

The Strongest Person in the World

My daughter writhes within a cocoon of brightly patterned blankets. Indignant to the thought of much needed rest she kicks out her legs and grapples with a mound of stuffed animals, whose bleary gaze mirrors hers.

Seemingly unsatisfied, her head slumps over in the pillow to look back at me.

With that look comes a barrage of questions: “Why do fish have fins when crabs have feet?”, “Why is the sea blue when it's far away but when it's close it looks green?”, “Why can you stay up when I have to sleep?”.

Her clever ruse becomes clear. A dastardly ploy to delay the inevitable for a few more minutes. A young, excitable and curious mind finding the idea of sleep so very tedious. I decided to engage her curiosity a short while longer.

“One more question and then you must sleep.”

She ponders for a moment wrestling with her decision, searching for something that will really challenge me.

“Who’s the strongest person in the world?”

I, in turn, ponder the question. She chose wisely. It was a treacherous trail of thought, a potential teachable moment, the type every parent spends seemingly years fixated and obsessing over, fearful of misstep. For in moments like these a parent must decide which values they hope to distil into the hearts of their ankle biting progeny, every moment threading into the tapestry of the person that they bloom into, day by day.

Should I attempt to teach a lesson on fortitude, steadfastness and resilience like the stoics of ancient Greece? Does strength lie in withstanding adversity, hardship and challenge and continuing; breathing and battling through the universe no matter how hard it may seem and how dark it may become?

Or do I fumble my way through a tall tale of brave warriors and adventurers overcoming their fears and uncertainties? Battle hardening quests designed to test strength of wills, where the hero triumphs through courage in the face of adversity. Whether you're

Indiana Jones, Amelia Airheart or Hercules, you must take a leap of faith and weather your fears.

Should I stagger my way through an anecdote on drive and purpose? A lesson on single minded ambition and dedication, exerting force forwards straight and true, onwards and upwards through the power of one's own verve and spirit alone. Like the tale of Sisyphus endlessly rolling a boulder up the hill, continually climbing, trailing forward despite the world's best efforts to push you back down.

What would it serve to preach on strength without a purpose for it? I could chronicle tales of good facing evil, standing up against injustice. Conjure a David and Goliath-ian allegory of morality, standing up for what is right, just and fair against bullies, colossal faceless corrupt systems and cruelty. A concerning early thought exercise on standing up for fairness and equity for yourself and others in a world that seems to be increasingly indifferent to the people living within it.

Shall I attempt to navigate her clear from the preconceived notion that strength stems from power, valiance and vigour entirely and instead hope to bumble my way through a lecture on the strength of the mind. The pen is mightier than the sword, the brain greater than brawn. I could tell tales of brilliant scientific discoveries that change the course of human endeavour; of interstellar voyages into the unknown, of new fangled breakthroughs in medicine saving millions of lives; or of dazzling albeit often tortured, visionary creatives that use their strength to entangle themselves with the souls of others to touch their lives with a single brushstroke, note or word.

Still paralysed in thought, I momentarily reconsider my notions on what strength is at its foundation. Shouldn't a marker of true strength differ from sheer might, wisdom or power, instead be constructed of kindness or love, forgiveness and hope or the strength of one's character? Should strength lie in humility? Knowing one's own limits and hubris and being receptive and accepting of others while remaining wise and understanding and patient. The tale of the tortoise and the hare flashes through my mind, feeling both poignant and completely irrelevant simultaneously?

I ponder for a moment, wary that my decision must come with haste as her bright wakefulness drains from her face and she drifts into a slumber. I can't allow her astute curious young mind to unravel the truth so early on that her father really does not in fact have all the answers, and instead possesses even less certainty in the world than she does at her tender age.

I'm not convinced I know what strength is?

A philosopher I can't recall once said - "The only thing we know, is we know nothing." It feels wise, poignant, humble and brave. Perhaps they were strong? But the longer I dwell on the thought the less certain I am it was even a philosopher who said it? For all I can recall it could of been some brainy scientist or mathematician on the verge of a breakthrough, or possibly some distant historical leader making a rallying call to the nation in advance of an uncertain future and "*Trying Times*" or even just some ranting new age guru vomiting needless empty statements in the name of spiritualism.

Trying Times

We always seem to be cocooned within "*Trying Times*", cocooned as my infant cocoons herself further into her sheets. From there I pray she is safe from the "*Trying Times*" because without the strength to fend off the world I -

She needs to be wise to the world, and this is my opportunity to impart some of that wisdom, that could stand as the only sails she has to weather her through the storm of life. I just need to decide what that grain of wisdom could be. Decide?

