

Moral Courage: Living Values with Integrity

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A mouse looked through the crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife open a package. “What food might this contain?” the mouse wondered. He was devastated to discover it was a mousetrap. Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning, “There’s a mousetrap in the house! There’s a mousetrap in the house!”

The chicken clucked and scratched, raised her head and said, “Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is a grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it.”

The mouse turned to the pig and told him, “There’s a mousetrap in the house! There’s a mousetrap in the house!” The pig sympathized, but said, “I am so very sorry, Mr. Mouse, but there is nothing I can do about it but pray. Be assured you are in my prayers.”

The mouse turned to the cow and said, “There’s a mousetrap in the house! There’s a mousetrap in the house!” The cow said, “Wow, Mr. Mouse, I’m sorry for you, but it’s no skin off my nose.”

So the mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected, to face the farmer’s mousetrap – alone. That very night a sound was heard throughout the house – like the sound of a mousetrap catching its prey. The farmer’s wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness she did not see that it was a venomous snake whose tail the trap had caught. The snake bit the farmer’s wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital and she returned home with a fever.

Everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard for the soup’s main ingredient. But his wife’s sickness continued, so friends and neighbors came to sit with her around the clock. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig. The farmer’s wife did not get well; she died. So many people came for her funeral, the farmer had the cow slaughtered to provide enough meat for all of them. The mouse looked upon all this from his crack in the wall with great sadness.

So next time you hear someone is facing a problem and think it doesn’t concern you, remember – when one of us is threatened, we are all at risk. We are all involved in this journey called life. We must keep an eye out for one another and make an extra effort to encourage one another to do the right thing.

That’s what I want to talk about this morning. Doing the right thing, especially when it is not easy, or convenient, or comfortable to do so. It’s one thing to have a well-developed sense of ethics. To know what is the right thing to do. It is another thing to have the courage and the strength to actually do it. Moral courage is having the courage of your convictions, the willingness to live out your ethics even when that may result in personal hardship, or the disapproval of your peers, or even a sense of isolation from family or colleagues.

An organization called the Pears foundation sponsors the Anne Frank Awards, which are designed to recognize acts of great personal strength and conviction, such as standing up for what you believe in even in the face of tremendous pressure. The awards recognize a whole set of core values: moral courage, but also respect, integrity, honesty, social justice, fairness, and responsibility.

One example: Danielle Maughan was on a school trip to an amusement park when she overheard a conversation that included racist comments and jokes about two 11-year-old Asian boys. She knew none of the people involved. But rather than taking the easy route of ignoring the comments, she intervened, putting herself at risk of being ridiculed or insulted.

Without worrying about the consequences, or at least pushing the worries aside, Danielle stood up for what she believed was right and challenged the racist comments. In doing so, she stopped the perpetrators from further insulting the young boys, and her actions made a real difference to the rest of their day and to their feelings.

Another example: Bnar Talabani, a young refugee from Iraq, faced war and extreme terror in her own country before emigrating to England. With great determination she mastered English and enrolled in school, where she became leader of the school's Amnesty International Youth Group. She feels it is her duty to help others who are in a situation not so different from hers when she was living in Iraq. Through a series of assemblies she has raised the awareness of the whole school about the horrors of political oppression around the world. At a time when it would have been easy to simply feel a victim, or to repress her past difficulties and enjoy her new-found freedom, Bnar has worked to make a difference in the lives of others.

Incidentally, Rushworth Kidder, in his book, *Moral Courage*, writes of a series of interviews he conducted with a set of noted "people of conscience", in order to uncover the core values that guided them. The resulting list is very similar to those values recognized by the Anne Frank Awards. His list includes love, truthfulness, fairness, freedom, unity, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for life. Later in the book, Kidder defines moral courage as the courage to *be* honest, fair, respectful, compassionate, etc. And he writes that:

[C]ourage seems a necessary element in the ethics equation. What good is a conviction about honesty or fairness without a willingness to put those values 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.

There are a couple of important ways to encourage and teach moral courage to our youngsters. The first is by rewarding it when we see it, whether formally through programs like the Anne Frank Awards, or informally by making a point of telling our children how proud we are of them when they stand up and do the right thing. But perhaps the best way of teaching moral courage is to model it. As James Baldwin once noted, "Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."

