



WHY I CREATED THE MORAL COURAGE METHOD OF COMMUNICATING

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According to conventional wisdom, moral courage means “speaking 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 question my truth-to-power mandate when I began as a professor of leadership. 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 interpretation 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, interpretations of their home life.

Hence the first problem with the standard definition of moral courage: “Speaking truth” implies that the truth is crystal-clear. Armed with that simple directive, and immersed in a culture of instant gratification, a number of my students shrugged that theirs was the exclusive truth — and thus the only one worth hearing. In the name of social justice, they often replicated the anti-social dynamic of “just us.”

The second question that jumped out at me relates directly to the first: In speaking truth to power, whose power must the truth-teller confront? Pop culture pushes the narrative that real power exists only “out there” — in the tech titans, the media moguls, the corporate captains, the police, the protestors, the politicians, The System.

In reality, there’s more to the picture. A few years into teaching moral courage, I expanded my research in the behavioral sciences. That’s when I realized something pivotal: **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 intending to be self-helpy or mystical by using 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 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 shut down.

Which is exactly what the majority of my students did when they encountered a point of view that persistently 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 the power isn't exclusively someone else's. I have to speak truth to my own power — the power of my ego.

More of us must. Otherwise, we'll drown in manufactured dogma and mutual disgust. We'll persist in scorning our critics when it's just as likely that the way we've chosen to communicate is itself a barrier to being understood.

In short, my adversary isn't always the person who's disagreeing with me. My first and most formidable adversary is my 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 varied truths for the sake of progress, not payback.

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. Further, 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 a 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. They're right. 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 human nature, it doesn't always have to be destructive. **Us-and-Them is quite 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 America finds itself today.**

Why, though, is polarization so much worse today than a generation ago? Multiple reasons.

Over the past several decades, many of us have geographically "sorted." We've moved to neighborhoods made up of the like-minded and like-mortgaged. In his exhaustive reporting, Bill Bishop calls this effect "[the big sort](#)."

On top of that, we swim in technologies that are designed to rile up our emotions. Social media, yes, but also legacy media, whose business models increasingly rely on [replacing advertisers with subscribers](#). People pay up for a reason. It's not to consume facts and opinions that will make them rethink *their* 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 partisan movements, right and left, are our sects. Scholars have a name for this phenomenon: [political sectarianism](#). Yet unlike the scriptures of yore, ideological messengers preach 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 I innovated the Moral Courage Method of communicating. My 15 years of teaching, researching, writing, and engaging have led me to a method that stops the spiral of fear on which the ego feasts.**

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Behavioral science [shows](#) that humans universally fear being [shamed, blamed, or labeled unworthy](#) by the group whose respect we covet. This explains why most people quietly go with their group's flow. Nowhere does "groupthink" rear its head more pridefully than on 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 anybody who participates in DEI programs. To self-sensor over this fear is to be bullied by your ego. Yet to speak your mind is to invite ostracism, or worse, thanks to the egos of others. What to do?

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

That is, it's entirely possible to both stand your ground and 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, not conquer, your Other, you'll override the ego's need to win at all costs. You'll forge the relationships to hear and be heard. You'll be reconciling free speech and social justice. You'll have outsmarted the mental prison fabricated by fear.

Leaders themselves need these communication skills. The fear of making a misstep in discussions about identity will 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. What's more, it drains each of us of our unique individuality.** Yet in too many institutions today, such division is taught under the banner of diversity.

The unifying alternative is Moral Courage, which fosters diversity without division. Its approach is three-pronged:

-  Moral Courage rejects the labeling and shaming of people, no matter what group they're born into.
-  Moral Courage defines "diversity" to include diversity of viewpoint. Individuals aren't identical even when they belong to the same demographic.
-  Moral Courage doesn't teach what we're allowed to think; it teaches how we can think more clearly by lowering emotional defenses on all sides.

The Moral Courage Method combines the art, science, and skills of inclusion — trading the Us-against-Them mindset for humanistic habits that foster both individuality and community. **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 College](#). 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.