



PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AND MORAL COURAGE
Professor: Irshad Manji
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University

Description:

What's the trouble with groupthink? When should you stand up to orthodoxy in your own community? How do you deal with the inevitable backlash? Why does it matter to speak about Truth in an era of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity? Above all, what does it mean to exercise moral courage, which Bobby Kennedy called the "essential quality" needed to change the world?

Such ambitious questions will be explored in Public Leadership and Moral Courage. This course is part of the Moral Courage Project, which aims to challenge intellectual conformity and self-censorship so that individual talent can be discovered, developed and applied to building more honest communities.

In that spirit, Public Leadership and Moral Courage will draw lessons from heretics throughout history. Along the way, students will be mentored and sometimes pushed to practice moral courage in their own lives. This course aims to produce leaders and not just study them.

Requirements:

Careful reading of assigned texts, avid class participation and questioning of the professor as well as of fellow students.

The number of participants in this course is small so that discussion can be profound. Students are expected to prepare by having read and reflected on the assigned course material. As an added incentive to reflect on the readings prior to class, I'll be calling on students at random to ask questions of each other based on the readings. That means these materials will be the starting point of each class conversation. But they won't be the finish line.

As your instructor, I'll be combining the wide variety of readings with real-world stories from my own journey as a Muslim dissident. Because this course is meant to cultivate moral courage, I urge students to challenge my premises and conclusions. Part of each student's course mark will depend on the frequency and quality of his or her challenges.

Grading:

Class participation (40%), mid-term assignment (20%), contribution to special project (20%), final assignment (20%).

Late assignment policy:

Extensions will be granted only in case of emergency, out of respect to those who abide by deadlines despite equally hectic schedules. Late submissions without pre-approved extensions will be penalized 15% per day.

SESSION THEMES AND PREPARATION**1. INTRODUCTION**

Students will introduce themselves to each other and speak about the passions that drive their interest in taking this course. Prof. Manji will explain her background as well as the evolution of the Moral Courage Project. Along the way, participants will be invited to convey their expectations of her, the class and themselves. All questions are welcome, especially as they relate to making this course among the most engaging and useful experiences of our lives.

Minimal readings:

A) *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (entire book – students to purchase)

B) Robert F. Kennedy's Speech at University of Capetown:
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/speech/rfksa.htm>

Context for the speech:
<http://www.rfksa.org/contents/overview.php>

2. WHAT IS COURAGE?

How we define courage depends largely on what people most fear losing. Do we fear losing our lives? Our families? Our careers? Our friends? Our honor and reputation? In his "Advice to a People Called Methodist," the co-founder of the Methodist Church in America, John Wesley, chillingly warned readers of all that they would have to give up in order to defy the Christian establishment. Despite fears, his church grew in leaps and bounds.

Are we hard-wired to succumb to voices of authority (like Wesley's) or does the environment in which we find ourselves indelibly shape our behavior? The controversial social psychologist Stanley Milgram bucked decades of research – and good manners -- to help answer that question.

If human nature longs to fit in, then what accounts for those who refuse to fire guns even in the fog of war, which is the focus of psychologist David Grossman? Or those who rescue potential victims during a holocaust, as studied by psychologist Perry London?

Combining the above insights with our personal experiences, let's attempt to set a *sustainable* standard of courage. Is it the complete absence of fear? The strategic use of fear? The effort to transcend fear? Or something else entirely?

Minimal readings:

- A) John Wesley. "Advice to a People Called Methodist," *Voices of Protest*, pp. 324-325.
- B) Lauren Slater. *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 32-63.
- C) David Grossman. *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, pp. 17-39/141-155.
- D) Perry London. "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians Who Saved Jews from Nazis," in *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, pp. 241-250.
- E) Ervin Staub. "The Psychology of Rescue: Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Heroic Helpers," in *Resisters, Rescuers and Refugees*, pp. 137-146.
- F) Eva Fogelman. "What Motivated the Rescuers?" in *Resisters, Rescuers and Refugees*, pp. 147-154.

3) WHAT IS MORALITY?

Why, if at all, do human beings need moral reflection? Contemporary philosopher Susan Neiman provides one set of answers while the 2007 Nobel laureate in literature, Doris Lessing, supplies another.

Does a universal morality exist? In addition to Neiman and Lessing, psychologist Jonathan Haidt offers provocative clues.

