



MORAL COURAGE AS A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Reflections from Irshad Manji

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According to conventional wisdom, moral courage means “speaking to truth to power.” That’s the definition [upheld by the legacy](#) of icons such as Robert F. Kennedy. It’s the definition I adopted in writing [my first book](#) about the need for reform in my religion. And it’s the definition that New York University embraced when its leadership invited me to [teach moral courage](#) at NYU’s school of public service.

Feeling validated, I didn’t interrogate my truth-to-power mandate when I began as a professor of moral courage practice. But soon enough, two questions revealed themselves to me.

First, whose truth? There’s fact and then there’s truth. Facts alone can’t constitute truth. How one *interprets* those facts contributes as much to one’s understanding of truth as the facts themselves do. After all, as a reform-minded Muslim, I can read the same words of scripture that a traditional believer does, yet each of us will walk away with a different idea of what the words “truly” mean. Similarly, two children can grow up in the same family, experience the same joys and travails, take part in the same dinner table conversations, but have divergent, even clashing, emotions about their home life.

Hence the first problem with the standard definition of moral courage: Speaking “truth” to power implies that the truth is crystal-clear. No wonder the question, “Whose truth?” didn’t occur to many of my NYU students. Armed with a simple directive, and immersed in a culture of instant gratification, a good number of them shrugged that theirs was the exclusive truth — and thus the only one worth hearing. In the name of social justice, then, they often replicated the anti-social dynamic of “just us.”

The second question that jumped out at me relates directly to the first: Whose power must the truth-teller confront? I once assumed it’s a power that exists somewhere out there — a formal authority like the president, the media mogul, the CEO, the union boss, the police chief, the religious bigwig, The System itself.

Then I expanded my research to the behavioral sciences, which proved to be the source of a pivotal realization: Every individual who’s born with a brain has a form of power called the ego. Not only is the ego pervasive — all human beings have it — but if we’re unaware of its potency, the ego easily curdles into a *pernicious* power. More pernicious, perhaps, than any external force that we perceive to be holding us back.



Let me clarify that I'm not seeking to be self-helpy or mystical in my use of the word "ego." I'm referring to it in the neurobiological sense. The ego is a function of the primitive part of our brain. It exists to keep us alive. In a life-and-death situation, my stressed-out ego will sound the alarm that I'd be better prepare to fight or flee. My ego has the power to save my skin.

Problem is, the ego can't easily distinguish between mortal danger and mere discomfort. This means when my truth is being tested by somebody else's, the mere discomfort that I feel will be interpreted by my ego as mortal danger. It's a cognitive illusion, of course. In most contexts, being disagreed with won't kill me. But because the ego's job is to ensure my survival, it'll do all it can to manipulate me into believing that I'm under attack — and that I've got to lash back or run away.

Which is exactly what the majority of my students did when they encountered a point of view that contradicted theirs. Defensiveness, anger, and hostility tended to hijack their stated values of fairness, compassion, and dignity. In such moments, they didn't respond. They reacted. Instead of listening, they resorted to labeling. Conversations congealed into confrontations.

As I witnessed this behavior again and again, the metaphorical lightbulb finally flashed for me. Moral courage may very well mean speaking truth to power, but it shouldn't limit us to challenging *someone else's* power. Rather, if I'm going to be heard, then I have to speak truth to my own power — the ego.

For that matter, more of us must speak truth to the power of our egos. Otherwise we, the members of a shared society, will continue to bark past each other. We'll persist in shaming and blaming our "enemy" when it's just as likely that the way we've chosen to communicate is itself a barrier to progress.

In short, my opponent isn't always the person who's disagreeing with me. My first and most formidable opponent can be my own ego. Only by taming it will I be open to finding common ground with the other side. Only then will the possibilities emerge for a co-created future; one that's sustainable because it has buy-in.



I've graduated from teaching moral courage to teaching Moral Courage (notice the upper-case letters). Exercising Moral Courage means listening to various truths for the sake of moving forward.

Crucially, listening to my Other doesn't require agreeing with my Other. Rather, listening counters the negative noise of my ego, clearing room for me to consider points and ideas that I wouldn't have thought of on my own. Furthermore, listening leaves my Other feeling heard. By lowering my Other's emotional defenses, I'm clearing room for me to be heard, too.

But how do I learn to hear, not fear, different perspectives? By speaking one basic truth to the power of my ego. This truth is: I must always respect you — one day, you might prevent my untimely death — but I don't have to be manipulated by you. I can choose to practice Moral Courage.



