



Sabrina Little ([00:03](#)):

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Joanna Meyer ([00:20](#)):

You're listening to the Faith & Work Podcast where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work. Hi, and welcome to the Faith & Work Podcast. I'm Joanna Meyer, Denver Institute's Director of Public Engagement, and I'm joined today by Abby Worland, our Vice President of Operations and Finance. Hi, Abby.

Abby Worland ([00:39](#)):

Hey, Joanna.

Joanna Meyer ([00:41](#)):

So fun to see you. Today, we're continuing with our Virtue and Vice series in which we explore the historic principles of the Christian faith and the relevance to modern work and life. You may remember that Denver Institute published a book by the same name. It's called *Virtue and Vice at Work: How the Gospel Redeems our Souls, Reshapes our Work, and Restores our relationships*. The book explores five historic vices. Themes like acedia, lust, and pride, and our podcast series is exploring five virtues. And it has been fun and fascinating to see how the reflections of these ancient writers have profound insight for modern life.

[\(01:20\)](#)

Today, we're exploring the virtue of courage with ultra runner and philosophy professor, Sabrina Little. What a fascinating combination. Longtime followers of Denver Institute may remember that Sabrina joined us as a panelist at the God and the Great Outdoors event in 2018. And Abby, I'd love to know more about Sabrina's history.

Abby Worland ([01:38](#)):

I am so excited to speak with her today. Sabrina Little is a philosopher, a teacher, and an athlete. Right now, she works as a professor at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. And she studied philosophy, religion, and psychology at Yale Divinity School, the College of William & Mary, and then most recently at Baylor University, which is also my alma mater, so sic 'em Bears.



[\(02:01\)](#)

In addition, she's also a five time national champion ultra runner, and she's a member of the US national team. Sabrina writes a monthly column for the iRunFar website, called The Examined Run, and we'll make sure to include a link to that in the show notes. Sabrina, welcome. We're really glad to have you here. To start our conversation, we'd love to just hear, how do you spend your days? What does a normal day look like for you?

Sabrina Little [\(02:30\)](#):

Oh, gosh. Okay, so a normal day. So, every morning I wake up at 5:45. I run about between 70 minutes to an hour 20, about, and then we get my daughter up and ready for the day. She is with a sitter. And I head to school to do research in writing, just to get some progress on my articles and my research. And I'm currently writing a book. And then I head back home and we have family time, and then maybe I do another short run and head to bed, and start again the next day.

Joanna Meyer [\(03:14\)](#):

Sabrina, what are you writing about? I didn't realize you were working on a book.

Sabrina Little [\(03:18\)](#):

Yeah. So, I'm under contract with Oxford University Press and I'm writing a book on actually, character development in the context of sport. So, virtues, vices, flourishing, questions of pain, things like that, in the context of athletics.

Abby Worland [\(03:36\)](#):

That's very cool.

Sabrina Little [\(03:37\)](#):

Thanks.

Abby Worland [\(03:38\)](#):

And congrats, book deal is a big deal. So, besides your family, it sounds like running and philosophy are really two of your big passions in life, and we're going to talk more about that throughout the podcast, but we'd love to hear how those two things became your guiding passions in life. Where did those come from? What got you interested in them?



Sabrina Little ([04:02](#)):

Yeah. So, I say that both running and philosophy are vocations for me. For most of my life, they were just two separate paths that I never had intersect at all. Only recently have I started to bring my philosophy to bear on my running and vice versa, but I mean, I grew up playing all manner of sports and the one commonality was that I was good at running. And so, I just started just walking through the channels of you pursue it at a higher and higher level until one day I was running professionally and doing the trail and ultra stuff in particular.

([04:43](#))

And then in terms of academics, I kind of fell into philosophy without knowing what it was. I was really interested in Christian apologetics as a high schooler, and so my mom kept me supplied and in books. I was also reading things like Dante, and Plato, and Aristotle just in my English and history classes. I just didn't know that it was called philosophy. And so, when I found my way into the philosophy department in college and realized there was an entire discipline where we just engaged in a tradition of inquiry and thought about big questions, I was sold. And then, eventually I started to ask questions of who I was as an athlete and bringing that tradition to bear on my running.

