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THE HERO'S APPRENTICE

By Laurence Gonzales

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Portraying an auto racer a quarter-century ago in the film *Le Mans*, real-life motorcycle racer Steve McQueen tried to explain his addiction to racing around a track at terrifying speeds. He noted, "It makes everything else feel like 'just waiting'."

On behalf of the mass of humanity living lives of quieter desperation, Chicago essayist and novelist Laurence Gonzales began a series of essays describing people who dared daily to face swift and bloody destruction. He chose, predictably enough, people who drive rivets into skyscraper beams 70 stories above Michigan Avenue, competition aviators, hikers whose paths crossed with grizzlies' in Glacier National Park, tightrope walkers and my own prime choice for perpetual heroes: firefighters. Gonzales worked with them all, the George Plimpton of the underpaid and lavishly courageous, in spheres where "sudden death" didn't mean overtime; it meant sudden death.

But Gonzales's quest for the unifying element spicing these lives with magical intensity expanded as he focussed on those who ante up against Death and win, not merely those who take risks.

He asked Randy Gagne, Canada's national aerobatics champion, "what it was that he'd seen in [those pilots] who had the stamp of death on their foreheads."

"An attitude," Gagne replied. "They don't listen.... They know everything. You can't teach them anything."

What common quality, however, was in those who beat Death regularly? Gonzales discovered it in, of all places, a Road Runner cartoon which prompted his 7-year-old daughter to wonder "why, when the coyote ran off the cliff, he didn't fall until he looked down." It was the fear that made him fall. "To show fear," Gonzales concluded, "even if we show it only to ourselves, is to fall from grace, to fall physically, to fall spiritually, to die."

The crucial quality in successful heroism, then, was "coolness, a cool place in the heart...that inner place of coolness from which to think and function smoothly."

So his book of essays on dangerous professions grew to explore others whose daily lives embodied coolness. He added Dr. Roberta Glick, the neurosurgeon at Cook County Hospital who could exceed an annual income of \$500,000 in private practice but preferred rolling up her sleeves against seemingly hopeless cases for a comparative

pittance. Gonzales traveled to the nightclubs of Austin, Tex. to study those who drew out their personal demons each night and coolly shaped them into the blues.

The book's most touching essay, the one where Gonzales displays the most coolness himself managing to achieve artistic distance, describes the ongoing battle between his wife, Carolyn, and her medical oncologist Cassandra Botzek against bilateral breast cancer, mastectomy, reconstructive surgery and chemotherapy. Some forums for heroism, we do not choose. They choose us.

Gonzales spins an immensely readable blend of fact, vivid description and authorial commentary. In his essay on Glacier National Park, the "Last American Wilderness," Gonzales describes the breathtaking experience of hiking to Grinnell Glacier: "[It] involves more exposed climbing on naked cliff side and therefore more impressive vistas, more vertigo, and a few slippery spots where a misstep would leave a person hanging in mid-air over a 2000-foot drop to nowhere.... The mountain goats have a 50 percent mortality rate in the first year of life.... The number-one cause of accidental death in Glacier is falling. Number one of all is heart attack." Yet, even after he describes maulings by grizzly bears, "the most dangerous land animals in the world," and snowstorms so hazardous that in 1913 one park ranger caught walking to his station "sat down beside the trail to wait for death," Gonzales has made Glacier seem so dazzlingly gorgeous that many readers will reach for maps of Montana to plan their summer vacations.

In each exploration of coolness, Gonzales gives courage a human face. He presents skyscraper hard hats with names like Beetle Juice, Bunyon and Maximum Sperm Buildup, and even the female hard hat so macho that she playfully wallops co-workers "with a fine punch that would raise a welt on pine." There's Ayin de Sela, the spritely high-wire walker whose unself-conscious nudity reflects that for her "the body is the total expression of not only art and self but of utter freedom." There is Gonzales's grandfather, Agustín, who at 14 shot his way out of the Mexican Revolution and at 90, blind and dying, weeps with joy at the touch of his little great-granddaughters. There are the Austin college kids who take on the blues, "a black art, an occult practice, like divination or alchemy, and its outcomes are uncertain.... [yet] some of them eventually cross over the line, and an inner change takes place like a deep chromatic shift.... The monster comes roaring out at them and consumes them, and from then on the blues is all they've got."

The noblest faces appear on the firefighters and physicians. Lieutenant Bob McKee of the Chicago Fire Department may like to put a tough mask over that face and tell you he became a firefighter because "I like to wreck things," but Gonzales uncovers McKee's real motive: "It's almost sacrilege to say it, because it sounds kind of sappy... the real reason is to help other people." Physicians aren't like you and me ("What do you expect?" says a friend of mine who's worked all her life in medicine. "You're in school until you're 30, then suddenly you're God"). But through Gonzales's eyes we see what Eliot called the sharp compassion of the healer's art, the ongoing struggle to keep the death of others at bay, how Cassandra Botzek saved Carolyn Gonzales's life on the first

office visit, all for less money than it would have cost to take both women to lunch at the Drake Hotel's Cape Cod Room.

It is ultimately such moments that make this so rewarding a book. In many ways, in several guises, Gonzales probes the heart's chambers of courage, coolness and caring to reveal what is best inside ourselves.