

## Moral Courage A White Paper

by  
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Like most independent schools, St. Paul's School for Boys posts athletic schedules on its Web site. In the spring of 2001, it listed baseball games, tennis matches, and crew events from its campus in suburban Baltimore.

But not lacrosse. Not that spring. Despite being ranked No. 1 in a nationwide lacrosse poll earlier in the year, this prestigious 151-year-old institution cancelled its entire varsity season on April 3.



The reason? Earlier in the spring, a 16-year-old team member of the lacrosse team had a sexual tryst with a 15-year-old girl from another private school—and, without her knowledge, videotaped the whole thing. He was apparently mimicking a sequence in *American Pie* (a movie some of the students had recently seen and discussed) where a character videos a sexual encounter and puts it on the Web. When this student's teammates gathered at a player's home to look at what they thought would be game tapes of an upcoming rival, they saw his tape instead.

None of the teammates objected. Nobody tried to stop the showing. Instead, they watched.

The story of what happened next is a tale of moral courage—a lack of it among teammates who failed to stand up against the tape, and the expression of it by an administration that took a formidable public stand. The debate could not have been an easy one. At St. Paul's, lacrosse has a 60-year history and attracts some of the best young players in the region. It enjoys solid alumni support, which translates into funding. But the school, affiliated with the Episcopal Church, still requires chapel for its students and retains a serious tradition of ethical concern.

What do you do when a popular sport crosses swords with an ethical collapse? In this case, the answer was clear. The boy who made the tape was expelled. Thirty varsity players were suspended for three days and sent into counseling with the school's chaplain and psychologist. Eight junior varsity players were made to sit out the rest of the season. And the varsity season was terminated.

“At a minimum,” Headmaster Robert W. Hallett wrote to parents, “we should expect each boy here will, in the future, have the courage to stand up for, to quote the Lower School prayer, ‘The hard right against the easy wrong.’”<sup>1</sup>

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In the annals of moral courage, this is a small story. It's not about a whistleblower, an investigative journalist, a researcher finding an unpopular truth, or the signers of the Declaration of Independence. But its very smallness is telling. Moral courage plays itself out daily, hourly, in the interstices of our lives. Without it, our brightest virtues rust from lack of use. With it, we build piece by piece a more ethical world. And at times we reap unexpected successes. By late April 2001, the *Boston Globe* was already reporting rumors that admissions inquiries at St. Paul's were up from previous years.

Which may suggest that while a tradition of lacrosse is a big draw, a climate of moral courage is even bigger.

### **A new focus on moral courage**

What, exactly, is moral courage? It's a question we've been pondering here at the Institute. In recent years, we've noticed an increasing inclination among our seminar participants to mention "courage" when we ask them to define their core moral values. It's a word they want to list along with the five values that commonly surface in this exercise—honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion—and that come to be a kind of litmus test for ethical behavior.

When the 23 members of the Maine Commission on Ethical and Responsible Student Behavior, for example, undertook to identify the core values "fundamental to a caring, civil society," they found those five—and then added courage.<sup>2</sup> "A person who is courageous in the face of ethical challenges," says their final report, does "the right thing even if it's not popular," refuses to "stand idly by while others engage in unethical or harmful behavior," and will not "sacrifice aspirations when confronted by academic or ethical setbacks."<sup>3</sup>

Put that way, moral courage is not a complicated concept to explain. "If there is some person getting really beaten up," one eight-year-old respondent told the Commission, "help them and tell other people that you shouldn't do this."<sup>4</sup> Nor is it a term arising only in the Western intellectual tradition. "No culture that we know lacks the notions of good and bad [or] true and false," says the British intellectual Isaiah Berlin. He singles out courage as an example of a universal value that "has, so far as we can tell, been admired in every society known to us."<sup>5</sup>

It's also a term that appears to be growing in public favor, at least across American culture early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Where a casual mention of the need for *ethics* brings knowing nods, a mention of the need for *moral courage* can bring people to their feet in enthusiastic agreement.

Yet the concept is oddly absent from current philosophical discourse. To be sure, scholars comment, sometimes at daunting length, on Aristotle's analysis of courage. And theologians note the primacy of courage in the thinking of St. Augustine and St. Thomas. Yet with the exception of a sermon published in the nineteenth century, the catalogue of the Library of Congress lists no book simply titled *Moral Courage*. And a scan of the indexes of a wide range of recently published books on ethics, assembled in our library here at the Institute, reveals few entries under either "courage" or "moral courage." The public, it seems, feels a greater need to understand this concept than the academic community has recognized.

