

Moral Courage—the Pilot Light of Ethical Action

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Simply put, moral courage is the courage to act morally. Both of those terms, moral and courage, lack the advantage a universally accepted interpretation. Together they evoke dramatically different images and reactions across theological and philosophical spectrums. So a bit of unpacking is in order.

I want to begin by sketching out what I mean by moral courage as distinct from physical bravery. Then take a look at right and wrong and, more importantly, moral dilemmas of right versus right. Followed by a brief but necessary detour into hope, upon which moral courage is dependent. And then the meat of it all, how moral courage serves as the pilot light of ethical action, igniting our passion toward social responsibility

I also want to take a look into how moral courage, or the lack thereof, affects our world today and what we might do with or about that.

My distilled thesis is that moral courage, rationally foundationed on the hope for a better tomorrow, consists of a considered examination of a moral dilemma followed by bold action directed toward the right that that consideration illuminates.

Courage, from the dictionary: “The state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger, fear, or vicissitudes with self-possession, confidence, and resolution.”

Note that even dictionaries shift the focus from the “danger, fear, or vicissitudes” to the internal attributes of “self-possession, confidence, and resolution” that allow one to face them. Whereas with bravery the external and the internal are more conjoined, with the internal being assumed and the emphasis consequently being placed on the external, on the physical.

Courage brings to mind strength of character and constitution. Bravery conjures up images of daring-do, of putting one’s self in harms way, of risking life and limb. Certainly bravery of this sort can be instigated by moral courage, but also by instincts of preservation and a whole panorama of other things.

I also find that bravery brings to mind the difficulty of doing what must be done, while courage, especially moral courage, is more about what should be done.

This begs the question, is moral courage something we’re born with, or something we acquire and develop? Well, if you take it down to the very base of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we share with other animals an instinct to survival that can manifest as physical bravery. We will face danger for survival of self and sometimes for the survival of others.

But moral courage is less connected to survival and more connected to aspiration. It resides a bit higher up on Maslow’s echelon and involves, in the words of ethicist Rushworth Kidder, “Standing up for values” which he puts forward as “the defining feature of moral courage” in holding, accurately I think, that, “values count for little without the willingness to put them into practice.”

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

Is that willingness nature or nurture? I don't know, maybe it's a bit of both. But I do know that it, like so many things in our nature or character, improves with nurturing. So the question becomes academic as moral courage, like ethical habits, is something we can nurture whether provided by nature or not.

And that's something I hope my efforts this morning encourage you toward.

It might help to see that the opposite of moral courage is not moral cowardice, it is fear triumphant. Moral courage is the discernment of right followed by acting on that discernment in a positive and forthright way. The deterrent to that kind of courage is reticence, timidity, and fear. Fear paralyzes us into inaction or causes us to turn away from the morally courageous path. And that's something I hope my efforts this morning direct you away from.

Let's move on to considerations of right and wrong and then to moral dilemmas of right versus right.

And here I want to give full credit to the aforequoted Rushworth Kidder who, over the years, has shaped much of my thinking in this and other areas. Rush founded the Institute for Global Ethics some two decades or so ago and remains its president and leading light. It would be cumbersome to continually credit him so let's just say that his thinking has influenced mine heavily and is reflected in my talk this morning.

Distinguishing right from wrong is the easier of the things we will be touching on and there are four simple tests that help. They're not comprehensive, this is a vast field, but they are handy guides to have around—guides that cover most of the ground.

- The first is the smell test. Without even having to go to the trouble of examining and weighing the issues at hand, you know, seemingly instinctually, that it's wrong—it just doesn't feel right, it just doesn't smell good. It's pretty easy to know when something's rotten.
- The second is the highest moral exemplar. This is best known as the "What Would Jesus Do" test. It of course doesn't have to be a religious divinity or prophet. For me WWJD means What Would Jefferson Do? For you it might mean someone else, or even a different someone in different situations. But you get the idea.
- Then there's the full disclosure standard. How would you feel if your anticipated action was going to be the headline of tomorrow morning's Times, or the lead item on the evening news? That's something that will make you pause and think.
- And, lastly, what if everybody did it? What kind of world would it be if everybody made the choice you are about to make in the same set of circumstance? Circumstances that may well find you on the other side of the equation as often as not.

Do you all remember Yossarian from Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*? Yossarian's take on that last one was that if everybody did it he would be crazy not to! That's specious logic but it does remind that these are guides, merely guides. Not dogma.

Which brings us to the hard part, the thinking part—moral dilemmas. Moral dilemmas are not generally questions of right or wrong but quandaries of right versus right. It's sometimes difficult to ferret out two rights when examining the options,

especially when you are not particularly fond of the other person or position and when the other “right” might well be to her, his, or its benefit.

I’m not reducing this to a pithy “everyone has his or her own truth,” which I don’t buy in the first place. I also don’t buy into the absolute, for-now-and-ever, etched-in-stone, science-be-damned “truths” of closed, authoritarian systems.

