

## Chapter 1

# Finding your brave face

‘Having courage does not mean that we are unafraid.  
Having courage and showing courage mean we face our fears.  
We are able to say “I have fallen, but I will get up.”’

– Maya Angelou

When I was lying in the ditch, gasping for air, I knew it was serious. I could feel that my body was in deep shock, with almost every muscle tense and contracted. I remember commenting, ‘Geez it feels bad, boys; I don’t think I am flying to Salt Lake City tonight’, and hearing from one of the physios with me, ‘You never know Berro, it could be just muscular’. All I could think was – you would not say that if you knew what I am experiencing.

My lower back hurt so intensely I cannot recall feeling any other pain. But not for one second did I contemplate that I might have a fractured back or the cleaving consequences of spinal cord damage. Not even when Dave gently took off my shoes and asked, ‘Can you wiggle your toes?’ Fortunately, I could. But the sensory feedback was vague and distant, which I brushed off as being due to the searing pain I was feeling and the heavy sensation of pins and needles I felt in my legs.

For the most part I was in my own little zone as I lay on my side in that ditch. Overwhelmed, I was just trying to get through each moment; I was in preservation mode, I later realised, even though there was not any risk to my life. Talking was extremely uncomfortable, but I was desperate to escape the gravity of my circumstance, so I attempted occasional moments of humour as we waited the 20 or more minutes for the ambulance to arrive.

I can't recall any thoughts about why the pain was so severe, or that there might be longer-term consequences. I just knew that it felt serious, and I may have some internal injury. I was scared but trying not to show it. I also suppressed the sense of shame I felt that I had crashed; I loved riding and was proud of my skill. I felt confusion as I relived the moments of the crash. What caused the bike to understeer? Why did the front wheel feel so strange through my hands in those moments, as if it were a surfboard caught in a breaking wave and I couldn't pull it free from the surge?

Most of all, I was battling three tiers of guilt:

1. I'd disrupted our ride.
2. I was going to let my colleagues down.
3. I was going to be an inconvenience to my wife that day and perhaps some days beyond.

I instinctively knew I had no chance of being cleared to travel on my flight to LAX at 9.30 that evening, so I was processing my travel alternatives based on what I recalled of the forward flight schedules. I knew there were no Virgin flights on the Monday, but if I could make the Tuesday morning flight then I could arrive in Salt Lake City late Tuesday morning, USA time. I'd only be a few hours late to the workshop. I could still make a meaningful contribution and be there to support the follow-up work. Certainly, I'd be a bit slow and sore, but better to arrive and not completely let the team down. I acknowledge

that these thoughts of making an aeroplane flight seem ridiculous in hindsight – but having a problem to focus on certainly helped distract me and get me through the minutes.

## What does bravery mean to you?

Do you classify yourself as courageous? I certainly have never thought of myself as brave.

Courage is something we put on a pedestal. The stuff of heroes. Moments of sacrifice or stoic resolve celebrated in timeless movies or songs. I think of Vincent Lingiari, an Australian Indigenous stockman who led a nine-year protest to regain his people's land rights. His brave story is beautifully captured in Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'. I think of Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*. I think of courage in the face of oppression, like in *Cry Freedom*, *The Power of One*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Selma*, *Schindler's List*, *The Zookeeper's Wife* and so many other books and films that have moved me.

For me, bravery is also the type of unyielding resolve shown by Australian Football League (AFL) Hall of Fame player Nigel Lappin, who desperately wanted to play in the Brisbane Lions' 2003 'three-peat' Grand Final, despite fracturing ribs the week before. To be declared fit to play, the day before the game Lappin was put through a fitness test that teammate Jonathan Brown described as 'the most brutal thing I've ever seen'. The coach kicked the ball to Lappin, who was spear tackled by a teammate. This happened repeatedly – perhaps 20 times. Lappin wouldn't give in and was eventually passed fit to play the game. I had flown from Brisbane to Melbourne to watch the game and recall my surprise when I heard he was playing, and then my anxiety as he was 'roughed up' by the opposition in the first minutes of the game. Lappin didn't yield. He was among his team's best players that

day, running hard as he always did – perhaps 16 km in the two-hour game – while absorbing intense physical contact. His courage inspired the team to a historic win. After the game Lappin went straight to hospital and spent three days recovering – it was discovered he had played the game with a punctured lung.

These are the type of events I visualise when I think of courage.

I also see bravery in many everyday moments – people asking difficult questions, or holding strong to their values or opinions in the face of prevailing views.

Since my accident, my view has broadened further. Bravery should be whatever you need it to be to help you believe. Whatever gets you through those moments in a ditch and back onto your pins, no matter how long that takes. Or if that extent of recovery proves impossible, to find new meaning – however you manage to define that.