## Moral versus physical courage

Courage is often understood to have two subsets, physical and moral. Physical courage is the willingness to face serious risk to life or limb instead of fleeing from it. “Courage,” says our 1926 Webster’s, is “that quality of mind which enables one to encounter danger and difficulties with firmness, or without fear, or fainting of heart.” The definition continues by distinguishing it from *mettle* or *spirit*:

*Courage* is the firmness of spirit that faces danger or extreme difficulty without flinching or retreating. *Mettle* suggests an ingrained capacity for meeting strain or difficulty without fear or with fortitude and resilience of spirit or mind. *Spirit*, like mettle suggesting a quality of temperament, implies an ability to hold one’s own, fight for one’s principles, or keep up one’s morale when opposed, interfered with, or checked.

The dictionary cites a definition of courage by General William T. Sherman (after whom the tank is named) as “a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger and a mental willingness to endure it.” John Wayne put it with characteristic bluntness: “Courage is being scared to death—and saddling up anyway.”<sup>6</sup> Sir Ernest Shackleton, seeking adventurers to join him on his South Pole exploration, described it nicely in an advertisement:

Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness—constant danger, safe return doubtful—honor and recognition in case of success.<sup>7</sup>

As the above definitions suggest, heroism is closely allied with courage—so much so that the former can’t seem to exist without the latter. That heroism is an undeniable human attraction is evident in a long tradition of story-telling dating back through the ancient Greeks to the age of cave paintings depicting acts of daring and prowess on the fields of prey. Throughout the ages, the first stories to ignite children’s imaginations have often been tales of adventure where virtuous heroes overcome the insurmountable. Among the favorites are war stories, often romanticized but typically portraying courage in action. Hollywood still cranks out tales of the underdog rising against incredible odds to triumph over evil.



Yet the world of physical courage celebrated in tales of the hero is increasingly remote. Physical courage is less in demand than it once was. For most of the developed world, modern life is designed for ease. No longer does the mere satisfaction of basic needs entail hazard or require courage. Rarely, if ever, do we have to think about physically defending ourselves or our loved ones. Where once the frontier loomed mysterious and uncharted, global positioning satellites now take us right to our mark. Even war, which Aristotle thought was the only place to find true courage, has become less dependent on the physical courage of the individual warrior and more dependent on technology, information, and weaponry launched from a safe distance.

But the *lessons* of courage are still needed, especially among youth seeking tests of adulthood and rites of passage into maturity. In the past, young men went to war, sailors went to sea, and pioneers took to the vast tracts of wilderness—to carve out new opportunities for themselves, yes, but also from a need to test their mettle beyond the comfortable regulation of civilization. So it was with Winston Churchill. “It seemed to my youthful mind,” he wrote in his autobiography, “that it must be a thrilling and immense experience to hear the whistle of bullets all around and to play at hazard from moment to moment with death and wounds.”<sup>8</sup> He was describing his decision, at age 20, to volunteer to fight for the Spanish in a guerrilla war in Cuba.

This need to test our mettle may also explain the popularity of the contrived risk-taking of extreme sports, survival treks, and some high-risk financial ventures—and the prevalence of risky sexual behavior, drug use, and gang activity. It’s as though the young were saying, “If nature, war, and the need for survival are not going to test my courage, I’ll find other ways, for I need to prove to myself and others that I really am courageous!”

Courage, then, remains as a felt need. Yet while the cultural context within which to express courage has changed radically, the stories we tell about courageous heroes have not. To fail to recognize this change—to go on telling stories about physical courage as though that were the most admirable avenue to maturity—may actually encourage more dangerous behavior by individuals misguidedly pursuing an archaic ideal. More appropriate to our age, perhaps, are stories about heroes expressing not physical but moral courage.

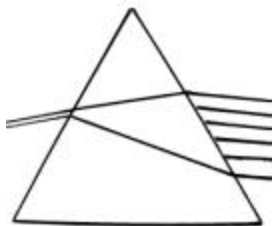
### Moral courage defined

Moral courage is not about facing physical challenges that could harm the body. It’s about facing mental challenges that could harm one’s reputation, emotional well-being, self-esteem, or other characteristics. These challenges, as the term implies, are deeply connected with our moral sense—our core moral values.