Within our own culture, can we agree on what's moral and what's not?

For example, Senator Daniel Webster diluted his opposition to slavery and compromised the principles of his abolitionist constituents in order to keep the Union intact. Was this "moral"? Even John F. Kennedy, whose profile of Webster remains a classic, wouldn't hazard an answer to that question. You will.

Minimal readings:

A) Susan Neiman. *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*, pp. 1-8 and pp. 325-332.

B) Doris Lessing. *Prisons We Choose To Live Inside* (entire essay).

C) Jonathan Haidt. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, pp. 155-179.

D) John F. Kennedy. *Profiles in Courage*, pp. 17-19/57-74.

E) Daniel Webster's speech and contextual background.

Pre-amble commentary:

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Speeches_Webster_7March.htm

Then:

http://www.senate.gov/reference/common/generic/Profiles_DW.htm

4) WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Does a leader get out in front of group opinion or does she maneuver within the parameters of a group consensus?

Can you be a leader without followers? Thomas Paine prepared the Yankee masses for Independence by writing his barn-burner, "Common Sense." Almost everyone accepted him as the catalyst of the American revolution. His later pamphlet, "The Age of Reason," honored God but attacked organized religion. Although it sold upwards of 100,000 copies, the pamphlet led to his vilification; so much so that Paine was denied his place among America's Founding Founders. Is he less of a leader because he had no major institution or organized following behind him?

What if your followers come mostly from "other" tribes? Lillian Smith was a white Southern liberal whom fellow white liberals labeled an extremist because she rejected the incremental approach to ending slavery. Most of her followers were African-Americans; yet they weren't the ones she needed to convince. Whites were. But she didn't have them onside. Is she disqualified as a leader?

Suppose you have the support of your own group, but then lose them. Do you stop being a leader? Consider Cindy Sheehan. The Iraq war mom incurred the wrath of her left-wing allies when she held Congressional Democrats to the same standard of accountability as Bush's Republicans. Voices from moveon.org, among other "progressive" groups, called her a traitor. Sheehan quit the organized anti-war movement in disgust. Did she abdicate her leadership stripes by leaving a structure in which she no longer had faith? Since it's less difficult to hurl rocks from the outside, does true leadership require working from within to change what's unjust?

Minimal readings:

A) Gregory Claeys. *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought*, pp. 177-195.

B) Anne C. Loveland. *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South*, pp. 80-105.

C) Lillian Smith. "The Right Way is Not the Moderate Way," *The Winner Names the Age*, pp. 67-75.

D) Cindy Sheehan's resignation letter
<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/5/28/12530/1525>

AT THE END OF SESSION 4, MID-TERM ASSIGNMENT WILL BE ANNOUNCED.

5) GETTING PERSONAL, PART ONE

A stated goal of this course is develop leaders and not just study them. Several questions must be tackled honestly to cultivate moral courage of our own:

To what groups does each of us belong? What are their flaws? Why do we affiliate with these groups despite their flaws?

What is it about these groups that we'd like to change? What attachments are stopping us? Are these attachments healthy or are they "prisons we choose to live inside"? We'll address these questions through the lens of previous readings and the added help of two new ones.

Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy explores the fear of selling out within African-American culture. He takes this issue personally, having been accused of betrayal after writing a book about the word "nigger."

Our other new guide is Shelby Steele, a self-identified Black conservative -- already a blasphemer by the puritan norms of identity politics. But it gets better (or worse): Steele is actually bi-racial. He examines both the challenges and opportunities of being an outcast, applying his insights as much to Barack Obama as to himself.

Minimal readings:

A) Randall Kennedy. *Sell-Out: The Politics of Racial Betrayal*, pp. 58-86 and pp. 186-194

B) Shelby Steele. *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*, pp. 3-42.

6) GETTING PERSONAL, PART TWO

What are our privileges? When have we taken the easy way out by remaining silent in order to protect life "as we know it"? What would shake us out of our silences? What tools do we *already* have to dissent and make change? The man who ran the Mille Collines in Kigali, Rwanda -- a hotel that saved 1,300 lives during the genocide -- says he had at least one tool that all of us share.

I, too, have tools as a Muslim reformer. In this session, we'll watch a 20-minute version of my film, "Faith Without Fear," to see how community pressure and even death threats can be eclipsed by the advantages of living in a free society.