Abby Worland ([05:37](#)):

Love that.

Joanna Meyer ([05:38](#)):

Ultra running, you have a lot of time to think about life's bigger questions.

Sabrina Little ([05:42](#)):

Yes.

Abby Worland ([05:44](#)):

That's great. You used the word intersect and thinking about how philosophy and sport, specifically running, intersect. And we're going to talk more about that as we go, but would just love to hear how you think about that. How have you seen philosophy and running inform one another as you've gotten deeper and deeper into both of those pursuits?

Sabrina Little ([06:07](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. So, it was a couple of things. One was just the practice every day of putting your shoes on and setting out and encountering your weaknesses and your strengths, and trying to work on those things. It was compatible with the kinds of things that I was learning about virtue ethics. So,



virtues are excellences of our person, right? So, they're these shining or good qualities about us, things like courage, things like perseverance, prudence, and so forth. And I needed to acquire these qualities if I wanted to become a better runner.

[\(06:49\)](#)

And as I learned more words, as I learned more virtue and vice concepts, it helped me to self-understand better as an athlete. I learned about this one vice, it's called acedia, some people pronounce it acedia, either way, it's the vice of sloth. And there are two manifestations. One is like the laziness sloth that everyone imagines when they hear the word, of just totally disengaged and disinterested. But the other side of it is this busyness, frenetic pace, where you're always doing one thing and then switching to the next. And I started to see that in my own running, like when I would get tired, instead of being able to stay in place, in a way that running well requires, I would just want to flit off and do something else.

[\(07:43\)](#)

And whereas previously, before I studied virtue ethics, I thought that that was just a failure of fitness, that I wasn't physically strong enough. I started to realize that I had these character deficiencies that were detracting from my ability to perform well. And so, I started talking about these things and more people were interested in them. And there are other things too, like in athletics, there's an odd rhetoric around, "No pain, no gain. Pain is weakness leaving the body." And things that just don't sound like good stewardship to me.

[\(08:17\)](#)

And so, I started to examine those things and those kinds of narratives that I had imbibed. Asking questions about flourishing. Asking questions about how I could learn from other excellent people in the sport. And all of these are within the confines of virtue ethics or character study. And because they enriched my own athletic practice, I wanted to help bridge the conversational gap to other athletes, so that they had those conceptual resources too.

Abby Worland [\(08:50\)](#):

That's great. I think so much of athletics, you think that it's purely physical, but just hearing you talk about that reminds me that being an athlete is both mental and physical, and you have to have both of those components engaged, in order to perform at your best.

Sabrina Little [\(09:07\)](#):

Yeah, for sure. Yeah, it's definitely both.



Joanna Meyer ([09:12](#)):

Sabrina, I am not a runner, and that won't surprise anyone who's familiar with our podcast, but I love reading your column, The Examined Run, on the iRunFar website. It's absolutely fascinating and so engaging for thinking about how things that could seem as dry and dusty as a virtue, just have deep personal relevance in our daily lives.

([09:33](#))

One of the things that stands out to me is the idea of being a virtuous person is not inherent. It's not something that's a personality trait that's God given. It's actually something that we have to work on. And I'm wondering your thoughts on how virtue is formed?

Sabrina Little ([09:51](#)):

Yeah. So, there's a great tradition through the classical period, through the ancients and medievals that addresses this question. And actually, if you look at the Desert Fathers, the monks for example, they talked about it considerably as well. But the idea of virtue development is you're not naturally excellent, right? You're not naturally patient. You don't do things for the right reasons. You don't love the right things. That's why parenting is so difficult, because you're trying to show your child what's choice worthy and how to be self-disciplined or how to be a free person, how to be able to manage your own desires, so that you can choose well for yourself. And that's a process.