Acts of moral courage, of course, come in all shapes and sizes. They may be small-scale and personal like calling someone on their bigoted remarks. Or they may be larger-scale, with greater social and political implications, when they deal with major issues of social justice. I believe it is important to notice, and recognize, and practice such acts at all levels. As feminist philosopher and theologian Mary Daly points out, "You become courageous by doing courageous acts. . . Courage is a habit." If we develop the habit in our personal lives, we will be better prepared to bring our moral courage to bear on the greater issues of the day.

Last summer, Ralph Nader, speaking at a political rally, emphasized that Americans need a good dose of moral courage in order to "address the problems of our neighborhoods, our community, our city, our state, our country, our world." He went on to say that

The big secret in a democracy is that the people have the power. If they would realize it, exercise it, organize it and focus it, with a fraction of their free time. If the people want a living wage, universal health care, their public works restored to a decent level, to stop the tax cuts for the rich, to

have clean water to drink and clean air to breathe, they need to get involved in the political process. . . In order to turn the present situation around, the people need to believe in themselves, believe that they have the power . . . and then to take action.

I'm happy to see the political tide turning on the issue of the war in Iraq, although there is clearly still a long way to go. But I'm also proud of the many in this congregation and around the country who had the moral and political courage to speak and act against that war before it was politically popular to do so. When dissent was equated by some to lack of patriotism. That courage, along with some obvious policy failures, has helped to bring us to a point where a positive change in direction is within the realm of possibility.

Of course there are other local, national, and world issues that cry out for morally courageous action. I'd like to mention two this morning. First is global climate change – global warming. As the scientific handwriting on the wall has become clearer and clearer, the amount of moral courage required to acknowledge the problem has lessened. That is thanks in part to the moral courage of people like Al Gore, who may well have sacrificed his political future in order to spread the word and raise public consciousness. But if we as a people are to address the issue successfully, a great deal of moral courage will yet be required. The courage to modify our lifestyles in ways that may not be easy or comfortable. The courage to sacrifice short-term comfort and economic well-being in the interest of long-term survival. Let's be ready to be courageous.

The other issue I want to mention is the ongoing nightmare of genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan. The situation in Darfur has been and remains on the radar screen of public consciousness. There are periodic reports of this ongoing political and humanitarian crisis, in which more than 300,000 people have been killed; more than 2.5 million civilians have been forced to flee their homes; and an estimated 3.5 million men, women and children are completely reliant on international aid for survival.

But whether out of a sense of “it's not our problem” or of helplessness in the face of such a huge tragedy, or of a lack of political will, the response so far has fallen far short of what is needed. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), which works for justice around the world, is currently focusing much of its attention and energy on the crisis in Darfur, and calls on Unitarian Universalists across the country to lend their hearts and hands to the effort.

The UUSC's efforts include:

- Pressuring the White House, Congress, and the United Nations to make Darfur a higher priority.
- Advocating that all sides respect the human rights of the civilians in the conflict.
- Demanding an end to the widespread rape of women and girls in Darfur.
- Calling for a U.N. force to provide protection in Darfur.

The UUSC's on-the-ground programming is working to protect civilians by:

- Supporting work for protection of displaced women in camps.
- Working with women in camps who have experienced rape to improve their access to health care and counseling.

- Coordinating efforts among different agencies to improve protection for women leaving the camps in search of firewood and other resources.
- Working with women and agencies to identify and implement ways to reduce the need for firewood.

The UUSC recommends some simple steps that we as citizens can take to help raise the decibel level so the media and policymakers can't ignore what is happening:

- Stay informed, through news reports, but also through websites like www.uusc.org and www.savedarfur.org
- Donate to UUSC's Darfur Relief Fund, supporting the work with displaced women in Darfur.
- Keep the message in the public mind by writing letters to the editor and to elected officials.
- Participate in public demonstrations to stop the genocide.

This is a case where the easy way is the way of the chicken: "it is of no consequence to me. I can't be bothered by it." Or the way of the pig: "I am so very sorry, but there is nothing I can do about it but pray." Or the way of the cow: "I'm sorry for you, but it's no skin off my nose."

Then there is the more difficult, the morally courageous way, of understanding that "when one of us is threatened, we are all at risk." Of doing the right thing – or at least something – and encouraging others to do as well.

In closing, I leave you with these words from Rushworth Kidder's *Moral Courage*:

In the defining moments of our lives . . . values count for little without the willingness to put them into practice. Without moral courage, our brightest virtues rust from lack of use. With it, we build piece by piece a more ethical world.

So may it be.