For us, moral courage has come to mean the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice, and also to defy immoral or imprudent orders. –William Ian Miller<sup>9</sup>

The term *moral* is commonly used in two distinct ways. It defines those areas of concern that consider questions of right and wrong—as opposed, say, to *political* (which considers questions of power) or *economic* (which considers questions of wealth). But we also use the term to mean *good*, *right*, or *just*. In the phrase “moral dilemma,” for example, it refers to the first sense: We understand it to mean “a dilemma about right and wrong,” not “a good dilemma.” But when we say, “that was a highly moral act,” we use it as a term of praise for something right and proper, rather than simply as a description of an act operating in the realm of good or bad choices.

That ambiguity carries over into the meaning of *moral courage*. To be sure, the phrase refers, in a somewhat neutral way, to a courage that operates within the realm of concern for good and bad, right and wrong. But if by *moral* we mean that which is good, then *moral courage* also means the positive courage to be ethical. That, it would seem, is the way our seminar participants intuitively want to use it. And if by *ethical* we mean taking action that accords with the



core values of honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, and compassion, then “moral courage” means the courage to invoke and practice those values. Pass the white light of moral courage through the prism of our understanding of values, in other words, and it breaks out into a five-banded spectrum: the courage to be honest, to be fair, to be respectful, to be responsible, and to be compassionate. And if the word *values* is in some way synonymous with *convictions*, then moral courage is, as it’s often characterized, “the courage of your convictions” in these five key areas.

That line of reasoning suggests why *courage* is not quite like the other values. Rather than being the next pearl on a string with the other five, moral courage is something that enables the others to be effective. Maybe it’s the string itself. Maybe it’s the catalyst that speeds up the reaction times of the others. Maybe it’s the hardware upon which the software of the other values operates. Whatever the metaphor, courage seems a necessary element in the ethics equation. It is, in the words of Samuel Johnson, “the greatest of all virtues; because, unless a man has that virtue, he has no security for preserving any other.”<sup>10</sup> What good is a conviction about honesty or fairness if there is no willingness to put them into action in the face of adversity? Of what use is a code of ethics that hangs on the wall, unimplemented? Without the courage to act, virtuous conviction is pointless and paralytic.

Yet courage without virtuous conviction is empty—or perverse. The Mafia hit-man needs physical courage, of course, to wreak mayhem among the innocent. But he also needs a kind of “immoral” courage to implement a cluster of distinctly bad values—self-seeking, lust, revenge, wrath, and others of the Seven Deadlies. Or think of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. One of his lawyers, Richard Burr, tried to paint him with the colors of moral courage. For years, he said, his client had been “deeply concerned about the overreaching of federal law enforcement authorities. When that overreach became apparent to him in his own case, it overrode other considerations.”<sup>11</sup> The implication is that he acted out of moral courage. Yet McVeigh seemed indifferent to the five core values. He showed little respect for others, and no compassion for his victims. The only responsibility he felt, apparently, was to take the law into his own hands, subverting justice and fairness. And his dishonesty showed up in the various deceptions he pursued to meet his ends. Hard to see anything moral or ethical here, although he had an odd sort of daring and bravado.

Moral courage: the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating.

But must every evidence of courage be thought of as true moral courage? Here Aristotle’s conceptions help. He defined moral virtue as an “intermediate” between a defect and an excess. Courage, he said, lay balanced between the defect of cowardice and the excess of rashness. Put another way, one can think of courage as flanked by two alternatives: its opposite, the cowering timidity that dares not act, and its counterfeit, the bravura and foolhardiness that looks a bit like courage but isn’t. The courage that is truly moral, then, has built into it a moderating restraint. If it falls backwards, it becomes its own negative. If it lapses into excess, it turns into a caricature of itself.

What, then, is moral courage? It can be defined as the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating.

- It is “a quality of mind and spirit” because, like all ethical endeavor, it partakes of both the rational and the intuitional capacities, both left-brain and right-brain activity, both the processes of intellectual discourse and the feelings of rightness and wrongness inherent in each individual.
- It enables us to “face up” to problems—not necessarily to resolve them, and certainly not to promise that we will master them, but to address them squarely, frontally, and with determination.
- It focuses on both “ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings,” because it is just as much in demand as a prerequisite for coping with the nuances of right-versus-right conundrums as for overcoming the evils of right-versus-wrong temptations.
- It requires action that is both firm in its persistence and confident that its tools—the moral, mental, and emotional elements of argumentation and persuasion—are sound enough to weather serious resistance.
- Finally, it requires us to act “without flinching or retreating” in the face of persuasions, from the subtle to the violent, that make us want to turn tail and run.

