just horrific the outfall from what happened to her. Or the fallout even. And I found myself, like on that night years ago, coming out of my body and I suddenly started to count these windows on the stage over and over again. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, I didn't know that I could still do that or go back to that place." It really shocked me. But what was different this time is I was very aware of what was happening, even though I didn't feel capable of stopping it. And after the play had finished, I was asked, do I want to go for a drink, you know? And I just thought, I need to be quiet. I need to find a way to ground myself, get back into my body. So now I have better tools than what I had years ago. So I won't say I'm never going to get triggered or, you know, it's never going to cause me issues. On the whole it is 99% cleaned up. But yeah, occasionally it does surprise me that things get triggered.

Kim Forrester (12:41):

I think it's important then for us to sort of carry that knowledge around with us because it helps us, if we do find that we have lost the courage we once had, that we can step into that space without self-judgement, without self-recrimination, and just love ourselves through, and nurture ourselves through that moment as you did there in Ireland. You found the Forgiveness Project and it was a very nurturing, very safe place, and a very safe way for you to find your courage and to speak about something you had never spoken about before. If we're going to be courageous in our expression, in whatever way is pertinent to us in our lives, if we're going to share our story, reveal our true selves, are there more conducive environments - are there more supportive methods - that you would advise we seek out in order to effectively and healthily express that courage?

Madeleine Black (13:40):

Yeah. I mean, I, that was the very first time I shared my story publicly. So I had shared my story, but just not in the public domain and I'm not suggesting that other people need to do what I do. You know, there's no reason why everybody has to stand on a stage or put their story out on the internet. But if you are going to share your story - and I think actually it's important because when we hold it all in, we really do hold ourselves back - just find somebody that you trust. It could be a

counsellor. Sometimes it's easier to speak to someone that's not connected to you in any way, you know, a stranger, a therapist, but find someone. And if you can't find someone, I think we have to stop denying our stories because for years, you know, I minimize what had happened to me. I said, it wasn't that bad. They weren't so bad. And you know, maybe I got it wrong. And I understand now I'm also a psychotherapist. That's part of the trauma. You know, our mind doesn't want to wake up to the worst possible thing that can happen to a woman. So I saw a post recently by Brittney Brown and it was the word Denial: Don't Even Know I Am Lying. And I thought that was me for years. I lied to myself. So when we can stop pretending or denying our stories and own stories. Yeah. I think that takes courage, but oh, it just, it really, it just woke me up again, you know, just really lined everything up, integrated my head with my body.

Kim Forrester (15:03):

Let's stay in this topic of safety because one of the young men who initially raped you when you were 13, he threatened you with death if you told anyone about the assault. And you had a knowing that he kind of meant it in the moment, right, Madeleine? So there are many situations where people are disguising parts of themselves, or have the fear of speaking out authentically about themselves, they are afraid of physical harm, humiliation, or even profound rejection. Are there any situations Madeleine, where you feel that personal courage is not safe or not healthy or perhaps not the right time?

Madeleine Black (15:50):

I guess everybody has to assess the situation you're in. But if you're in a situation, a relationship, where you really feel unsafe and you don't trust the person, it doesn't sound like a very equal partnership. It's perhaps an abusive relationship. So I would really start to look at, who do you surround yourself with? You know? If that's your reality, it's good to wake up to what you're going through and perhaps think about, is this kind of person, people, I want in my life? But yeah, everyone is going to have to assess the situation for themselves. But everybody's journey is so, so different. And you know, and I don't tell people, "I did it this way so you do it this way." There's many, many paths to healing, but it's ... I know it's very possible for everyone to heal. We just have to find our own way there; our own unique way.

Kim Forrester (16:37):

So let's talk about how we can be there for each other. You were explaining earlier on how courage is contagious. We can actually inspire others to speak out and be more of themselves if we choose to be courageous. But while researching for this interview, my daughter who's 18, she reminded me of what I told her and her older brother as they were approaching their teenage years. And I actually said to them, "Look, you are about to become teenagers, which means you are about to start doing really dumb stuff. And I want you to know that I know you're going to do dumb stuff. So if you are ever in a position where you feel in danger, where you feel uncomfortable, where you need my help and support, call me. And I will not judge you in that moment. You know, we're going to accept that this is just one of those dumb decisions that you made as a teenager." I know, Madeleine, that you also told your children the same thing.

Madeleine Black (17:32):

Almost the same script. Absolutely. Just because I always want them to feel they could always come to me and not have to hide stuff or lie to me.

Kim Forrester (17:40):

Precisely, because I think that it's clear that liberating others from our personal judgment has got to be a powerful way to encourage them to be courageously vulnerable and authentic. If they know they're not going to be judged or ridiculed or shunned because of whatever choices they've made, then it allows them to find that courage to speak out more truthfully. But are there other ways that you feel we can enable others - our loved ones, our friends, our family members, people in the community - to speak out courageously? Or, at least, are there ways that we can remove the largest obstacles to courageous personal expression?