Girded by stories from both cases, we can appreciate the benefits that we already have at our disposal -- benefits that we may be overlooking in our concern for what we could lose along the way.

Minimal readings:

A) Paul Rusesabagina. *An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography*, pp. ix-49.

B) Irshad Manji. "Faith Without Fear," 20-minute version.

AT THE BEGINNING OF SESSION 7, MID-TERM ASSIGNMENTS ARE DUE.

7) RELIGION

Because religion is among the drivers of both geo-politics and identity

politics today, and because any challenge to religion, or within it, generates emotional blowback, we need to look at the potential for moral courage in the religious arena.

What role should ordinary believers play in challenging their religious communities to reform for the sake of inclusive justice? Why bother when faith is often irrational and thus incontestable? We'll address these and related questions through the prism of two American patriots.

Anne Hutchinson, a Protestant, defied the authority of John Winthrop, a Protestant leader and among the first governors of the U.S. colonies. As an ordinary believer, she had an extraordinary impact. In his seminal speech about why Mormonism will not interfere with his leadership of America, then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney cited Hutchinson approvingly. Today, as in her own time, the transcript of her heresy trial makes for revealing reading.

Then there's Martin Luther King Jr., accused by eight progressive clergymen of creating needless tension in Alabama. King's response to these clergymen -- blazingly articulated in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" -- is as much a religious *crie de coeur* as it is a manifesto of universal values. Should King have bothered to reply to these self-righteous clerics? Did he give them more legitimacy by doing so? Or did he seize upon an opportunity to use his personal faith for public good?

Minimal readings:

A) Transcript of Anne Hutchinson heresy trial, *Voices of Protest*, pp. 317-321.

B) "Statement of Unity" by eight Alabama clergy
<http://www.library.spscc.ctc.edu/electronicreserve/eng9697/instructors/PublicStatementbyEightAlabamaClergymen.pdf>

Response: "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" by MLK
<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/letter.html>

AT THE BEGINNING OF SESSION 8, MID-TERM GRADES WILL BE DELIVERED.

8) MORAL AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

What practices of *other* groups do we find unjust, but are afraid to say so because we'll be perceived as "offensive," "racist," or "out of line"? In this session, we'll explore the dilemmas of multiculturalism and speaking truth to power about "other" cultures as much as our own.

Minimal readings:

A) Helen Kennedy et al. "Do Human Rights Travel?" pp. 4-57.

B) Steven Lukes. *Moral Relativism*.

9) GROUPTHINK IN LEADERSHIP, PART ONE

With the next U.S. president about to be decided, it's time to assess among the biggest leadership challenges he'll face: the lack of moral courage in his inner circle. We can predict this because in small and cohesive groups, critical thinking typically loses to the forces of consensus. That is, unity almost always becomes confused with uniformity.

In this session, we'll tackle the risks of groupthink in policy-making by studying the case of John F. Kennedy's first major foreign policy decision: the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Irving Janis is the psychologist who coined the word "groupthink." He explains how groupthink undermined moral courage among a highly educated, confident cluster of individuals who distinguished themselves in their chosen professions -- but who abandoned their questioning faculties as advisors to JFK.

We'll also discuss possible remedies or, at least, pre-cautionary measures that the new president could take to raise his entire team's awareness of this problem.

FIRST HALF OF SESSION WILL BE DISCUSSION AND SECOND HALF WILL BE THE SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT: DRAFTING A MEMO FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT ABOUT THE PERILS OF GROUPTHINK IN POLICY-MAKING. (EXTEND CLASS IF NEED BE.)

Minimal readings:

A) Irving L. Janis. *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, pp. 2-47.

10) GROUPTHINK IN LEADERSHIP, PART TWO

How does the U.S. get out of Iraq carefully yet resolutely? How do we add more troops to Afghanistan in light of the rage that any troop presence induces among jihadis? How do we deal with Taliban-aiding Pakistan and, even more,

with a potentially nuclear Iran? These are among the most difficult and urgent foreign policy decisions that the new Administration will have to make.

But plenty of questions will have to be asked of government operatives, and in the pressure cooker of the White House, asking questions means bucking conformity.

Between Sessions 9 and 10, the class will have met to draft a memo to the next President about the need for moral courage in decision-making. This memo does not dispense foreign policy advice. Rather, it spells out the lessons we've gleaned about groupthink and communicates them in a relevant way to the new Commander-in-Chief.