But moral courage does not, it seems, require fearlessness—at least in its beginnings. There is little indication that those who triumph in moral courage have never felt an ounce of fear—have never, in John Wayne’s words, been scared to death as they saddled up for battle. Rather, moral courage may be a means whereby one overcomes fear through practical action.

### **Moral courage in action**

If physical courage acts in the defense of the tangible, moral courage is concerned with the defense of the intangible. It is not property but principles, not valuables but virtues that moral courage rises to defend. Acts of moral courage carry with them the risks of humiliation, ridicule, contempt, unemployment, and loss of social standing. The morally courageous person is often going against the grain, acting contrary to the accepted norm. So moral courage differs from its physical counterpart in that, ironically, the risk comes from success rather than from failure.

#### **Portrait of a Whistleblower**

Philip Vargas had been working as a political appointee to a commission studying the workings of the federal government in Washington, DC. Looking at the government’s information procedures, Vargas and his coworkers uncovered corruption in certain federal agencies that were flouting the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts at significant costs to taxpayers. The commission produced a report accurately portraying the corruption. When Vargas was told to clean up the report and remove all allegations of wrong-doing by the government, he refused, instead sending the report to the White House and then to the press. He lost his job and his house, and discovered wider ramifications of his actions. “‘Whistleblower’ is the worst label you can have in this town,” he said, speaking of Washington. “You can be a felon—that’s not as bad as being a whistleblower. People are afraid of you.” His career in the government was over.<sup>12</sup>

Moral courage also differs from physical courage in that it can be practiced by anyone regardless of age, gender, physical ability, or surroundings. A child can stand up to her peers in defense of a principle in the same way her parents could.

Classic examples of moral courage addressing the problems of our modern world are the cases of whistleblowers who report fraud or corruption in their places of employment. Their own brand of moral courage calls upon them to face the possibility of ruining their careers, losing their friends, and being labeled as traitors. Seeking to expose wrongs and promote what is right, whistleblowers often face little if any reward from the success of their actions.

The False Claims Act was first passed in 1863 in an attempt to counter rampant fraud being perpetrated against the Union by rewarding whistleblowing citizens a percentage of monies reclaimed. Though successful, subsequent amendments, which took away much of the monetary incentive of the Act, resulted in virtually non-existent fraud litigation. Fraud against the government grew, and by 1980 the Department of Justice was reporting that fraud was costing the federal government an estimated 10 percent of its budget. In 1986, the Act was again amended. Among several changes, plaintiffs were now guaranteed 15–30 percent of recovered funds. There was, however, little recourse for whistleblowers who lost their jobs in retaliation until the Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 provided protection through the Office of Special Counsel.

Since the 1986 amendments, more than \$3 billion have been recovered as a result of whistleblower lawsuits

Until recently, that is. Now, under recent amendments to the False Claims Act, whistleblowers stand to win substantial settlements if they win their cases. That very fact raises a definitional dilemma: Does it require *moral* courage to persist in an act which, while risky, can bring tremendous financial gain? Or is this, like physical courage, a capacity to persist in the face of adversity to win a tangible benefit or avoid a tangible loss? Is there, along with moral and physical courage, something we might call *economic* courage that applies to those whose intention is more to enrich themselves than to expose wrongdoing?

And what about *emotional* courage, where the challenge does not require one to stand up for honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, or compassion, but simply to dare to face circumstances—like a boss who ridicules you—that threaten your emotional stability? Do these different elements require an expanded taxonomy of courage? Or are these, too, simply versions of moral courage?

Proponents of pure moral courage contend that if there is any element of physical or bodily risk, an act should not be considered moral but physical courage. To make this contention, however, is to miss one of the most compelling lessons moral courage has to teach us in our age: the lesson of the “righteous gentiles.” These citizens of Nazi-occupied Europe, who were not Jewish themselves, harbored Jews during the holocaust. Their actions clearly involved physical risk to themselves and their families. Yet we see them as *morally* courageous because they rose from the multitudes of passive onlookers to take a stand against genocide when it would have been easier and more acceptable to be like everyone else around them.