([10:39](#))

So, the way that you develop virtues is just to do the virtues. It's a practice-based approach, which I think is really cool. It's just, you just continually do that thing until it defines you in a stable way. And so Aristotle says, "We become builders by building, and lyre players by playing the lyre. So too, we become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts." And I think a lot of people acknowledge that they have deficiencies in certain respects like, "Oh, I'm not doing as much as I should in terms of being a just person in this broken society." Or, "I wish I were more courageous."

([11:23](#))

They'll acknowledge that there's a character gap there but then don't know how to get started. And the getting started part is just doing the awkward first step of trying to be courageous until it defines you in a way that is stable and becomes something that's a part of your character. So, it's the repetition, and that's why I think these kinds of conversations are at home in the athletic context, because athletics and then, I mean, music, there are very few domains left in society where we think in terms of practice or set out every day to do the same kind of work but do it a little bit better. You lean into the athlete you want to be tomorrow and you lean into the person you want to be tomorrow. So, that kind of repetition and practice is the same for how you develop a better character.



Joanna Meyer ([12:19](#)):

How have you seen some of the practices that make you virtuous in your running translate into your daily life as a mom, as an academic?

Sabrina Little ([12:27](#)):

Yeah. So, I guess one thing is just perseverance, for example. Just being able to stay in place when things get really difficult, is something that I've had a lot of opportunity to practice in distance running, because it is practice in long suffering. All you're doing is remaining in an uncomfortable place and in an uncomfortable feeling. And I think that's given me a lot of practice for those kind of icky, in between moments in life, like being in a hard conversation and all you want to do is anything else, just get out of there. Just knowing that you can persist in those situations and be fixed on some good end. That kind of continuity or continuance, having practice in that, I think has been really valuable.

([13:21](#))

And I think just also, structurally, like I mentioned previously, developing a kind of freedom with respect to self, is really valuable and something that we don't often talk about in our cultures. So, we often talk about freedom in terms of something that's granted, like, "You have permission to do this." And we think about freedom in terms of other people standing in our way. But oftentimes, freedom, we're not free if we stand in our own way. So, can you commit to some academic program or some job project and see it through to completion? Or, are you going to be distracted the whole time and unable to do it, to really commit? And I think athletics gives you practice in being able to self-govern well and to choose something and to see it through to completion, because you need those skills in order to finish a long race, but you need them out outside of athletics as well.

Abby Worland ([14:25](#)):

That's great. Let's transition and begin talking about our virtue for today, which is courage. And so, Joanna and I have been talking about, "How do we define courage?" So, I wanted to walk through how we're thinking about it and then I'd love to hear, how would you, as a philosopher, define courage?

([14:43](#))

So, Joanna and I have been thinking about courage as one of the cardinal virtues from the Catholic tradition. It's a virtue on which all the other virtues depend. Courage also shares a linguistic root with the French word for heart. And there's a biblical reference here in the Psalms when the psalmist says, "When I called you, you answered me. You made me bold and stout-hearted." There's something to do with courage in our heart. And then, finally, Thomas Aquinas said, "Courage was a combination of both endurance and patient suffering." And so, those are some of the things that we've been thinking about



in terms of defining courage, but we'd love to hear from you as a actually trained philosopher, how do you define courage?

Sabrina Little ([15:34](#)):

Yeah. So, in the classical tradition, right? It's cardinal virtue, which you said, cardinal comes from cardo, which means hinge. It means it's one of the virtues on which the moral life hinges. Well, they come out specifically in the medieval period as cardinal, but in the time period previously, they're just virtues that are really emphasized in the tradition. And so, in order to develop a lot of virtues, you need courage in place.

