Robot or Alien?
Mark Dixon – February 2017

What is courage?

A few years ago there was a television show called "Heroes" that I very much enjoyed. For those that don't know it, it is about a group of people who have unsuspected powers – some small, some very large.

One of the characters is a teenage girl, known by fans of the series as "the cheerleader". She is invulnerable and is a key part of saving the world in the end of the first series. At the beginning of the second series she gets moved away to a new town and state where her family want her to start a new life and be anonymous.

We see her in her first day in her new school. She is quickly noticed by a boy in her class, who takes the opportunity to sit next to her and chat to her. One of the first things he says to her is: "are you an alien or a robot?" This was not just a random chat-up line – he really wants to know which she is and if she is worth spending time on.

The cheerleader is confused. He goes on to explain. Robots do everything everyone else does, think everything everyone else does. Whereas aliens he says do what *they* want to do, not worrying about the crowd. He says, "tell me now, I don't waste my time on robots."

What are you: a robot or an alien? The question is a bit simplistic and you probably haven't got an answer. I don't really need you to answer it, that's not the point of this talk.

Does it take courage to fit in, or to choose not to fit in? For some it can take a lot of courage just to be in a situation where that question is asked.

I want to read you an extract from "About A Boy" a novel by Nick Hornby. You may have read it or seen the film – I recommend both.

"During the night after his first day at school, Marcus woke every half-hour or so. He could not believe he was going to have to go back there the next morning, and the next morning after that….and more or less every morning for the rest of his life.

He could change school, but that would not make a whole lot of difference. He would still be who he was and that, it seemed to him was the basic problem.

He just wasn't right for schools. Not secondary schools, anyway. Not being right for school was a big problem."

Do any of us ever feel like Marcus?

What is the answer to this problem? Well, it is tempting to act like others so we can be in the same group – do the same things, treat people the same way. I think it takes courage to not be changed like this however. I think it takes courage to be yourself and who you want to be.

Sometimes people decide to take a stand and aggressively decide to be individual. Deciding perhaps to act in a way that's different to the rest and exaggerate their actions in order to stand out.

I don't think this takes courage – it's a way of attracting attention and of controlling the situation. And deciding to go the other way and stand out in the crowd for being individual, is allowing yourself to be changed and amended by everyone else – just in a different direction. It's very easy to do this and think to yourself "I'm being an individual and I'm not a sheep". However, you are being herded by everyone else, just in a different direction.

I want to suggest to you that we can actually show courage by allowing other people to be themselves.

Why is it that we allow ourselves to be part of a group that wants others to be like us? And why is it that we feel uncomfortable with the fact that some other people around us are different with different interests or opinions or ideas.

It's admirable if we can accept people's differences and even better if we can embrace them. This is what I think takes courage, to be good friends with people that are different and to enjoy those differences without trying to get them to change them so they fit in with our comfort.

So the key question I want to ask is not whether we change or be changed to be part of a group, but whether we are comfortable with making friends with people without feeling the need to change *them*. It certainly takes courage to do this in spite of the fact that the "herd" doesn't like it.