Cynthia Ozick, writing on the nature of indifference as it relates to the Holocaust, identifies some of the reasons why we describe the actions of these righteous gentiles as morally courageous:

And those who undertook the risks, those whose bravery steeped them in perilous contingencies, those whose moral strength urged them into heart-stopping responsibility—what (despite their demurrals) are they really, if not the heroes of our battered world? What other name can they possibly merit? In the Europe of the most savage decade of the twentieth century, not to be a bystander was the choice of an infinitesimal few. These few are more substantial than the multitudes from whom they distinguished themselves; and it is from these undeniably heroic and principled few that we can learn the full resonance of civilization.<sup>14</sup>

#### Portrait of a “Righteous Gentile”

Though she didn’t know them before the war, when Teresa Kozminski learned of the escape of the Glazer family from the Warsaw ghetto, she immediately took them in. For 16 months, the family, ranging from 14 to at times 22 members, hid under the floor of the Kozminski’s building. When the Glazers’ money ran out, Teresa continued to care for them, even when fighting broke out around her house and she risked her life to go out for food. After the war, Samuel Glazer recounted that despite the danger to herself and her family, “Teresa, infused with exemplary courage, insisted that we all remain.”<sup>13</sup>

There are cases, then, where physical and moral courage go hand in hand. Often it’s difficult to determine the ascendancy of one over the other. Consider the story of L. Alex Wilson, a black journalist who was editor and general manager of the *Tri-State Defender* in Memphis, Tennessee. On the morning of September 23, 1957, an angry mob of white racists had gathered outside Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, determined to stop the court-ordered integration of the school by nine black students. Continuing a personal history of seeking out and reporting the truth of racial injustices ignored or belittled by the white press, Wilson arrived on the scene with three other reporters. The white crowd shifted its focus to the small group of newspapermen. On seeing that the reporters would not be turned away, the crowd attacked. Wilson suffered serious blows to the head, chest, and back. But he continued on at a deliberate gait, still intent on doing his job. Describing the incident, Hank Klibanoff writes that “Wilson, still holding his hat even as he fell to

the ground, raised himself up, recreated his hat and kept walking. He looked straight ahead. Then he took one last powerful blow to the head—some witnesses later said it was the brick this time—before being pushed away by the crowd. The nine Negro students had quietly slipped into the high school.”<sup>16</sup>

Wilson survived the beating that day, but sustained permanent physical damage that some believe led to his death at age 51.

Was his an act of moral or of physical courage? Or was it an inseparable blend of the

#### Portrait of a Unifier

Kaneesha Sonee Johnson was in fifth grade in Hawthorne, CA, when she noticed that the African American and Asian students in her class wouldn’t play together on the playground. She also was aware that some of the African American kids bullied the Asian students, tormenting and taunting them. An African American herself, she decided this was wrong. Despite being a focus of the bully’s taunts herself, she befriended the Asian kids, helping them with their homework and ultimately talking both groups into playing together and seeing each other as equals.<sup>15</sup>



two? Whichever it was, it started long before the fateful morning in Little Rock. For an editor in Wilson's position, it would have been acceptable to follow the norm and remain a bystander to the injustices of segregation. Indeed, there were black newspapermen in the South sympathetic to the white establishment and critical of black agitation. Long before that day in 1957, however, he had found he could not take the easy route. In the end, his courage expressed itself in holding his ground—defending a principle, even while enduring physical danger. “If I were to be beaten,” he later wrote, “I’d take it walking if I could—not running.”<sup>17</sup>

### Courage in business and the professions

It is well understood that physical and moral courage matters in the military. And there are ample illustrations of courage in religion, sometimes to the point of martyrdom. Increasingly, attention is being paid to the need for moral courage in business and in government as well.

“Consider courage,” writes Elaine Sternberg in *Just Business: Business Ethics in Action*. “Since killing and coercion and physical violence are out of bounds, physical courage normally has little role to play in business. Business courage is therefore mainly moral, and is most commonly displayed in a steadfast adherence to the fundamental values of justice, honesty, and fairness.”<sup>18</sup>

Such courage is typically thought to belong to leaders and managers. “For management, and for the organization as a whole, the endemic uncertainty of business and the inherent unfairness of the situation require the virtues of courage and selflessness,” writes Canadian business consultant John Dalla Costa. “Courage is needed . . . not only for taking the difficult decisions attending downsizing. Courage is also vitally important for fulfilling the moral obligations to deal justly with all employees. Finally, courage must express itself in the companies’ strategic choices, and in the risks and new creations of employees.”<sup>19</sup>

