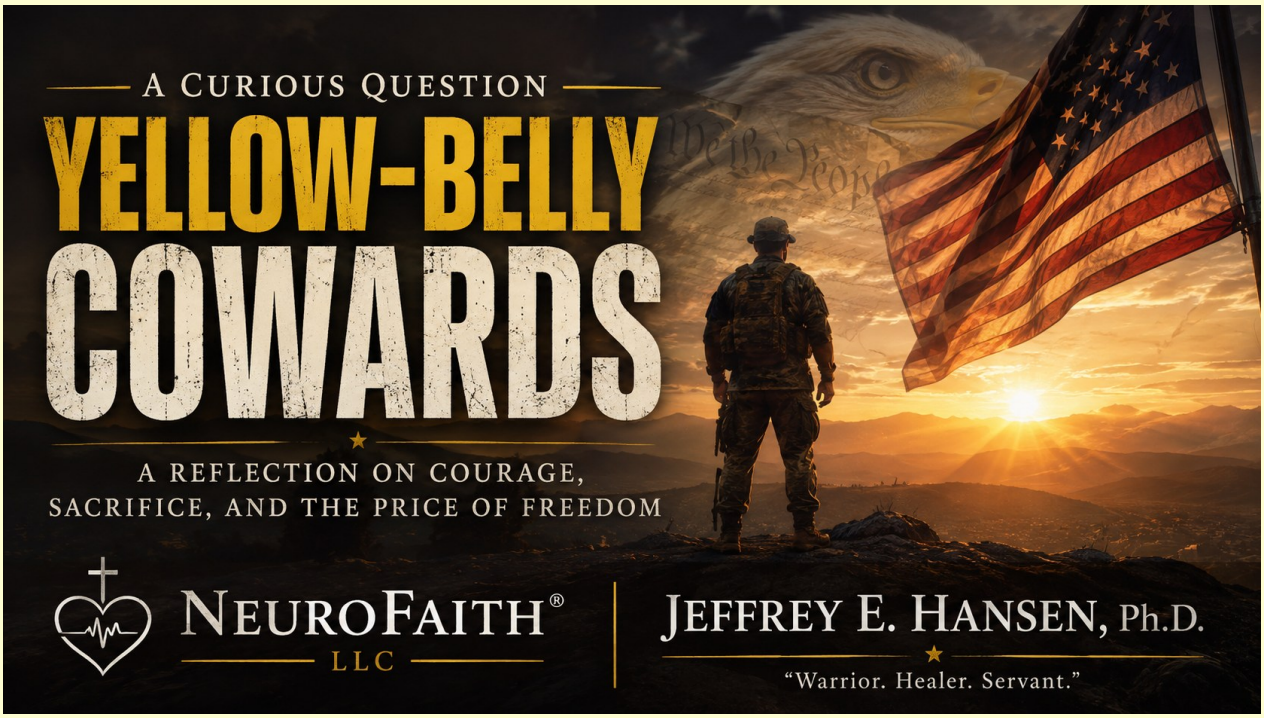

A Curious Question

I have no idea why certain thoughts lodge themselves in my mind.

Some people wake up thinking about the stock market. Others think about golf scores, grocery lists, or what's for dinner. My brain, for reasons known only to God, wakes up wondering about phrases like yellow-bellied coward.

Once a thought like that finds its way into my head, it rarely leaves quietly. It rattles around until I either satisfy my curiosity or write it out. Writing, for me, is a little like a massage for a knotted back. It works out the tension until the mind can finally rest.

So, I started asking myself a simple question.

Why yellow?

The Curious History of a Color

As it turns out, no one knows with absolute certainty.

The phrase yellow-bellied has been around for well over a century, but its roots likely stretch much farther back. Ancient Greek medicine believed human temperament was influenced by four bodily humors, one of which was yellow bile. Over time, yellow became associated with weakness and poor character. During the Middle Ages, yellow also became the color of betrayal. Judas was often depicted wearing yellow robes, and throughout parts of Europe traitors and the dishonorable were marked with the color.

By the nineteenth century, simply calling someone "yellow" meant they lacked courage. Add "belly" to the expression, and the insult became even sharper. It suggested cowardice ran all the way to the core.

Interesting history.

But then my mind drifted somewhere else.

When Duty Calls

For the past several months I've been immersed in writing When Duty Called, a collection of stories from veterans and first responders. I have read accounts from helicopter pilots, submariners, infantrymen, police officers, firefighters, and combat veterans. I've listened to stories of unimaginable courage. Men who stepped forward when every instinct screamed to run. Men who carried their wounded friends. Men who watched others die. Men who still wake up decades later with memories they never asked to keep.

