



**Corrie's dignity--Inspired by Betsy  
By Stoo Brown**

The question I want to pose - and one I spent many, many hours contemplating - is difficult to express. Does serious illness devalue my life? Is my life less of a life because I'm ill? Does it have less meaning? Am I not really fully human? Do I matter less? Is the pursuit of a fulfilling life a futile exercise? I've expressed it in several ways but to me it's all just one question, and a very troubling one. At least, it might be, depending on what answer you arrive at. For those whose life is confined by the walls of their bedroom it's a question to be faced frequently, perhaps every day. But you're not reading this for the question - I assume what you want is the answer.

I need to qualify my answer with a caveat. I have suffered from depression all my life and as a result I take antidepressants: I have taken them for years and they work for me. I suspect that antidepressants have saved me from staring too darkly into the shadows cast by my illness. I haven't gone to the places where others have been taken, simply because the chemistry of my brain is cushioned by drugs. I'm not ashamed of that. Any port in a storm.

One of the ways I framed the question is "Do I matter less?" and a harsh but real answer is yes. I don't earn a wage. I am unable to give very much of myself in the care of others. I'm not very visible. I have few friends and fewer still who understand me. I'm usually motivated by doing and completing, activity and success, and now there's precious little of that. In all of these measures, I live a smaller, less meaningful life but I have come to accept this and let it go, not because I'm a great philosophical martyr who has transcended the material and social world but simply because I had to. I had no choice. I either let go of these aspirations I or clung to them and faced annihilation, an annihilation of hope. It sounds trite but, given that choice, letting them go was relatively easy.

When I was kid my Christian Mum and Dad used to feed my reading appetite with tales of Christian heroes down the ages. One such, who left a tremendous impression upon me, was of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman who, with her family, sheltered Jews during the Second World War. She was captured and ultimately sent to Ravensbruck but throughout her extreme hardship she somehow found joy in her existence and a reason to live and love. She would say

that her graciousness came from God but oddly, that's not what I took from her book ("The Hiding Place"): the lesson I drew was that her value in life came from her determination to live with dignity. I was left in awe of her dignity and it's an awe which has never entirely left me. The fact that I am an atheist is no detraction.

I'm fortunate to have read *The Hiding Place* and fortunate that it left an impression on me. Corrie's profound belief in her dignity became my own *raison d'être*. I need to be clear: I don't see my bedroom as Ravensbruck or ME as a malicious Nazi guard. No, those are not the parallels I draw from the book. Nor did I ever make a conscious resolution to be like Corrie ten Boom. It is more subtle than that. I somehow grasped, early on, that any meaning and value I get from my limited life in my bedroom has to come from within, not without. And the thing I cling to, for reasons I cannot explain, is my need, every single day, to accept with good grace that I have a serious illness and to live what life I have with dignity.

It must sound like I am blowing my own trumpet. Living with dignity. What a pompous ass. For crying out loud. But I am not actually claiming any virtue, any heroism, any distinction. Trying to salvage a strand of dignity from the life I lead is not elective: it's the only thing I can do. It's not virtue: it's necessity. I know no other way to live and keep my mind intact. The notion didn't come from me at all: it came from *The Hiding Place*.

Corrie ten Boom: I'm afraid I don't share your faith but I am profoundly grateful for your book.

[Note: I've used a sleight-of-hand in this piece – I have written as if I'm currently ill but for those of you who know my backstory you'll know this isn't the case. Please excuse my use of present tense]