

Moral Courage

"Courage is being scared to death and doing it anyway." - John Wayne

Moral courage is the hallmark of many of our great leaders. Names such as Ghandi, The Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Lincoln readily come to mind. They, like many others, steered the morally correct course out of conviction that they must do so in spite of the danger it posed. A less well-known example of moral courage is Morris Dees, an attorney who challenged the segregated society in which he was raised and founded the Southern Poverty Law Center. He has tirelessly crusaded for civil rights and succeeded in shutting down many hate groups in our country in spite of harrowing obstacles and threats upon his life. Similar courage has been displayed by the many Afghan women who operate clandestine schools for girls in the face of opposition by the Taliban. A different type of moral courage was demonstrated by relatives of Ted Kaczynski when they became increasingly suspicious that he matched descriptions of the Unabomber. The family faced an agonizing struggle over whether or not to contact authorities knowing it might send Ted to prison



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and possibly result in a death sentence. Ted's brother, David, commented, "You have to ask, what is your first responsibility as a human being? It's to do what you need to do to stop the killing. The second responsibility is to provide whatever support you possibly can to your loved one." David took comfort in knowing his decision may well have spared other families.

Derrick Bell was one of the first black attorneys in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department. He left in protest when they insisted he drop his NAACP membership. He traded the courtroom for academia where he left many a high ranking position at prestigious universities in protest over

university decisions to deny tenure to other members of minority groups. Bell repeatedly risked career and financial security to stand up for principles. When asked why he would do this, he replied, "Because I am committed to a cause that matters more to me than my own comfort." His goals have always been justice and the relief of suffering. In contrast, many of today's business, political, and even religious leaders have put self interest foremost and are led by greed rather than ethical values and concern for the welfare of others. The culprits are not just those who exploit others but the many who, aware of these misdeeds, have failed to speak up.

Numerous factors deter individuals from taking the morally courageous course. Concern with peer reactions is a powerful factor not just for teens but psychiatrists as well. Concerns about financial security and job loss may deter employees from becoming whistle blowers. It was not so long ago that managed care companies had gag orders forbidding physicians who had contracted with them from speaking unfavorably about the companies with patients or even informing their patients of treatment options beyond those approved by managed care. Some physicians may bury their heads in the sand rather than report unethical behavior in a colleague. They may be unclear about their reporting responsibilities or torn by loyalty conflicts such as the need to protect a fallen colleague. Guild issues also arise, as when I was once accused by an executive of a medical liability insurance company of being a "whore psychiatrist." My crime was that I had testified as an expert witness for a plaintiff who alleged that she had been sexually abused by the psychiatrist the company was defending. Physicians may suffer from inertia. With so many demands upon our time, it is easier to let someone else report an impaired physician or write a letter to a U.S. senator urging her to take a morally correct course of action on ethical issues such as assuring equitable health care services to indigent children. How often do we think about writing letters to the editor of our local paper on topical

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The APA Nominating Committee is pleased to announce its unanimous selection of candidates for the 2003 election. Although AACAP must remain neutral in APA elections, we would strongly encourage you to vote for a child and adolescent psychiatrist for APA President. For more information about these candidates and a complete listing of the candidates, visit the APA's Web site (www.psych.org).

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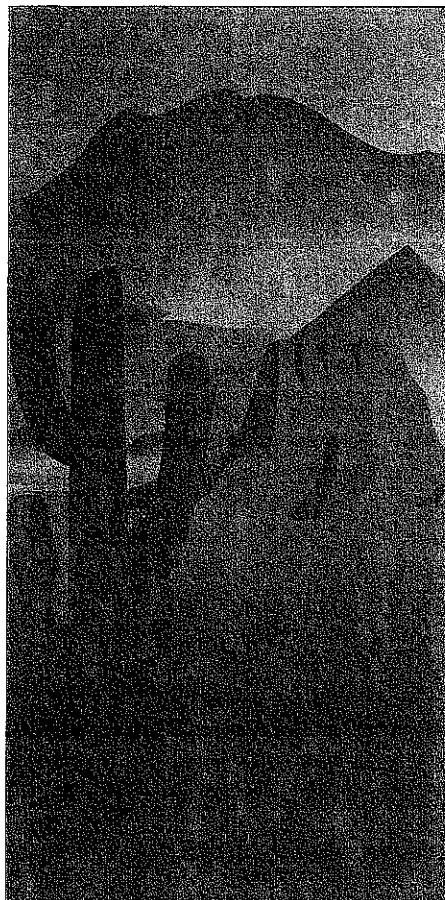
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ethical issues or commending someone's moral courage but never quite get around to it?

Moral courage requires that we have a clear moral compass and a conviction of our principles without which there is no incentive to act. It requires that we be aware of the dangers and able to perform a risk/benefit analysis of the proposed action and that we have a willingness and ability to endure the consequences. It means acting even when there is not a lot of support for our position and we feel as if we are standing alone in the storm. Yet another consideration in contemplating action is whether innocent parties will be harmed by it. It also requires some checks and balances to make sure we are not acting out of self righteousness. A trivial example occurred with a friend who stayed at my home while we both attended a conference sponsored by The Institute for Global Ethics for Ethical Fitness® trainers where moral courage was one of the topics on the agenda

(for more information, visit the Web Site at www.globalethics.org). My friend insisted on leaving me with what I considered to be an excessive amount of money for some long distance phone calls he had made. I plan to return the excess once my phone bill arrives but wonder if we are engaging in a game of who can be most righteous.

A morally courageous act is like a pebble in a pool that has a ripple effect. The pebble may give voice to beliefs others have shared but not dared to express. It may become a catalyst for action. It may provide a role model for others to emulate. I think of the paradigm of bullying where the bully's ongoing harassment of the victim is so often supported by silent bystanders. It takes a courageous teen to speak up or go to the aid of a victim, but that lone voice can have a very powerful effect. Unfortunately, today's youth have a paucity of ethical heroes to emulate and their moral compasses are wobbly. Disturbing statistics show that almost twice as many students entering college

now view wealth as more important than a meaningful philosophy of life. The same survey conducted in 1968 found the reverse. As child and adolescent psychiatrists, we are in a unique position to encourage and empower children and adolescents to demonstrate moral courage. We can be role models for our patients in this regard and follow our own moral compasses. Moral courage will be facilitated in environments where there are ethical policies in place and clear support for them from peers and leadership. ■

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References

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- Bell, Derrick: *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*. Bloomsbury, 2002.
- What Really Matters: Public Perspective, January/February 2002.