([16:07](#))

Courage is a really interesting one. I think that our cultural imagination for courage is like running into the burning building to save someone in a fire, which is like, if you're like me, you've never had occasion to do that sort of thing. And so you think, "How relevant is this to me?" But on a regular basis, courage comes up a lot, like having hard conversations, or public speaking, or just even persisting through difficulties. So, I'm glad you drew out the connection to endurance because that is something that Aquinas emphasizes. It's persistence through risk. And it involves a couple things. One is, how you manage your fear. So, there's a sense in which we can have too much fear, right? So we can be cowardly. But on the other end of the spectrum is, you can have too little fear and you can be kind of like a reckless person, and that's not a virtue either.

([17:17](#))

And so, trying to find that middle ground of having some sort of commitment to a good, such that you persist in risks for that good and also have a suitable amount of fear, that's not too much or not too little, it's a challenge to end up in the right place in that respect. And in fact, it's interesting, that was a virtue that I worked on with my middle school athletes. When we were working on courage, I would have some athletes who would err on the side of being so reckless and would just take off on workouts at a pace that would definitely set them on fire and they definitely couldn't continue in. But then, I would have other ones who were just really tepid and they would just jog off the start line because they were afraid of hitting that moment. There's no one prescription that you give to everyone, like, "Take more risks." Or something, to develop courage, because it's also figuring out where your natural disposition falls, so you can hit the right aim there.

Jeff Hoffmeyer ([18:37](#)):

Hi, I'm Jeff Hoffmeyer, Vice President of Advancement here at Denver Institute for Faith & Work. And I'd like to invite you to become a part of our new monthly partner community. Whether it's a monthly commitment of \$25, \$50, or any amount, your generosity will support Denver Institute's ongoing efforts



to help men and women love God, their neighbors, and society, through their daily work, including this podcast.

[\(19:03\)](#)

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Abby Worland [\(19:30\)](#):

That's so helpful. I think the popular understanding of courage is often that idea of, to be courageous you have to be totally fearless. And what you're saying really challenges that. To be courageous doesn't mean being fearless, it means actually managing our fears appropriately and well, and that's helpful. Would love to hear, how do you think the Christian understanding of courage differs from how courage may be portrayed in popular culture or the popular imagination?

Sabrina Little [\(20:01\)](#):

Yeah, that's a good question. I think the way in which Christian courage changes is just the kinds of ends that you would be fixed on, the kinds of goods to which you're oriented are different than secular culture. So, for example, we wouldn't call it courage if you do something risky in business, because your summum bonum, your greatest good is money. Right? So, if you do some big move on the stock market, because you're all about money and that's your great good, well, we would be inclined not to call that courage. Right?

[\(20:46\)](#)

So, if you do something that's fixed on some better end, something that is oriented toward the Kingdom of God, or something that is, I don't know, loving people well, we would be inclined to call that good. It's interesting, in the Christian tradition, we look at cardinal virtues like courage and say that they're transformed by these three infused virtues that are gifted to us. And those are faith, hope, and love. And so, if you have faith, and hope, and love, they change the orientation of the virtues to make them richer and fixed on the right goods.

Joanna Meyer [\(21:32\)](#):

So, Sabrina, one thing that I love about your role at the university is that you are teaching in the leadership development department, which is so encouraging to think that business leaders and other leaders in our community to be thinking about deep ethical issues from a Christian worldview, whether they realize that there's a Christian teaching them or not, just that you have that unique place of



influence. And so, I'm wondering if we think practically, what are some ways in which virtue can be formed in our lives? When you think about your day-to-day work, what are some steps that you're taking to form a virtue like courage?

Sabrina Little ([22:06](#)):

Yeah. So, I think it's a couple things. One is, I try to surround myself not just with people I want to learn from, but also people I want to be like. So, having exemplars or having people in my life who exhibit good qualities like courage, has been really valuable for me in just seeing what it looks like, right? Because it's one thing to read about courage as a word and it's another thing to see it in practice and see why it's choice worthy, why it's something that you want.

([22:45](#))

But then I think another thing is just being really mindful or attentive to the ways in which you're walking through the world. And one is, I mean, the example from running, when I do my workouts, I usually have a virtue goal and I have a performance goal, and having those alongside of one another. Right? So, just taking the opportunities that are there, because you are practicing something. You're either practicing cowardice and reinforcing that disposition, or you're practicing courage.