But it is not only the leaders who need courage. In focusing on what he calls “Exemplary Followers,” Robert E. Kelley argues that those who are being led also need courage. Urging followers to “Prepare your courage to go over heads when absolutely necessary,” he notes that “No Exemplary Follower operating in the bottom-line fixated business environment of the 1990s, no follower who will likely work for several organizations over the span of a career, can expect to breeze through the years without facing at least one crisis of conscience over a disagreement with the leader. . . . Exemplary Followers work on their confrontation and courage-building skills on a daily basis, practicing insightful, positive challenges to small directives in order to establish both a reputation and experience level that prepares them for the heavy crises that will eventually present themselves.”<sup>20</sup>



In government, examples of moral courage are often drawn from the top leaders. In our day, some of their tales have grown to almost legendary status: Mahatma Gandhi practicing and advocating his philosophy of non-violence in the struggle for a free India despite repeated internment; Nelson Mandela enduring 18 years of degrading imprisonment on Robbin Island and still being able to forgive his oppressors in the apartheid regime of South Africa; Boris Yeltsin standing atop a tank in Moscow to protest the coup attempt that had imprisoned Mikhail Gorbachev; Lech Valesa rising

from the shipyards of Gdansk to lead the Solidarity movement that ultimately played a decisive role in toppling communism in Poland; Vaclav Havel, dissident playwright, enduring three prison sentences for organizing strong opposition to the Communist rule of Czechoslovakia; Aung San Suu Kyi defiantly resisting her imprisonment in Myanmar.

Closer to home, the histories of American presidents suggests that moral courage is not only a characteristic of earlier centuries but is still very much in practice: Franklin D. Roosevelt's courageous conviction in 1940 that, as Doris Kearns Goodwin writes, "the uncoerced energies of democracy would prove more than a match for the totalitarian regimes;"<sup>21</sup> Harry Truman's efforts to end segregation in the armed forces, to mount the Berlin Airlift, and to establish the Marshall Plan, which to historian David McCullough revealed "the seemingly ordinary American who when put to the test, rises to the occasion and does the extraordinary;"<sup>22</sup> Jimmy Carter's post-presidential willingness to denounce the rigging of the Panamanian election by Manuel Noriega "not from the safety of Washington or Atlanta, but from a sidewalk in Panama City, under the eyes—and guns—of Noriega's armed secret police."<sup>23</sup>

"In a president, character is everything," writes Peggy Noonan about Ronald Reagan.

A president doesn't have to be brilliant; Harry Truman wasn't brilliant, and he helped save Western Europe from Stalin. He doesn't have to be clever; you can hire clever. White Houses are always full of quick-witted people with ready advice on how to flip a senator or implement a strategy. You can hire pragmatic, and you can buy and bring in policy wonks.

But you can't buy courage and decency; you can't rent a strong moral sense. A president must bring those things with him. If he does, they will give meaning and animation to the the great practical requirement of the presidency: He must know why he's there and what he wants to do. . . . He needs to have, in that much maligned word, but a good one nonetheless, a *vision* of the future he wishes to create. . . .

But a vision is worth little if a president doesn't have the character—the courage and heart—to see it through.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever you think about Reagan's own abilities and actions, Ms. Noonan's words ring true: A vision, a code of ethics, a sense of core values means little without the courage "to see it through."

### **Attaining moral courage**

How, then, can a culture create the capacity to "see it through?" How can moral courage be transmitted downward to the next generation and outward through the culture?

The first step is to recognize the nature of "moral courage." As defined above, it is the quality of mind and spirit that enables one to face up to ethical dilemmas and moral wrongdoings firmly and confidently, without flinching or retreating. As such, it has certain distinct attributes:

- It is the courage to be moral—to act with fairness, respect, responsibility, honesty, and compassion even when the risks of doing so are substantial. To stand up against the threat

of bodily harm requires physical courage. To stand up against the unfair, the disrespectful, the irresponsible, the dishonest, and the uncompassionate demands moral courage.

- It requires a conscious awareness of those risks. The sleepwalker on the ridgepole is not courageous unless, waking up, he or she perceives the danger and goes forward anyway. So, too, the truth-teller is not courageous unless he or she is aware that candor is risky and dangerous.
- Moral courage is never formulaic or automatic, but requires constant vigilance against its opposite (moral timidity) and its counterfeit (moral foolhardiness).
- It can be promoted, encouraged, and taught through precept, example, and practice.