I don't think bravery is something we can plan for; we just need to find our own way to persist in the moment. I doubt Nigel Lappin was trying to be celebrated for being courageous. He was just trying to get through the match – through a series of moments – to achieve his goal. It is only with the benefit of reflection that we can see the magnitude of what has been achieved.

When you allow yourself to reflect, you can find evidence of your own bravery, like I did. In my sporting contests – I always put my body on the line when it counted. At work – pushing through anxiety while preparing for or during a big negotiation, a tense presentation or a conflict I didn't seek but couldn't avoid. I knew I always found ways to confront fear, even if occasionally it took time for me to gather myself for the contest. I was able to persevere through those tough moments. I might have called this grit – a deep determination to fight my way through to the result I desired, because I believe there is courage in being gritty. As leadership writer Margaret M. Perlis says, 'Courage helps fuel grit; the two are symbiotic, feeding into and off of each other.'

I was prepared to lead. Leadership requires, and builds, courage.

In the aftermath of my crash, I wasn't trying to achieve anything apart from just finding a way to get through each moment – consistent with most acts of courage. I distinctly remember the last few minutes before the paramedics arrived particularly testing my resolve to hang on. The pain was truly off the scale, like every nerve was screaming. My body was physically contracted, but my fear was expanding. The wail of the ambulance siren seemed to hang in the air forever. More than two years on, as I type this, I can feel just how much emotion – mostly relief – I associate with Mike's words: 'We can see the ambulance now, Berro.'

Hearing this meant I had made it through the first challenge. Congruent with the words of iconic author J.R.R. Tolkien: 'Courage is found in unlikely places.' Getting through this first challenge gave me strength and belief to face the next.

## **Manoeuvred from the ditch**

When they arrived, the paramedics gave me pain relief, assessed and then stabilised me. Then came the challenge of safely getting me out of that ditch.

I needed to be kept stable to protect my spine. But my position across the contour of the drain meant they could not safely get the stretcher straight underneath me. (Specifically it was a 'CombiCarrier', which consists of two lengthwise pieces, making it easier to insert underneath prone patients.) One of the paramedics problem-solved a solution; I recall her explaining her plan to me and thinking, 'Whatever, just get me out of here'. I felt quite defeated by this point, and impatient to get to hospital so that we could work out what was wrong.

Her plan was achieved with the help of my cycling buddies, saving me from a longer wait for a second ambulance crew. They

log rolled me, placing half the stretcher under me. They lifted me a few inches, then delicately changed my angle such that the stretcher could fit lengthways down the middle of the ditch. They placed me back down and log rolled me off to reposition the stretcher, rolled me back on, then combined the two parts of the stretcher with me on it. Once I was secure, the cycling crew carried me about 30 metres downstream, finding a safe place to climb out of the stormwater drain before carting me back to the ambulance.

You can imagine my sense of gratitude for the paramedics' work when I had the story retold to me in those first few fragile days in hospital, and the emotion I felt when I wrote my thanks to them many weeks later. Their care and skill were crucial in me being able to achieve the mobility I have today.

## **Grasping for meaning through the pain**

As we sped towards the hospital, the paramedic travelling with me warned that my wedding ring would be cut off unless I removed it before we reached emergency. I asked if I would cause more damage by dragging it through the deep lacerations he had described on that knuckle. The paramedic said, 'Perhaps, but it looks such a mess I am sure they will need to stitch that finger anyway.' He asked if I wanted his help to sit up a little, to see what I needed to pull the ring through, to which I replied, 'Only if it is going to make the task easier by looking?' It was not, so I just lay back and pulled hard.

My wedding ring was a tight fit and getting it over my knuckle was always a challenge, requiring force and twisting in equal measure. Dragging and twisting it through the torn tissue and skin was awful – it felt like I was tearing myself, taking skin with the ring. I clenched my teeth at the stabbing pain as the ring pressed on exposed nerves as I dragged it off. It was the first of many tests of resolve, but in that

moment, I just did not want the wedding ring destroyed on top of my other damage. It was like it was the first battleground of keeping my identity whole, even though I had no idea of how true that thought would prove to be in the coming hours.

Getting through the first few hours following my accident required that same resolve. I needed to just brace and find a way to get through. I utilised that same brave face again many times over the course of my recovery, finding a way to avoid defeat in the hope of better times ahead. Finding courage in the moment and over a sustained – often seemingly infinite – period ahead. Finding the will to persevere.

I found the brave face that allowed me to seek and welcome help. I had to become comfortable with a deeper, more profound, brave face – one that would give me the courage to step into uncertainty, to liberate possibility, to pursue aspirational outcomes and to tackle my fears. It was this infinite brave face that gave me the fortitude to look for the embers of normality that connected me to my identity, that gave me the self-motivation to sustain an effort that had no guarantee of success but was integral to who I wanted to be as a character.

