

THE SOCIETY  
OF TIMID SOULS

or, How To Be Brave

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## Introduction

The day is bitterly cold. I see steam blooming from a man's lips as he jumps down from the trolley car on the Upper West Side at Broadway and 73rd Street. His feet hit the icy sidewalk and the streetcar clangs away with all the acoustic precision that sound has on very cold days. He tugs the brim of his hat low over his eyes. The other passengers from downtown have been discussing the war, but he has not been thinking about the Japanese, or Hitler, or bombs. He has instead been thinking of his hands on the piano keyboard. The thought makes his mouth dry. Gripping the leather handle of his music satchel, he hesitates on the street corner for a moment. Then he sets off, crossing Broadway with a grey crowd of Sunday strollers. He skirts the upper edge of Verdi Square. Through the trees, the statue of the composer stands, his back turned as if to eschew the sorry kind of musician the man has become. He walks on past the Central Savings Bank, glancing up at the clock above the door that says it is a minute or two before four o'clock. Crossing Amsterdam Avenue onto West 73rd Street, he stops for a moment to check the advertisement torn from the newspaper and now folded – a little furtively – in his coat pocket. Number One

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Hundred And Sixty. There it is – on the right. He passes beneath the portico and steps across the polished hallway into a wood-panelled elevator. With a clunk, he is lifted skyward and when the elevator boy yanks open the metal grille again, the man finds himself at the inaugural meeting of the Society of Timid Souls.



Only fragments remain about what really happened that January day. We know that the year was 1942. We also know that just four unsteady piano players responded to the first advertisement placed by Bernard Gabriel, a professional concert pianist, publicising a series of meetings to be held at his Manhattan apartment on the first and third Sunday afternoon of every month. In exchange for seventy-five cents apiece – to cover, so the notice in *The New York Times* read, ‘refreshments’ – fear-wracked musicians were invited to step in out of the cold and ‘to play, to criticise and be criticised, in order to conquer the old bogey of stage fright’. They were to assemble at Sherman Square Studios, high above West 73rd Street, in a room bare but for two Steinway grand pianos and so extensively soundproofed that no one would hear what went on behind the closed door. Inside was Maestro Gabriel, with no formal qualification for this work other than a confidence beyond his thirty years. Gabriel was, it was said, ‘non-timid’ and duly he proceeded to deploy what he called ‘strange and devious methods’ to inoculate those in attendance against their fears.

By the early summer, the Society of Timid Souls numbered more than twenty and on 17 May, *The New Yorker* sent along a reporter, Charles Cooke, who happened to be a pianist himself. First Cooke encountered the silver-haired Mr William Hopkins, who told him, ‘I’m old enough to

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know better and I'm scared to death,' before plunging into a Respighi nocturne. Next came Mrs Moeller, who grew flustered if the audience was silent. Then Miss Simson, who panicked even when others played. Finally, the mysterious inoculation process was revealed, with the revival of a Timid Soul belonging to a Miss Flora Cantwell.

'This afternoon,' said Bernard Gabriel, 'I'm going to kill or cure her.'

Flora Cantwell sat down at one of the two pianos and began to play an étude. As she stumbled through – so Charles Cooke told his readers – Mr Gabriel moved among the Society members handing out props, a whistle here, a rattle there, occasionally pausing to whisper something into another Timid Soul's ear.

Miss Cantwell finished playing.

'Again,' said Gabriel and the moment the étude resumed – pandemonium.

Miss Simson blew Bronx cheers on a Bronx-cheer blower. Mr Carr spun a watchman's rattle. Mr Hopkins repeatedly slammed the door. Miss Cohen warbled *Daydreams Come True At Night* and Mrs Moeller flung the Manhattan Telephone Directory at the floor.

Flora Cantwell tucked her head down and kept playing.

Bernard Gabriel now crashed his hands upon the keyboard of the other Steinway, shouting, 'You're playing abominably, but don't stop!'

She did as he said and rising from the piano at the end, Miss Cantwell reported, 'I could play it in a boiler factory now.'

Bernard Gabriel's apparently comical methods proved to be remarkably effective. Many Timid Souls claimed to have been 'cured' by a dose of his 'anti-toxin' and, a year later, Society membership had doubled to include timid actors, timid singers, timid public speakers and timid parlour

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entertainers, each of them desperate to learn – or to remember – how to be brave.

The rudimentary exposure therapy techniques improvised those Sunday afternoons on West 73rd Street, while not unheard of, were certainly ahead of their time. In 1940s Manhattan, qualms like those of the Timid Souls would typically have been treated with rest and barbiturates; or if you were very modern, perhaps an evening of dream analysis at a ‘Freuding’ party. ‘*In vivo* flooding’, as methods like Gabriel’s later became known, would have to wait a further thirty years to gain much in the way of clinical credence. And yet this was how the Society of Timid Souls were healing themselves – and each other – every other weekend.

Copycat societies soon followed for nervous fashion models and others. Even Charles Cooke, the piano-playing reporter from *The New Yorker*, was whispered to have gone native and signed up as a Timid Soul himself. Said Bernard Gabriel triumphantly to the correspondent from *Reader’s Digest* who visited in April 1943, ‘I can see no reason why the shy and timid in any community couldn’t get together and help each other.’



It would be easy to dismiss the Society of Timid Souls as a period piece, quaint but scarcely important. I did at first, but then the timing of Bernard Gabriel’s experiment in stress inoculation caught my eye.

For the first meeting of Timid Souls was called just four weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States joined World War II. While Jewish refugees had been flooding into Gabriel’s Upper West Side neighbourhood for many months, now America itself entered the fray. That very evening, 7 December 1941, a teacher at

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the Modern Piano School in New York City noted in her diary how Bernard Gabriel had been warming up to play a concert as news of the Japanese attack came over the wireless. And I imagined how pre-performance nerves must now have mingled with a deeper fear that ran through everyone gathered there that night and in the streets beyond.

My curiosity was piqued. Further scrutiny of what I still assumed to be little more than a historical coincidence revealed that this Society of Timid Souls had offered its whimsical response to big ideas and world events in other ways too. For the phrase ‘timid souls’ was not Mr Gabriel’s own, nor did its origins share his affection, or at least his sympathy, for those cowed by life’s little anxieties. ‘Timid souls’ comes instead from a famous speech given in 1910 by Theodore Roosevelt, in which the President invoked a muscular apparition of courage: ‘the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; ... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.’

Roosevelt’s rhetoric is thrilling, of course, but it was Bernard Gabriel’s enterprise that I found myself admiring. I felt uplifted by how quietly radical its rehabilitation of the very idea of timidity was. For however stirring the ideal of ‘the man in the arena,’ the substance of Roosevelt’s argument seemed to have missed the point about timidity, a point that the Society of Timid Souls intuitively understood: that the world is not populated only by square-jawed heroes and snivelling cowards. Instead, whenever the times are troubled and fearful, then or now, the vast majority of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle, wishing to be brave and yet easily frightened by what is frightening. Either that, or we are