This last point is particularly important. Courage can indeed be taught, and in several ways:

1. **By distinguishing courage from cowardice.** If moral courage is the willingness to express honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion in risky circumstances, then moral cowardice is that which permits the expression of their opposites: dishonesty, disrespect, irresponsibility, unfairness, and lack of compassion. It is, in the words of the St. Paul's school prayer, "the easy wrong" rather than "the hard right." The value of distinguishing moral courage from moral cowardice as a means of learning the former is well articulated by Gen. Chuck Krulak, USMC:

Cowardliness in character, manifested by a lack of integrity, or honor, will sooner or later manifest itself as cowardliness in other forms. People who have the courage to face up to the ethical challenges in their daily lives, to remain faithful to sacred oaths, have a reservoir of strength from which to draw upon in times of great stress—in the heat of battle.<sup>25</sup>

Here courage comes close to its philosophical cousin, temperance. The philosopher James Wallace, distinguishing two sorts of intemperate persons, notes that "One is weak and abandons his plans when he can pursue easy pleasures and amusements," while the other "pursues easy pleasures without any reservations, because he has no plans to abandon." Expanding on Wallace's distinction, Robert N. Van Wyk defines "two types of cowards." One, he writes, "allows excessive fears to prevent him from carrying out plans," while the other is "so influenced by fear that he never makes any plans." In order to live the moral life, Van Wyk concludes, "one must avoid being either sort of self-indulgent person and either sort of coward, so one must have the virtues of temperance, or self-restraint, and courage."<sup>26</sup>

2. **By studying the lives of moral heroes.** The Giraffe Project, a nonprofit organization specializing in celebrating the lives of ordinary people who stick their necks out for the common good, collects and distributes stories of morally courageous individuals that educators use to acquaint children with ennobling acts of modern heroism. "In stories back to the dawn of time," says founder and president Anne Medlock, "the healing of the wasteland has come only when someone refuses to be passive and summons up the courage to ignore all the naysayers, go forth, and slay whatever dragon has scared everybody else into terrified passivity. We need those brave blazers of trails, those people who are true heroes."<sup>27</sup>

3. **By engaging in acts of moral courage.** Like the five core values, courage is built by practice and repetition. Like a habit or a muscle, it gets strengthened by use. “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face,” wrote Eleanor Roosevelt. “You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ The danger lies in refusing to face the fear, in not daring to come to grips with it. If you fail anywhere along the line it will take away your confidence. You must make yourself succeed every time. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”<sup>28</sup>

Fundamentally, then, the attaining of moral courage requires two things: a recognition both of what it is (through the lives of exemplars) and what it is not (through an understanding of cowardice), and a structure for practicing it. Those activities need to take place both in the individual and the collective spheres. Typically, moral courage is seen to be a quality of individual character. As such, it needs to be taught and demonstrated through school curricula, employee workshops, executive education, military training, religious teaching, civic exhortation, and other ways.

But moral courage also depends strongly on the moral climate and culture of organizations and societies. Harboring a Jew in 21<sup>st</sup>-century New England is such a wholly different proposition from doing so in Nazi-controlled Europe in the 1940s that the word “harboring” no longer makes sense. Less dramatically, exposing lies in a dishonest school system may be far more dangerous than in an honest one.

To be sure, the stakes are higher where the culture is more corrupt. But that very fact raises a final, and vital, question: Why be morally courageous? Why bother? Why not simply muddle through, head down, without making any effort to confront unethical behaviors?

Among many answers, three stand out:

- 1) As with physical courage, the acceptance of the challenges of moral courage can be a means of personal growth and fulfillment. While opportunities to express physical courage in today’s world must often be contrived, the possibilities for expressing moral courage are nearly endless. As long as the passage from youth to adulthood is still measured by the mileposts of courage, the challenges of moral courage will continue to remain important and, to a great extent, attractive.
- 2) The expression of moral courage provides individual rewards. Facing down any foe is exhilarating. If the premise is correct that most people seek to be good people, then facing up to the correction of moral wrongs is particularly satisfying. It is observable that narratives ending with the triumph of good over evil are typically more uplifting and pleasing than those that end otherwise. It would seem that we have an inbuilt predilection for the good, the just, and the fair. Not surprisingly, then, the act of bringing about the triumph of good, while perhaps risky, provides genuine satisfaction.
- 3) Moral courage creates better cultures. The moral climate of any organization, larger than that of the individual, is created hour by hour through the multitudes of choices and behaviors of its members. But the willingness to make those choices and practice those behaviors can hinge on a willingness to face up to difficult moral issues—to be, in other

words, morally courageous. Paradoxically, those organizations that encourage and reward moral courage may find fewer examples of morally courageous behavior—since the risk of failure that is requisite for courage is proportionately reduced in such organizations. It would appear, then, that organizations with a history of moral courage become, in themselves, places where the collective decisions are morally courageous and where it is easier to make such decisions.