I made the choice on that first day that I could and would improve. And with help from others, I sustained that belief with all my stamina.

I made that choice with inspiration from the bravery I had seen and wanted to see in myself. In people like my wife, and the courage she had continually demonstrated during eight months of sickening chemotherapy. Sustained bravery like that of my dad, John, embodied in his ability to get back up when life had knocked him down.

## **The battle to keep that brave face**

John was the eldest of Bill and Ethel's three children. Bill had an important job as a cage-winder driver in a Kalgoorlie gold mine, until he became deeply affected by a tragic work accident and couldn't

continue his role. This stress probably contributed to his early passing – and so it was that at age nine John was called from his North Kalgoorlie classroom by the headmaster and told: ‘Your dad is dead. You better go home, son.’

Ethel was always stoic and found a way to make ends meet with very little. She ironed and gained support from Legacy, an Australian non-profit organisation that provides support to veterans’ families. The family ran chickens and John would often shoot rabbits and kangaroos with his cherished school mate Ron, providing valuable extra meat for the household.

John took odd jobs, bringing in additional money to support the family and his education. Ethel didn’t drive, so John rode his bicycle everywhere. At age 12 John came home holding a handful of his front teeth, having knocked them out when he accidentally rode his bicycle into a pole. ‘I was blinded by the sun,’ he told his mum. Some years after the accident, when the family savings enabled it, it was off to the dentist and the remaining top teeth were pulled out – without anaesthetic – and John’s false teeth cast.

John secured a teaching bursary, which assisted him through senior school. He captained the school hockey team and starred as Marco in *The Gondoliers* – a proud part of his regular association with school and local theatre productions. Then it was on to the University of Western Australia, where John made his family so proud by attaining a Bachelor of Science degree, becoming the family’s first university graduate. His first teaching post was at Mt Barker Senior High School in 1964, where he was quickly claimed by Beth, who was already teaching at the local primary school.

John and Beth embarked on a 51-year journey yielding two boys, an assortment of pets, boats, canoes and caravans, and a love of entertaining under handmade pergolas and on patios made of second-hand bricks formed into creative arcs that challenged John’s capability with a portable grinder.



Along his life journey, John's career progressed quickly. He was seen as a rising star within the WA education system and was promoted to Senior Master of Mathematics. But his gentle, selfless nature saw him taking too much on his own shoulders, and periods of stress curtailed his career. But John found a way to not let these periods of anxiety and depression affect his family achievements – I am sure all parents can appreciate the fortitude it must have taken to tow a caravan around Australia for six months with two bickering boys in the back seat, reversing it into tight caravan bays in fading light at the end of a long day's drive!

John had to deal with a series of major depressive episodes during a period when this condition was suppressed and misunderstood. He often had to put on his brave face to front up to school during or after one of these challenging periods. I can't imagine how tough that must have been at times, the fear it must have invoked – high-school children at state-run schools are notoriously determined not to demonstrate any empathy!

Not only did John consistently find that brave face that gets us through the moment, he often found his way to the infinite brave face that transforms, with sustained periods of success and peace. But such is the fragile nature of mental health, it was an ongoing exercise of employing both. John sustained his internal grit and courage to achieve an amazing, honourable and rewarding life.

My dad's resilience was one of the first things I thought of when I made my choice to pursue my best possible recovery on the day of my accident. I focused on all the things he had achieved despite his challenges. Because to me, he was a champion handyman – welding, cutting and building. He was a successful hockey player, leader and coach. He made fabulous camping and caravanning holidays possible, fishing in a dinghy in so many WA bays, and minding my uncle's farm without major mishap despite the naughty goats giving us plenty of entertaining memories. And he did it all with a warm smile and a

twinkle in his eye, telling a joke or amusing both the listener and himself with some witty word play. Donning a brave face, no matter how hard the inner battle.

I didn't want to be defeated by fear or despair. I wanted to tackle any adversity while demonstrating gratitude and decency to others. Just like he did.

I believe we all have a pilot light of courage quietly burning away inside us. It is fuelled by the inspiration that is happening around us all the time – ordinary people doing extraordinary things. This inner flame is stoked by the nurturing of our family, our work and life experiences, including those we identify as heroic from stories or events.

When it counts, you can be braver than you ever imagined.

If you reflect on your life, you can see that your brave face has marched you through many tough moments so far, and has always been there when you needed it. Trust it, release yourself to step into uncertainty, to try and fail, and let your brave face enable you to liberate possibility.

### **Become a fraction stronger**

- Do you think of yourself as courageous?
- Can you recall a tough moment when you had to reach deep inside to find your brave face? Were you surprised by your strength?
- Would you say you are a determined person? What are some examples of when you have shown this?
- How has your sense of bravery changed as you have grown and developed through life?
- Who is the most courageous person you know? What is inspiring about that person?
- What are some small acts of bravery you have witnessed?