([23:22](#))

And so, taking that opportunity to just say, "Well, I'm in the middle of this run right now and I want to quit, but if I do, I'm practicing not being perseverance. Is that the kind of person that I want to be outside of this situation?" Then maybe I shouldn't practice it. Right? So, I guess, just having that awareness. I think it can be really overwhelming if you think about your character all at once, because, I mean, speaking for myself, there are so many deficiencies and it can be overwhelming. And so, if you just focus on one at a time and really just have that virtue in practice for a while and then focus on another one, and so forth.

Joanna Meyer ([24:14](#)):

So fascinating. I can see all the parents listening today adopting virtue goals for their kids.

Sabrina Little ([24:18](#)):

Yeah.

Joanna Meyer ([24:20](#)):

Do you do that with your daughter? She's pretty young, but do you think of having a virtue goal for her?



Sabrina Little ([24:24](#)):

She's two, so she's not ready yet, but yeah, I will definitely inculcate that into her vocabulary.

Joanna Meyer ([24:35](#)):

Potty training goals are next for you guys. So, I wanted to share a quote from your writing, because to me, it made it very personal and vivid how you live this out, what courage looks like becoming a habit. So, if you'll indulge me, I'm just going to read a paragraph from The Examined Run. You said, "Tomorrow, I race the Lake Sonoma 50 mile, 50 miles of tough climbs on a hot day against a challenging field. I'm not afraid, but eager and expectant. I won't be afraid at the start line and I won't be scared if I'm pressed to make a move at a pace that I might not be able to sustain. To be clear, this race might go terribly for me. Anything can happen over 50 miles, and maybe my legs won't show up. I could be really tired or struggle over the relentless hills, but if this race does not go well for me, it won't be because I was not brave.

([25:25](#))

The reason I can say this is that I have been practicing bravery in my sneakers. I practiced being brave in my training, so that it is an impulse, my second nature. This way when courage is required of me, I won't have to deliberate in the moment about how to respond, because I have formed the right habits." And that phrase, "I have been practicing bravery in my sneakers." It just made my heart sing. I started having the soundtrack from Chariots of Fire playing in my background.

([25:55](#))

But I just think that something super tangible of that is that you knew that this virtue had been formed in your life. You didn't have to be afraid that it wouldn't be there, because you had been actively developing it. I'm wondering if we could just step out a little bit, and I want to ask you to think as a professor for a moment, of your students' lives, because any one of us could probably be in your seat as we think about our daily work, of what it looks like to work and to lead virtuously. Let's use an example of maybe a business leader or an organizational leader. What does practicing virtue look like in a scenario like that?

Sabrina Little ([26:32](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good question. Courage in that context, I think, I guess just having the hard conversations that need to be had and sending the difficult emails, and so forth. I mean, there are always opportunities to practice virtues in a given context.



[\(26:57\)](#)

I also think it can be really good to have some sort of embodied practice outside of your career, to work on these things. Like having running as my laboratory for virtues, I think there's a kind of safety net there, because you might get it wrong. Right? So, the person who's trying to be courageous acts too reckless. Well, it has no consequences really, if I mess up my training run, but if I did it in the workspace, I don't know, maybe that awkward process of virtue acquisition might have more repercussions.

Joanna Meyer [\(27:36\)](#):

It's challenging. Maybe that's an invitation for our listeners to identify. Well, I think in that quote that I read from you, running, a few things stood out to me. You knew the particular scenarios that would tax you as a runner, where it would be, for example, a moment where you had to overtake a competitor, or maybe there was a pace that you had to run that you worried would be beyond something that you could sustain. You anticipated the moments in which courage would be required of you and you practiced for them.

[\(28:05\)](#)

And one step for our listeners might be to take a moment to identify, and you can even do this now as you're listening to my voice, two to three areas, and you know what they are, that test your courage at work. I can think of them right now. Those tough moments or those things that you're just dreading. And identifying them is a first step. And then thinking, "What are the smaller steps in which exercising courage, building that muscle, would prepare you to show up courageously in those moments?"