Madeleine Black (18:29):

Well, I think the, you know, the fear is always, we're going to be judged or we're not going to be believed. So again, it's who do you surround yourself with? But you know, also leading by example. I told exactly the same message to my daughters. I have three girls and actually the very first time Anna, my oldest daughter got drunk - she's now a very sensible 28 year old engaged with a dog and a home, but she was about 14, 15 and she got very, very drunk - and I always told her, like, "You just phone me, Mum and Dad, you know. We won't judge. We would just come and get you. We just want to make sure you're okay." And her friends wouldn't let her use the phone. They wouldn't let her phone. Cause they were worried that they would going to get into trouble. So I wonder what their parents told them. And eventually she said, "My mum, just phone my mum." And she said, "I told you, my mum would be okay." And we went and collected her and she was fine. But since then I've had some of her friends, or my other daughter's friends, contact me to say, you know, "Uh, there's been a situation at university, we're not sure what to do." And they hadn't gone to their parents. They've come to me first. And I think they'd just see that there's no judgment. You know, that some of the situations, you know, one of the ... my middle daughter's friend had been raped while she was at university and she didn't want to go to her Mum. She didn't want to go to the police. And because she knows what I do - I'm a sexual violence activist - they came to me, which in some ways it's really good. In some ways it's hard to hear that she didn't feel she could go to someone closer to her.

Kim Forrester (19:53):

Hmm. So it seems to me, there are steps we can each take to lower that barrier between someone's fear and their courage. And we can provide a safe space where they know they can come and speak vulnerably. You share how you listened to your gut instinct when you first met your husband Madeleine. And after all you had been through - because it wasn't just the initial gang rape at 13, there were a few rapes for the few years following - and yet when you met your husband, you sort of allowed yourself to know that you are safe with him. Our inner wisdom is something that is very special to me. It's something I talk about an awful lot. Do you think there is a connection between our inner voice and our courage?

Madeleine Black (20:47):

Yeah. I think the truth is within all of us. If we get rid of all the conditioning and the veils and everything, we really stay with our core of who we really are, we know everything that we need to do to help ourselves. We just, we need to get out of the way of ourselves. Luckily in that moment, as you say, I really listened to my intuition because it's been, well next month it will be 38 years ago that I met him. So it's been quite a while and I'm very pleased. I listened to that gut, because just something just spoke to me so loudly, that "You're going to be okay with him". You know, "You can trust him". And I do believe that he was this angel sent to save me, you know? So I have learnt, I guess, just to trust life. People always, you know, interview me and ask me, "What's next?" I never know what's next. I just really make it up as I go along. I leave the doors open. And I just trust that life now knows what it's doing and I just see what comes in. And it's quite a ... it's a different way to live to how I used to live, when I micromanaged everything because one needed to be in control. And then I realized we're never really in control anyway, are we? It's a bit of a myth that we tell ourselves, you know. Obsessed with everything. I had so many fears and phobias and OCDs. And now I really try just to let it all go, just to really try and be me in this moment as much as I can.

Kim Forrester (22:08):

Wonderful. And I think too, you live very much as I do Madeleine. I think it comes down to also having the courage to follow that gut instinct when it presents itself to you. We can be courageous in very subtle ways in our everyday lives, often without realizing it I think, Madeleine. I think of your father's courage to withstand the Holocaust. I think of your courage just to get through each day with the trauma of your multiple rapes running around in your brain. I think of the many subtle ways that people have displayed courage as we've endured the COVID-19 pandemic. Is there benefit in us stopping, just taking time to turn within and reflect on how courageous we all ready are? Like how many times we've already been gutsy and vulnerable and bold. Do you think that can amplify that sense of courageousness when we need it?

Madeleine Black (23:13):

It's so good to look back and see how far we've come because often we look forward and see how much we've got left to do. So when I was on the hill - back to my hike on Sunday - one of the women, Hamida, she really, really struggled and she was panicking and she felt sick and she was crying. And then we've got down to the bottom, and she said she couldn't have done without me. I said, "But you did it. The strength came from you" "No, no no, you really helped me." I said, "No, but you did it. Just turn around now and look what we came down." She said, "Oh my gosh, I came, I came so far. Look what I did". And so, yeah, I think we often focus on what we have left to do rather than all that we've done. So it's just interesting where we put our attention. Do you focus on the negative, do you focus on the positive? You know, where do you put your attention? So I think it's just always good to really look and observe where we're at.

Kim Forrester (24:04):

I also think too, we allow the media to dictate the narrative to us as well about what courage is. So what a wonderful, a wonderful thing for us all to do, and perhaps encourage those who are closest to us, our children, our loved ones and say, "Hey, look at how courageous you already are. You can endure, you can overcome because you already have in so many ways."

