

Courage Pills



The house was exciting when all six of our sons were still living at home. Everyone sat down at the dinner table, we had an evening prayer, and with the last reverberations of the amen, chaos ensued. I could almost feel the breeze as the food moved from plates to palates. Pork chops were the main course this particular night, and Owen, the second youngest, was having a problem coordinating his steak knife and fork. No one was looking as he held the meat in his left hand and sawed through it with the knife in his right.

Later, he tried to be brave as we sat in the Emergency Room, but tears began to well up in his eyes. I happened to have several pink wintergreen candies in my pocket. I put one in his good hand, and he popped it into his mouth. As if by magic, the tears seemed to find their way back under the eyelids. Later, as a doctor stitched his hand, the same thing happened. Tears began to fight their way into the open, but a piece of candy drew back

Jesse Hulse

under the lids. I went through all the candy in my pocket that night, and those pink wintergreen mints became known as “Courage Pills”. That’s how they got their name, but their story goes back to when I was a little boy and to a man named Oliver Barlow.

In my heart, I don’t think Mr. Barlow was ever young. He turned eighty the month before I was born, and while I know he wasn’t always that way, I remember him as older than time itself.

In his long life, he had been a craftsman, house painter, geologist, custodian, horticulturist, and businessman. He was an athlete who enjoyed wrestling, boxing, swimming, acrobatics, and tightrope walking. He quit ice skating when he was 80 because he was afraid that he was getting brittle and might break something if he fell. He was an avid fisherman until he was 86, when he said, “The stones were becoming slicker, the banks steeper, and the trails longer.” He was an artist. One of his paintings hung above my grandparents’ fireplace for years. The painting was a view of my grandfather’s farm; Mr. Barlow finished it and gave it to them when he was 90, about a week before he died. Now it hangs on the wall in my home office.

Mr. Barlow was a great man. But not because of his accomplishments—I’ve listed only a few—those are things adults would notice, and I was a little boy. No, Mr. Barlow was a

Jesse Hulse

great man because he carried candy.

Every Sunday, as soon as the last hymn was sung in our little church, a line of children formed to shake hands with Mr. Barlow. As a child approached, Mr. Barlow would reach into his pocket and hide a piece of candy in his large hand. When we shook his hand, we came away with a pink wintergreen lozenge and a warm feeling that there was at least one old man who cared about kids.

I was too young to have noticed any of his accomplishments, but I knew about his kindness. I can still feel that ten-year-old boy inside of me and how he felt the day the old man died. It was hard to find a grownup who took the time to make a little boy feel special.

Now, when I show kindness to a child, I remember the man who showed me how. I remember the little things that made this man great. And he was great; for it is a great man whose death is mourned by children.

Several years ago, I wrote a song called “The Old Man”.

I was only ten years old when they told me that he died.

He was eighty years my senior, but I remembered how I cried.

It’s been over half a century, and I’ve met a lot of men,

But the old man holds a special place among my honored friends.

An athlete as a young man, an artist in old age.

Jesse Hulse

A businessman throughout his life, an outdoorsman, and a sage.
He won respect of grownups for the things that grownups do,
But that old man was different because children loved him too.

Each Sunday in our little church, when I was just a boy,
We kids sat through the sermon anticipating joy.
We knew that when it ended, in a line we'd stand,
And wait till it was our turn to shake the old man's hand.
He'd stoop down to our level and flash a big wide smile.
He'd give us his attention like there was no one else for miles.
A piece of candy in his hand, with a grin he'd let it go
As if to say, "Our secret. Nobody else will know."

I never got to tell him, just what he meant to me.
He died before I realized. Only looking back, I see.
Since I can never thank him, I will try each day.
To follow his example and honor him that way.
Looking back through all the years, I see him even now.
I stoop to greet a child because the old man showed me how.
Mr. Barlow was a wonder, a success on any scale.
For when an old man dies and children cry,
It's clear he did not fail.

Mr. Barlow took up singing when he was about eighty. One evening a local gospel group was singing in our church. At the end of their performance, they asked if anyone had a request,

Jesse Hulse

and my hand went up. I asked them to sing “How Great Thou Art”. They said they didn’t know it, but one of them added, “I’ll bet Mr. Barlow would sing it for you.” That disappointed me a little. I loved Mr. Barlow, but he didn’t play a guitar, and being in his late 80s, his voice was a bit quivery. Looking back, I don’t remember the name or face of any man in the gospel group. Still, my memory holds a picture of that old man walking to the front of the church and climbing the steps to the pulpit to sing a song without accompaniment or preparation just because a little boy asked for it.