Some will dismiss the teaching of Moral Courage as a pipe dream. Education, they'll argue, can't change human wiring; as I've already attested, the tribal impulse is, indeed, biological. That said, let's keep in mind a vital distinction: Although the Us-and-Them instinct is endemic to the human condition, it doesn't need to become destructive. *Us-and-Them* is natural and often benign: People who belong to this or that community can still cooperate with one another. By contrast, *Us-against-Them* turns collaborative potential into a win/lose showdown.

This is where much of America finds itself today. The reasons are manifold.

Over the past generation, more and more people have geographically "sorted." They've moved to neighborhoods made up of the like-minded. In his exhaustive reporting, Bill Bishop calls this effect "[the big sort](#)."

On top of that, we swim in technologies designed to rile up our emotions. Social media, yes, but also legacy media, whose business models increasingly rely on [replacing advertisers with subscribers](#). Why do people pay hard-earned money for a subscription? It's not to consume facts and opinions that will make them rethink *their* cozy facts and opinions. In the main, subscribers want their biases confirmed. Media companies oblige by feeding the Us-against-Them beast.

A third factor is relatively new but no less ambient. While organized religion has plummeted in popularity, religiosity hasn't. Politics is our religion now and parties are our sects. Scholars have a name for this phenomenon: [political sectarianism](#). Yet unlike the scriptures of yore, partisan messaging preaches no grace whatsoever. As a politically obsessed friend of mine declares, "Do unto others before they do unto you."

Combine these variables and we can appreciate why the collective ego is raging. It's also why educators would be wise to take social-emotional learning to the next level. The Moral Courage Method — a pedagogy that I've developed over 15 years of teaching, researching, writing, and engaging — aims to stop the spiral of fear on which the ego feasts.

Behavioral science repeatedly [shows](#) that we humans fear being judged; being [shamed, blamed, or labeled unworthy](#) by the group whose respect we covet. This is why, in any given situation, most people will go with their group's flow — "groupthink," for short. Nowhere does groupthink rear its head more pridefully than in issues of identity, which are typically framed in black-and-white, you're-with-us-or-against-us terms.

The fear of being judged as Them — racist or white-adjacent or inauthentically BIPOC — looms over young people. To capitulate to this fear is to be bullied. Yet to fight back is to invite ridicule. What to do?

Moral Courage unveils a third, more creative, option: You can outwit the ego's either/or approach, which is born of fear, by adopting a both/and lens.



That is, it's entirely possible to stand your ground and, at the same time, seek common ground. Standing your ground is about what you believe. Seeking common ground is about how you express what you believe. When you communicate with the intent to understand your Other, you'll override the ego's need to win at all costs. You'll forge the conditions to hear and be heard. You'll be reconciling free speech and social justice. You'll have outsmarted the limits fabricated by fear.

Educators themselves could use these communication skills. The fear of making a misstep in discussions about identity can tempt any professional to stifle legitimate questions or oversimplify the issues. For example, depicting certain groups of people as inherently oppressive and others as uniformly victimized strips all people of our common humanity. It also drains each of us of our unique individuality. Yet in too many schools today, division is taught under the banner of diversity.

Thus the need for a pedagogy that fosters diversity *without* division. In this spirit, the Moral Courage Method:

- starts **with what we share** before diving into how we're different, since shared ground builds trust
- defines diversity to include **diversity of viewpoint**, so that listening becomes as much a leadership skill as speaking
- works for social progress by **dissolving the Us-against-Them** paradigm, steadily replacing it with the practice of curiosity and caring
- treats people as **dynamic and ever-evolving**, not as static categories or commodities to be labeled
- **respects individuality** because each of us has a particular backstory even as we identify with certain groups
- reveals that almost **every individual enjoys some power** – a voice, a choice and, above all, a brain whose primitive region gives rise to the ego (which is exceptionally powerful...)
- uses neuroscience and cognitive psychology to **show how powerful the ego is**, and that when we speak truth to *this* power, we're far more likely to be understood by others because we're disciplining our ego to understand others first.

The Moral Courage Method teaches the art, science, and skills of inclusion — trading the Us-against-Them mindset for humanistic habits that foster confidence as well as introspection. Welcome to a journey that redirects us from the suffocation of either/or to the imagination of both/and.

The recipient of Oprah's first "Chutzpah Award" for boldness, Irshad Manji is the founder of [Moral Courage ED](#). A professor at New York University for many years, she now teaches with Oxford University's Initiative for Global Ethics and Human Rights. Irshad is also the New York Times bestselling author, most recently, of [Don't Label Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars](#). Fun fact: Chris Rock calls the book "genius." Not everyone agrees.