Madeleine Black (24:26):

Yes, it was very interesting when we were out hiking and we had to call the emergency services in the end. We called them up and then we all felt so embarrassed that, oh my gosh, we're going to be those people on the news. "Four women were rescued just a few hundred yards off the path and had to call the emergency services and helicopter" And we were all making up these, you know, these headlines. But actually we did absolutely the right thing because we were on a really steep, steep path, slipping and sliding, nothing to grip onto. And it was raining. We couldn't see. So I know in my gut it was the right thing to do. But instantly after we made that call, we were all so embarrassed and the shame of it that we should have known better. But that's their job. That's what they're there to do to - guide people that are lost off the mountains.

Kim Forrester (25:11):

You just touched on a point I think is so incredibly powerful and important for us to reflect on and to understand. And that is about having the courage to ask for help. Not just on the mountain side, Madeleine. Not just when you have been raped in your college dorm. But having the courage to ask for help when we deserve it and when we need it. What would be your greatest advice to my listeners about finding the courage to reach out and say, "Hey, I need help."

Madeleine Black (25:40):

Yeah, really, I would not have got where I am at without the brilliant people that helped me. That includes all the different therapists, all the right people that encouraged me to write, to speak. You know, I wouldn't have got where I am. I'm just standing on the shoulders of so many people that have supported me. And yeah, it was really interesting situation at the weekend. My daughter and I really said, "I think we might need to call someone." You know, I said, "We're not going to get out of this Mimi." And she agreed. And when these other women said that, you know, we need to call someone, they agreed as well. So it was real relief that actually it was the right thing to do. But you could see the resistance like, "Oh, could we do this ourselves." And actually there's times when you have to just go, "Okay, we're really in a tricky situation and we're not going to get out of this without help." It was great when the mist lifted and we could see our way down. But then actually, they're so brilliant, the rescue services in the UK. Every two minutes, they would send a link to your phone and then you just click it and they knew exactly where you were. So knowing they knew that we were on the slopes - and we were stuck, but making our way down slowly - that really reassured us as well. So it was a bit like they were silently holding our hand. And I guess that's what support really is, isn't it? Someone is holding your hand, facilitating the journey, but you're the one that's taking the steps.

Kim Forrester (27:00):

See, I just love that. I'll just reiterate that point once more because it's resonating through my body - that we have come to see courage as being when we endure by ourselves, right? When we get through, when we conquer by ourselves and under our own steam. But so often I think the courage comes from reaching out and asking for support and calling rescue services when we find that we actually have to. Madeleine, I am so regretful that we're up to the last question, the final question of the Eudaemonia podcast. It's one I ask every guest that comes on the show. Can you offer a morning reminder - so this may be a practice, a mantra, perhaps an affirmation - something that can help us all become a little more courageous each day?

Madeleine Black (27:46):

Yeah. I just think, you know, it's never too late to find your voice. It's never too late to reach out and share your story, to stop holding you back, to get the support that you need. To recognize, you know, maybe when you are struggling. Also on my hill walk we met a lovely guy and, afterwards, I discovered- we connected on Facebook - that he had really, really tough times and he used the hills to nurture him. And he's now going to do a charity walk on the highest mountain in Scotland, which is Ben Nevis, with six men to raise awareness about mental health and suicide amongst men. And he just said, "You know, I never take any food. And I never stop to have a photo." I said, "Come and have a photo of us. Let's have a selfie." And he said, "Oh!" It just made his day that he did that. We recognized him from this group we're all in on Facebook and we stopped to chat to him, and we took a photo for him. And yeah, just these little things can make such a difference as well, you know. To ourselves and to other people. So I think just keep the connections there. And he was just saying that if he'd have spoken years ago, he would be in a different place. But you speak when you speak. You find your voice when you find your voice. So, don't have any regrets, but also, you know, recognize maybe when you're struggling and you need some support.

Kim Forrester (29:02):

Well, yeah, that's really important, I think, to understand that. I love that. We speak when we speak and so there's no judgment around when you find the courage to speak out, stand out, come out. Madeleine Black, your memoir is called *Unbroken*. It is truly beautiful and saddening and sickening and inspiring. Also, you are a courage cultivator. If people want to find out more about you and the work that you do - you have your own podcast as well - where can people find out more?

Madeleine Black (29:34):

Yeah. My podcast is called "Unbroken, Healing Through Storytelling" because I love the power that comes when we share our stories. I speak to people, I guess a little bit like me, that have overcome adversity and are doing great things with their life. They could just come to my website, which is www.madeleineblack.co.uk, and all my social media links and my podcast links are on my website.

Kim Forrester (29:56):

It has been an absolute delight, sincerely, to have you here on the show, Madeleine. Thank you so much for gifting your time, your wisdom, and that beautiful personal courage that you show as an example to all of us here on the show today.

Madeleine Black (30:10):

Oh, you're very welcome, Kim. Thanks for inviting me on the show.

Kim Forrester (30:13):

As Coco Chanel once said, "The most courageous act is to still think for yourself. Aloud." You've been listening to the *Eudaemonia* podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe, check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes or come join me on Instagram @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester until next time be well, be kind to yourself, and share your story courageously.