That kind of world—where it is easier, not harder, to make tough moral choices—is where we long to live. Finding ways to establish and enhance a culture of moral courage is surely one of the noblest goals of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Carpenter, “MD School Puts Athletics in Perspective: Lacrosse Season is Canceled Over Player’s Sex Tape,” *Boston Globe*, April 22, 2001, A14.

<sup>2</sup> *Taking Responsibility: Standards for Ethical and Responsible Behavior in Maine Schools and Communities* (Augusta, Maine: Maine Department of Education, 2001), p. 30. Rushworth M. Kidder cochaired the commission that produced this report.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Peter Halban, 1992), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Appearing on Brainyquote.com (visited August 26, 2001),

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/q104746.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Appearing on the American Museum of Natural History Web site (visited August 26, 2001),

<http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/shackleton/home/html>.

<sup>8</sup> Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930), p.76.

<sup>9</sup> William Ian Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 254.

<sup>10</sup> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Rushworth M. Kidder, “Timothy McVeigh: Moral Courage or Moral Vacuity?”

*Ethics Newslines* (Camden, ME: Institute for Global Ethics),

<http://www.globalethics.org/newslines/members/issue.tmpl?articleid=06040107410662>.

<sup>12</sup> *The Giraffe Project* (visited May 22, 2001) [http://www.giraffe.org/giraffe\\_heroes/philip\\_vargas.html](http://www.giraffe.org/giraffe_heroes/philip_vargas.html).

<sup>13</sup> Mordecai Paldiel, *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, appearing on

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shtetl/righteous/gentilesbios.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Gay Block and Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1992), p. xvi.

<sup>15</sup> *The Giraffe Project* (visited May 22, 2001) [http://www.giraffe.org/giraffe\\_heroes/kanesha\\_sonee\\_johnson.html](http://www.giraffe.org/giraffe_heroes/kanesha_sonee_johnson.html).

<sup>16</sup> Hank Klibanoff, “L. Alex Wilson,” *Media Studies Journal* Volume 14, Number 2 (Spring/Summer 2000) p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994, pp. 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> John Dalla Costa, *The Ethical Imperative: Why Moral Leadership is Good Business* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 275-76.

<sup>20</sup> “Followership in a Leadership World,” in Larry C. Spears, ed., *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), pp. 182-183.

<sup>21</sup> “Franklin D. Roosevelt,” in Robert A. Wilson, ed., *Character Above All: Ten Presidents from FDR to George Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> “Harry S. Truman,” *Ibid.*, p. 40-41.

<sup>23</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, “Jimmy Carter,” *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>24</sup> “Ronald Reagan,” *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup> “Marines Have to be Held to Higher Standards,” *USA Today* 11 Aug. 1998, sec. A: 10.

<sup>26</sup> Robert N. Van Wyk, *Introduction to Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> “The Courage to Stick Your Neck Out,” in Michael S. Josephson and Wes Hanson, eds., *The Power of Character* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), p. 338.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn By Living* (New York: Harper & Brothers 1960), pp. 29-30.

Moral courage is the courage to take action for moral reasons despite the risk of adverse consequences.[1] Courage is required to take action when one has doubts or fears about the consequences. Moral courage therefore involves deliberation or careful thought

Wikipedia. moral courage noun The power to face disapprobation and ridicule Main Entry: moral Useful english dictionary. moral courage /mɔːrɪˈkʌdʒ/ (say moruhl kurij) noun bravery of the spirit (def. Learning. Moral courage equips you to do the right thing in the face of your fear. We teach you how. learn more. Stories. We don't tell you how to practice Moral Courage; we show you. Moral Courage TV is our award-winning YouTube channel. The Moral Courage Project is a collaboration between the University of Dayton Human Rights Center and PROOF: Media for Social Justice that strives to shift debate and shape narrative by centering the . 7 Tracks. 24 Followers. Stream Tracks and Playlists from Moral Courage Radio on your desktop or mobile device.