Having already drafted its memo, the class will return to the "cabinet table" in Session 10 and revisit the draft with fresh minds, questioning each other's assumptions and putting the finishing touches on their advice to the President.

11) INTEGRITY, PART ONE

This session brings to a climax themes raised throughout the course. We introduce pressures faced by multi-faceted, multi-talented individuals to "choose" one identity over others -- and thus dilute their integrity -- as part of committing themselves to a bigger struggle.

Our case study is Bayard Rustin, a charismatic African-American who was among the first freedom riders. He co-organized the famed 1963 March on Washington at which MLK delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech. Rustin advised King on matters great and small. But according to the definitive documentary about Rustin, "his homosexuality forced him to play a background role in landmark events of the Black struggle."

In this session, we'll watch the 90-minute documentary about Rustin to prepare for an intense discussion, to be had in Session 13, about the themes of identity, individuality and integrity.

12) INTEGRITY, PART TWO

Our core concepts of moral courage and public leadership are brought back to the personal front in this session.

Globalization means that today's citizens live in times of fluid borders -- borders of identity and not just geography. Building on our study of Bayard

Rustin, does moral courage demand that we assert our individuality as part of an honest approach to solving community problems?

To address that question, consider these: What, if anything, does personal authenticity have to do with political efficacy? If Rustin had been accepted as a gay man by Black leaders in the 1960s, would the fight for civil rights have been jeopardized, accelerated, or otherwise affected?

When does one's individuality become corrosive individualism -- the notion that each of us should be out only for ourselves and it doesn't matter whether our communities benefit from our talents?

Does investing in more than one identity help us to resist dogmas of our own? That is, if a complex and nuanced individual is honest about herself, will she have complex and nuanced politics?

What about YOU? Are you more complex than people know? If so, how? Is it important to you, your activism, or your sense of personal integrity that your many facets be recognized, even if they seem contradictory? Are you willing to pay the price of ex-communication from your group(s) to achieve integrity?

Minimal readings:

Jean Bethke Elstain. *Democracy on Trial*, pp. 36-89.

AT END OF SESSION 12, FINAL ASSIGNMENT WILL BE INTRODUCED AND DISCUSSED.

13) LEADERS VERSUS MIS-LEADERS

In our focus on the new President and his team, we continue with thorny questions about public leadership.

What must a leader do to remain honest both to herself and to her constituents? Gandhi, for example, manipulated the underclass to breathe life into his civil disobedience movement. He thus violated Kant's basic principle of morality: treat people as ends unto themselves, not as a means to an end. Did Gandhi lead or mis-lead?

How should you confront a *murderous* mis-leader in your own country? Take Adolf Hitler. Having come to power through free and fair elections, Hitler's authority could be considered legitimate. But he fundamentally mis-led Germans into believing that all their problems lay at the feet of "others,"

from the Roma to homosexuals to Jews. Even if he was true to his convictions, his convictions amounted to tribal lies. What do you do with a democratically elected mis-leader, especially if democracy is quashed after he's elected?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, exchanged his pacifist beliefs for direct, violent action against Hitler. He participated in a plot to assassinate the Fuhrer. Gandhi would have disagreed with Bonhoeffer. What are the moral attributes of each position, and which should win out?

Finally, in accumulating lessons from previous sessions, we must tackle this question: Are you responsible to help oust a genocidal misleader who's in charge of somebody else's country or community? Despite the Holocaust, America resisted getting involved in WWII until Pearl Harbor was attacked. It thereby earned the credibility to care about Nazi atrocities.

Should credibility matter when hundreds of thousands of lives are being wiped out? Is it any of your business? In an interdependent world, is there such a thing as "somebody *e/se's* business"? If not, what does that say about the advisability U.S. intervention in Saddam's Iraq -- or non-intervention (so far) in Bashir's Darfur?

Minimal readings:

A) John F. Kennedy. *Profiles in Courage*, pp. 217-225.

B) Arthur Herman. *Gandhi and Churchill*, pp. 154-197.

C) J. Deotis Roberts. *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power*, pp. 61-71, pp. 101-109 and pp. 138-143.

14) PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In this final session, students analyze their personal manifestos for moral courage. What worked? What would you revise? How do you propose to help others become agents of moral courage and how will you equip your communities to feel less threatened by them?

Above all, as an agent of moral courage, you'll need support to sustain your gutsiness. What part can this class play?