

New Project Explores Why Moral Courage Is 'More Important Than Fear'

By Robert Polner

Irshad Manji is an internationally acclaimed author, filmmaker and Muslim reformer. She is also director of the newly-launched Moral Courage Project at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Through research, a graduate-level course, and public discussions, the Moral Courage Project will explore how to challenge political correctness and self-censorship for the sake of a greater good. The new initiative is supported by Wagner's Research Center for Leadership in Action.

NYU Today recently sat down with Manji to discuss the nature of moral courage and the project's goals.

Robert F. Kennedy said that "few are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows," which is why "moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle." That was some 40 years ago. Why the Moral Courage Project now?

Manji: Our era promotes conformity on various levels: cultural, economic, and intellectual. Either you're liberal or you're conservative. Either you're a consumer or you're a loser. Either you swallow the dogma of your ethnic, religious, and professional group or you're a sell-out. The pressure to toe the line breeds fundamentalisms and simplistic responses to complex human issues. While many of us hunger to defy orthodoxy, few of us feel we have the permission to do so. Emerging leaders need the courage to speak their truths to their tribes and risk backlash from their own for the sake of a greater good.

So moral courage isn't something one is born with. Can it be taught?

The key is how you define courage. If you say it's about being utterly fearless, then you're asking people to stop being real. That's not sustainable. We shouldn't set the bar of courage so high that we cease to be human along the way. Now suppose you start with this premise: Courage is not the

absence of fear; it's the realization that some things are more important than fear — like the authenticity of your voice. Throughout history, morally courageous individuals have used their unique voices to buck groupthink and the dishonesty it produces. As part of this project, we'll examine how they withstood hostility not just from opponents, but also from friends.

How will the project differ from traditional ethics courses?

First, ethics courses these days tend to focus on dilemmas without expressly distinguishing between right and wrong. They often get stuck in the doctrine of relativism, which assumes we can't speak up about abuses of power that happen under the banner of "other" belief systems. That's political correctness, and we'll resist it. Second, while traditional ethics courses concern themselves with theories and issues, the Moral Courage Project will pay at least as much attention to the personal development of our students. We want to produce leaders, not merely study them. Whether in ethnic groups, organized religions, social movements, or places of work, appreciating when to speak up and why is a crucial aspect of public service.

Where have you tapped moral courage in your own life?

I'm a faithful Muslim who has written a book entitled *The Trouble with Islam Today* and created a documen-

tary film called *Faith Without Fear*. Both have generated fierce retaliation from my fellow Muslims because I'm emphasizing that we can no longer point fingers elsewhere. As Muslims, we must keep faith with a beautiful passage in the Quran that states, "God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." I could have ended my mission at the first death threat. But my passion for change is sustained by gratitude. I'm enormously thankful for what Islam has given both to me and to history, including the tradition of independent thinking known as *ijtihad*. This tradition shapes my vision for the Moral Courage Project.

When you think of moral courage in history, who comes to mind?

Lillian Smith: a white Southern proponent of racial equality, she rejected an incremental end to segregation. Fellow progressives labeled her an "extremist." Her willingness to dare them helped inform the way Martin Luther King Jr. confronted accusations that he was creating "needless tension" — accusations that came from the black clergy!

Mahatma Gandhi: not only did he stand up to British imperialists, but he held Indians to account for the centuries-old caste oppression and gender apartheid that they perpetrated against each other. As Gandhi observed, there's no virtue in replacing a white oligarchy with a brown oligarchy because it remains an oligarchy.



Irshad Manji at NYU's screening of her PBS documentary Faith Without Fear, which calls for a liberal reformation of Islam.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: a German theologian and one-time pacifist, Bonhoeffer reassessed the moral validity of non-violence when he faced the unremitting evil of Nazism. Unlike Gandhi and King, he concluded that certain situations demand direct and brutal action. By participating in an assassination attempt on Hitler, Bonhoeffer challenged received wisdom in at least three of his "families:" Germans, Christians and pacifists.

Are there morally courageous people today?

Vaclav Havel is one of many Eastern European dissidents who exposed the shame of his society's totalitarian commitments. Bill Cosby is pushing his African-American community to bust out of the victim mindset. Cindy Sheehan, the Iraq war mom, incurred vicious anger from her anti-war allies when she held Congressional Democrats to the same standards of accountability as George W. Bush's Republicans. Even some U.S. presidential candidates are swimming against the tide of their party brass. Maybe there's hope for moral courage after all!

You emphasize the individual — not the community — as the agent of change.

Individuality is good for community. It's individualism that's not. Individualism states, "I'm out for myself and it doesn't matter if I give back to my society." But individuality states, "I'm myself and my society is better for the unique voice that I bring to it." Remember that champions of moral courage care about the greater good, which is why they won't be silenced by insular politics and tribal pressures.

What's the long-range future of the Moral Courage Project?

It could serve as a model for universities around the world, starting with NYU's overseas campuses. Turning this project into a global classroom through digital technologies is an exciting possibility. Ultimately, it's about enabling graduates to find both their voices and their passions so their communities gain from talent that would otherwise be lost to self-censorship.

The Moral Courage Project will hold its first public event on March 11. For information: www.wagner.nyu.edu/events.