Many of them still carry PTSD. Many still bear scars no one else can see. Yet if you met them in the grocery store, you'd probably never know. Their sacrifice purchased freedoms that the rest of us enjoy every single day, often without a second thought.

As I listened to their stories, the old phrase yellow-belly began taking on a much deeper meaning.

The Price of Freedom

Military service is not the only form of sacrifice. Millions of honorable people serve their country, their communities, their churches, and their neighbors in ways that never make the evening news. Every healthy nation depends upon citizens who are willing to give more than they take, who shoulder responsibility rather than merely demand rights, and who understand that freedom has always required someone to pay a price.

What troubles me is not the person who never wore a uniform.

What troubles me is the person who gladly enjoys the freedoms purchased by others while refusing to sacrifice anything for anyone beyond themselves. They consume without gratitude. They complain without contributing. They ridicule institutions they have never helped build. They condemn sacrifices they have never been asked to make. They demand the blessings of liberty while shrinking from the responsibilities that liberty requires.

That, to me, is the deeper spirit of the yellow-belly.

It is not simply fear in battle. It is fear of responsibility. Fear of sacrifice. Fear of placing something larger than oneself above personal comfort. It is a life organized around self-preservation rather than self-giving.

Perhaps that is the most subtle form of cowardice because it rarely announces itself. It hides behind criticism, entitlement, and endless complaint while quietly allowing others to carry the burdens that preserve the very freedoms it enjoys.

Looking Into the Mirror

I confess there are moments when I feel genuine contempt for that attitude.

Then I catch myself.

Contempt rarely changes a human heart. Conviction sometimes does.

Perhaps this essay is not really about pointing a finger at someone else and calling them a yellow-belly. Perhaps it is about inviting every one of us, myself included, to stand before the mirror and wrestle with a far more uncomfortable question. Where am I consuming more than I am contributing? Where have I become comfortable letting someone else carry burdens that rightly belong to me? Where have I quietly chosen comfort over courage, convenience over responsibility, or self-preservation over sacrifice?

Those are not easy questions, but they are necessary ones. The measure of character is rarely revealed when life is easy. It is revealed when duty quietly presents itself, asking something of us that costs time, comfort, pride, reputation, or even personal safety.

The truth is that courage is not reserved for battlefields. Most of us will never storm a beach at Tarawa, fly a Huey through hostile fire, or run toward a burning building. Yet every day ordinary people are asked to demonstrate extraordinary faithfulness. Fathers and mothers sacrificially raise their children. Sons and daughters lovingly care for aging parents. Police officers answer another dangerous call. Firefighters run toward flames that everyone else is fleeing. Teachers refuse to give up on struggling students. Pastors patiently shepherd wounded souls. Countless men and women quietly keep promises when no one is watching and choose integrity when compromise would be easier.

That kind of courage rarely makes headlines. It seldom earns medals or public applause. Yet it is precisely that quiet, steadfast faithfulness that holds families together, strengthens communities, and preserves the moral fabric of a nation.

Real courage is not always dramatic.

More often, it is quietly faithful.

The Measure of Courage

History remembers heroes because heroes pay a price. Freedom has never been free, and it never will be. Every generation inherits the blessings purchased by those who came before it. Somewhere, someone stood a post through the night. Someone deployed far from home. Someone missed birthdays and anniversaries. Someone came home carrying wounds that could be seen, and many more returned carrying wounds that no one else ever noticed.

That reality extends far beyond military service. Every meaningful life requires sacrifice. Every healthy society depends upon people who willingly place the needs of others ahead of their own comfort. The question is not whether sacrifice will be required. The only question is who will be willing to make it.

The next time you hear the phrase *yellow-belly coward*, don't simply picture an old Western where one cowboy insults another across a dusty street. Hear instead the deeper question quietly echoing beneath those words.

What price am I willing to pay for the blessings I so freely enjoy?

Am I willing to sacrifice comfort for conviction? Convenience for responsibility? Personal gain for the good of my family, my community, my country, or my faith?

Perhaps our answer to those questions reveals far more about our character than any label ever could.

In the end, courage is not measured merely by what we claim to believe. It is measured by what we are willing to sacrifice because of those beliefs. That has always been the dividing line between those who merely enjoy freedom and those who quietly help preserve it.

Perhaps that is the true opposite of being yellow-bellied.

Not fearlessness.

But faithfulness.