[\(28:34\)](#)

You've modeled that in your running and now we can just translate that into our life as educators, or as business leaders, or as healthcare executives. There are lots of moments that we'll find that invite us to have courage. I'm wondering, Sabrina, if we could have you give our listeners a charge? I want to give you the last word. There are lots of moments in which we can choose to show up, and you model that through your life and work. How would you charge our listeners to be people that form virtue, especially form courage in their life, through practice?

Sabrina Little [\(29:09\)](#):

Yeah. I would just say, take initiative for your character. I think so often we see someone exemplary and then admire them and just leave it at that. Take on board what it is that is admirable in that person and then put it into practice. And it might be awkward at first, like say, courage or perseverance or something, in the same way that you are acquiring a new skill and in the beginning it's awkward. Just embrace that gawky phase and know it won't always be awkward to practice virtues. It will become second nature. And that's the objective.



[\(29:47\)](#)

So, just take the initiative, put it into plan in the same way that you would plan a training schedule or something like that. But yeah, don't wait for lightning to strike and one day you wake up with a better character. You have to practice it.

Joanna Meyer [\(30:06\)](#):

I love it. Sabrina, thanks for modeling this in your daily life. I've never known anyone that is as thoughtful and intentional about living an integrated life that's governed by these incredible virtues. So, it's just a privilege to get to observe and learn with you today.

Sabrina Little [\(30:21\)](#):

Well, thanks so much for having me.

Joanna Meyer [\(30:25\)](#):

Abby, before we wrap up, I wanted to hear a little bit from you. As someone who has spent more than a decade working in public education, I would love to know more about what you think in your life as an educator, practicing a virtue like courage might have looked like?

Abby Worland [\(30:40\)](#):

Yeah. I got so much from what Sabrina was saying. I think even now in this job and on my previous work experience, there are times where I wake up and I honestly feel fear about the day, there's an apprehensiveness or a pit in my stomach about something that's going to happen during that day. Whether it's a conversation, whether it's a meeting, whether it's an undone project, those things that loom over you in your work life.

[\(31:05\)](#)

And what Sabrina helped me understand is that it's very natural to feel fear, and our ultimate goal is not to ignore it or be reckless about it. I like the way she used that word reckless. But really to see fear specifically at work, as an opportunity to demonstrate courage. So, I want to, when I'm feeling that way about something that's upcoming at work, to see it as an opportunity to grow and not necessarily a deficit that I need to overcome or ignore. And I think that is really helping me think about work differently and not shove those feelings of fear aside, but rather see them as a way to practice a spiritual discipline. And that is encouraging to me.



Joanna Meyer ([31:54](#)):

Yeah, I think about scripture that talks about Christ being formed in us, and that word, form, is so important. It's not the idea of just slapping a solution of a Bible verse and a problem is eliminated, but the idea that over time the virtues, the character of Christ is formed in us through the work of the Holy Spirit. And I think that's a beautiful model for what virtue formation can look like in the practical life of a believer. So, I love that it's lived out in your life. I love that Sabrina gave us some framework and insight to talk about it.

([32:24](#))

For our listeners who are interested in learning a little bit more, I would recommend two resources that we'll link to in the show notes. The first is a link to Sabrina's blog, The Examined Run, on the iRunFar website, which even if you're not a runner, they're really great reads, they're really fun. And then finally, we'll link to the Vice and Virtue book, which you can purchase. And I think you'll be fascinated how relevant the teachings of church fathers from the fourth and fifth centuries are to our daily work and life today. Thanks for joining us, Abby. Thanks to Sabrina for a fun conversation.

Abby Worland ([32:55](#)):

Thank you. Joanna, you ready to go for a run?

Joanna Meyer ([32:57](#)):

Yeah. Lacing up my shoes now.

([33:05](#))

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