But I do want to make a distinction between considerations of right and wrong—as in I’m right and you’re wrong, which is sometimes the case—and those situations when there’s a genuine consideration of right, of goodness, of truth on both sides of the question. For the ethically oriented person, those are the most difficult.

I’m referring to value clashes like truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short-term versus long-term, and peace versus justice or justice versus mercy. Those identifications may be flexible but the concepts are not. Let me give a quick example of each.

- **Truth versus loyalty:** Most of us encounter this dilemma in elementary school when the teacher asks, Does anyone know who did this? You know, so do you tell the truth or does loyalty win out and you choose not to rat on your friends?

The dilemma stays with us throughout our lives. You learn something in an executive meeting or other confidential situation that could adversely impact the future of another. When asked directly about it by the person in question, or when the disclosure of what you know becomes pertinent in another confidential context, what do you do?

You know the truth so honesty compels you to answer or disclose accurately, but you also have a loyalty not to break a confidence you’ve agreed to—to keep your word, to honor your promise. Either course would be “right” but you can’t do both.

Whether a conflict of interest or a conflict of roles, that’s a moral dilemma.

- **Individual versus community:** Utilitarian in essence, it is nonetheless a moral dilemma—the “greatest good for the greatest number” dilemma. Both quantitative and reductionist in nature, it’s easily as tricky as truth-versus-loyalty. It begins with a quantitative analysis of the “good” followed by a reduction of the consequential impact on the numbers involved. That makes it one of the murkier dilemmas we are faced with and one subject to our own biases.
- But mistier still is the **short-term versus long-term** dilemma as it involves no small portion of prognostication. In some instances we can assume, reliably but not with certainty, the long-term consequences of our actions. But the future holds much more uncertainty than fact. And that uncertainty, I believe, makes it much easier to lazily focus on the short, the near-term to the near exclusion of the long. So, in this case, just getting into the dilemma is a dilemma itself.
- There are two aspects to this last one that I’ll mention in this abbreviated list, **peace versus justice** and **justice versus mercy**. Our sense of compassion enters into both and in fact creates the dilemma of justice versus mercy.

When we see an act that is clearly wrong yet we know the perpetrator of the wrong to be a person of integrity, our reaction is often not one of unmitigated justice but rather one of mercy. We don't want to just bust their chops, we want to take them aside and say, "What's gotten into you. You know better than this. What's going on with you that caused such a moral lapse?" We're caught between conceiving of ourselves as hard-hearted, too ridged to care, or being too lenient to face the offense.

But more often the conflict is between peace and justice. Of seeking an even-handed sense of fairness and simply wanting to maintain the peace between ourselves and others, between parties, or even between nations. In our uncommonly disputations world, our desire to "just get along" often tempts us to be tolerant of that which should not be tolerated. And so we remain silent in the face of injustice and our silence is interpreted as approval and encouragement.

And so our reticence, our timidity, results in an increase of that which we disapprove, eventually becoming correctable only by truly courageous and often costly acts.

The impulse toward peace at the expense of justice is, of course, tinged with all of the above considerations of truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short-term versus long-term, and certainly mercy versus fairness. The dilemmas that challenge us rise and ebb in frequency and intensity as our culture meanders to and fro, but this imbalance of peace and justice is becoming serious and calls for courage and hope.

Spurred by unjust social as well as interpersonal conditions, people of strong and undeviating conscience have responded with moral courage out of a sense of duty to right the present in order to secure a better future. Which brings us to hope.

When we speak of moral courage we're speaking about opting for the hard right over the easy wrong. That takes hope, albeit a reasoned hope, that what we do matters and that if we do right to the best of our light others will follow suit and the world will be a better place.

There are many philosophical bases for hope. Some, like William James, find hope in the strength of the human will. For others—Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler among them—hope is more a product of the mind, of reasoned thought. And for the likes of Albert Camus hope is to be found in the struggles of life itself.

Each of these requires effort, a sort of personal moral courage. I don't want to spend too much time on this except to underline that without hope there is little support for a call to moral courage. Without a sense that acting morally matters, that it makes a difference, why bother?

And that lays the ground work for moral courage. Quoting again from Kidder, "Moral courage lifts values from the theoretical to the practical and carries us beyond reasoning to principled action." That's the pilot light of ethical action that burns warmly within us, ever ready to ignite acts of personal compassion and social responsibility.

In speaking of moral courage without naming it, psychologist Robert Coles [*Lives of Moral Leadership*] said, "Suddenly and surprisingly we can become an example to others—and those others to us: they hand us along, become a source of moral encouragement to us, arouse us and stir us, move us to do things when we might

otherwise not be provoked, and they have the will to act in pursuit of purposes we have come to regard as important.”

If we choose to be courageous then it is our duty to do courageous things. We live in a world wracked by ideological extremism both religious and political; a world divided by insolence, intolerance, and instability; a world characterized by tyranny, totalitarianism, and terrorism. So the exploration of moral courage isn't just an excursion into a nuanced branch of philosophy. Moral courage is a practical necessity in our complex world. It is the pinnacle of the ethical life.

