“Hope is not merely an emotion that comes and goes. It is a virtue, resulting from a conscious, deliberate choice and long practice.” —Mary McDermott Shideler (I’m still looking for the source in her writings. Freeorder generators (forges) are the quintessential entrepreneurial embodiment of hope. -leif)

The following is from Mary Shideler’s *Consciousness of Battle: An Interim Report on a Theological Journey*, pages 196-97, part of the last chapter, “Doing It Yourself Theology”. To read this as I do, you may substitute the word ‘Being’ for the word ‘God’, and understand Being to point to the magnificence of which we are an awestruck part. I find this book to be a treasure for explorers, though some of us must translate her words into a language of reverence for Being dependent on fewer conjectures. -leif

Failures of courage lie at the roots of epidemic conformity and doctrinaire nonconformity alike: we permit our integration to be fashioned in terms of others’ integrities by submitting to or rebelling against theirs. Every person has his own style of integrity, his own manner of uniting his temperament, experiences, and reflections into a coordinated whole, and his own way of responding to the call of his Lord. At best it is not easy for most of us to discover our own styles, and when we do, we tend to universalize them. It is hard enough to be ourselves, God knows. It is harder still to free others, particularly those we love, to find their own integrities in their own times, their own ways, and to their own ends. It requires the great courage of great integrity to think clearly and to live in love, and so far as I know, there are no rules upon which we can surely depend, and only one guide — which is not very helpful in concrete situations. He who loves because he knows himself to be loved will be less apt to err than he who loves in order to obtain love. He who has received his integrity as a gift from God will not be prone to overbear the integrities that God has given to others.

The courage to keep going, to refuse premature solutions, to wait in darkness, to reject what does not ring true: these only hint at the forms of courage which are needed for living, and therefore for theologizing. In addition, there is one other which may be the most important of all: the courage to make mistakes. Few errors are as disabling as the fear of being wrong; consequently, our sins from timidity frequently outweigh our sins from boldness. Because we are finite and sinful, we are wrong whatever we do. But, also, if we do nothing we are wrong, and what we do may very well be right. Therefore it behooves us to walk humbly on our journey, but also to walk bravely.

Common sense. Social responsibility. Discipline. Courage. The exercise of these qualities — which are the cardinal virtues of both classical and Christian tradition: prudence justice, temperance (as steel is tempered), and fortitude — will not guarantee that we shall know the truth and attain integrity within the truth. They are means for
growing and defenses against the most vicious enemies of growth: unreality, isolation, fragmentation, and despair. And they are preparatory exercises for developing the virtues that traditional Christianity has said are the highest of all: faith, hope, and love.

The cardinal virtues carry no inviolable promise. Nothing that we can do, however, does carry such a guarantee. We cannot bargain with life, much less with God — at least, not with the Christian God. We can plant the seed, but it is he who gives or does not give the increase, and often the one who reaps is not the one who had sown. The covenant that we make with him by responding to his covenant with us is not a treaty or a pledge, but a decision to respond to Love with love. It is the choice to live by incarnating love whatever the situation and consequences, and we are not told in advance what the consequences will be.

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Do not ask for anything less than fullness of life, or seek anything smaller than truth, or knock at any door that is too low or too narrow for you to enter when you stand at your full height. Fight the good fight; finish the course; keep the faith.