Is there strength in decisiveness and certainty? In knowing oneself, knowing what is right and wrong and having the good judgement to choose the former. Alas but one person's benevolent act is surely another's malevolent one, a martyr to one, a terror to another. What is good for you may not be good for everyone.

I am not decisive. I'm hardly certain of anything, how can anyone be? I am not steadfast and stoic, not like iron against the wind. Instead a sharp tone or harsh look derails my train of thoughts into chaos and carnage and resentment, embarrassment and shame.

I've never faced great battles and quests of might, overcame fears and taken leaps of faith. Perhaps once in my turbulent youth I was daring but that was beaten out of me by the discovery that many of these leaps of faith and warchants were leaps into the abyss and empty shouts into the void.

The strength that I once could have conceived was within my drive and resilience fades more and more by the day battered and reshaped paradoxically into regrets. Time spent wasted driving forth blindfolded into a dead end. As with Sisyphus I realised even if you can reach the pinnacle of the hill the boulder could just tumble down the other side, and somehow you would still be surprised.

Perhaps strength lies in the wisdom to choose the battles worth fighting.

Is there strength in decisiveness and certainty? In knowing oneself, knowing what is right and wrong and having the good judgement to choose the former. But one person's benevolent act is surely another's malevolent one, a martyr to one, a terror to another. What is good for you may not be good for everyone. Am I thinking in circles?

How can we be sure which battles are worth fighting, or even of how to fight them? Even the most peaceful, considered and justified protest is marked by its opposition as riotous and stokes the fire of further division.

Who could possibly possess enough wisdom to be strong? Even the journey of all the greatest discoveries in science and medicine are riddled with unforeseen potholes, bends and threats. We made fireworks from gunpowder centuries before we conceived of guns, and were innately curious about chemistry long before we realised we could use it to annihilate each other. As with Frankenstein all great minds inevitably create monsters. Curiosity and ingenuity could be strength but only if it doesn't leave us blind to our wrongdoings.

Even the artists are not strong. Those who dare to lay their insecurities, their innermost thoughts and oftentimes anxious spirals out on canvas, in verse and on page; do so out of fear not courage. Escapism from the feelings they dare not comprehend within and instead eject forcefully in any manner they can often in manic frenzies and emotional tantrums and outbursts exploding with overuse of excessive colours, linguistically arduous terminology or cliches. Vomiting your pain into the world under the guise of expression like a Jackson Pollock at force for the fear that keeping it inside may eat you alive.

Writing is not brave. It is a disgustingly cowardly act.

How can I hope to impart any strength and hope to this pure and vulnerable creature that will need so much of it, with so little. How can I hope to guide her to weave the tapestry of her being when my tapestry of threads, also woven from the wisdom of my own role models quiet teachable moments is fraught with holes, knots and patchworks; of realisations, stitched over with realisations that every notion I have is wrong, has been wrong and has been wrong over and over.

Every tale of valiance and lesson on betterment I've ever heard flitters through my thoughts. From the machismo raging battles Homer's Odyssey and Lord of the Rings to the pretentious and convoluted teachings in the Letters of Seneca. The heartwarming evening news fluffers stories of community spirit overcoming adversity, a million cookie

cutter marvel movies and the nothingful platitudes of a self-help book whirl through my mind.

I fear through my parentage she will meet the same fate I have, repeat my misdoings and pass on the same mistakes. Who is the Strongest Person in the world - The only thing I know for sure is it could never be me.

What do I tell her?

What could I possibly tell her? Which false virtue shall I lay as the first stone of a tower that will climb into the heavens as she grows. My words will be a misshapen brick laying the faulty foundations of a structure that cannot stand forever, bricks gradually and undetectably shifting out from their places. My words here will be the cracks that grow through her, long after the cracks my parents grew through me, bring my tower tumbling down.

As my fatigue mirrored in hers, sets in across her face from a day fraught with wonder and misadventures, I resent my reflection in the mirror, growing irritated with toys strewn across the floor or unfinished plates of vegetables as if her blemishes on the otherwise hauntingly blank page of my existence aren't what makes the world so blisteringly beautiful.

Bleary eyed she meets my vacant gaze. My failings as a parent will only be matched by my failings as a man.

She smiles.

"You are my dear. You are".