Moral courage is the courage to do what's right as best we can determine it with all things considered. It often goes unnoticed not because it is unseen but because it is not recognized for what it is. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Sometimes life creeps up on you and you find yourself trapped. The survival instinct kicks in and, like a cornered skunk, we instantly become capable of some pretty smelly things. But we're not skunks, or at least most of us are not.

I mentioned before that the opposite of courage is not cowardice but fear. That said there is such a thing as moral cowardice, which I would define as an intentionally wrong act. Facing a clear choice between right and wrong and opting for the patently wrong—for the morally smelly, for skunky behavior.

Let me give you an example of moral cowardice brought to my attention by Bob Tapp, who will be speaking here in on May 11th, and by our own Abe Markman, chair of the Society's Public Issues Committee. Abe also offered a concrete suggestion as to what we might do about it and I'll pass that along, as well.

On February 12th, in addressing Black History Month on President's Day, President George W. Bush said, correctly, that the noose is not just a symbol of murder but a “tool of intimidation.” He went on to say, again correctly, that lynching is “Not prairie justice but gross injustice.”

Bill O'Reilly on his February 20th radio show, said, "I don't want to go on a lynching party against Michelle Obama unless there's evidence."

Bill O'Reilly, if nothing else, is Bush's loudest cheer leader. Yet in referencing the noose as he did, he—in Bush's own words—employed a “tool of intimidation” toward “gross injustice.”

I don't want to ascribe malice aforethought, but for someone so in the public eye, who spends a good portion of his life opining over the public airwaves, and who chooses his words very carefully, it's hard not to. If O'Reilly's remarks are not themselves evidence of gross bigotry and intentional fear mongering, they certainly suggest and inflame bigotry and violence.

But the key word here is not “lynching” or the unveiled evoking of the vile and shameful history it brings to mind. The key word here is “unless.” O'Reilly more than implied that if, in his sole opinion, there is evidence to justify it—as if such evidence could ever exist—he would indeed “go on a lynching party” against the wife of a United States Senator and leading presidential candidate. And he did so in a way that invites bigotry, incites violence, and strikes fear in the heart. That's moral cowardice and it cannot stand!

That's rank bigotry that unmasks an insidious violence that lurks just beneath the surface and it cannot stand. The targeting of a powerful black woman is cowardliness of the most immoral sort and must be countered quickly and firmly.

And so I invite you all to join in an effort led by our own Public Issues Committee to demand that Bill O'Reilly be taken off Fox News in a clear and unambiguous message that this bigotry must be disowned and discontinued. It cannot stand!

You can do that by emailing yourcomments@foxnews.com. It was in this week's action alert emailed to you by the Society. So send your comments to the president of the Fox New Channel, Roger Ailes, and demand that he display the moral courage to act.

It is our duty to identify, resist, and eliminate prejudice wherever it may exist. Discrimination against any of us is discrimination against all of us as we are all distinct and therefore minorities of one sort or another. Silence is taken as a sign of acceptance and encourages those with whom we disagree. We must give voice to our values lest our polite passivity fuel further transgressions. Again, the address is yourcomments@foxnews.com.

Here's something else you can do.

In places where trust is ascendant, constituents, be they citizens or members, are asked to select through democratic process those who will govern the present and impact the future. This year you will have the opportunity to exercise your vote.

Sometimes the choice is easy, shaped as much by the negative as the positive. Sometimes it poses the dilemma of choosing between two attractive alternatives. Whichever it is for you, in making your decision I urge you to consider whether those asking for your trust have themselves exhibited trust in you and respect for the process through which they curry your favor. In other words, do you think they trust and respect you as much as you are being asked to trust and respect them?

Do they have a history of openness? Or do they use and abuse process the by tightening the circle of influence to include only those who agree with them, or those who are themselves so eager for power and influence that they can be easily manipulated?

Are they themselves open to discussion, input and creativity? Or do they want to hear only that with which they agree, usually from those beholden to them.

I could go on but all of these point to two overriding questions: Do they have moral courage? And do you have the moral courage to demand that they do? If the former does not apply to those seeking offices large or small, if they do not exhibit moral courage, then the latter must apply to you. It is your duty to exhibit moral courage.

Righting social wrongs was one of the founding inspirations of Ethical Culture and remains an expression of our ethical religion today. Moral courage is the pilot light that burns low and steady within us, ever ready to ignite social action that can restore justice to our public and private lives—for ourselves, for our community, for our nation, and for our world.

Moral courage ignites our passion for justice. Moral courage sparks the goodness that supports the choice of Ethical Humanists to ascribe worth and dignity to others and thereby to ourselves. Moral courage lights what German philosopher Immanuel Kant, from whom Ethical Culture draws so much, called "the moral law within."

Without moral courage, there can be no social responsibility, no social service, no social action. Moral courage is the glue that bonds humanity together in its quest for a more just and humane world for all.

I close with the simple wisdom and encouragement of an ancient Chinese proverb: “When you see what is right, have the courage to do it.”

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