Moral Courage College Teaches “Honest Diversity”

The antidote to polarization is diversity -- but not just diversity of demographics. For diversity to have integrity, it must include different viewpoints. That way, all people are seen for their uniqueness as individuals, even if they affiliate with certain groups. In short, "honest diversity" embraces diversity of thought.

Let us address three crucial questions right off the top:

What does moral courage have to do with ensuring diversity of viewpoint?

Moral courage means doing the right thing in the face of fear. According to social science research, what human beings fear most is being judged. So developing moral courage is key to two outcomes: 1) Standing for what's right, despite the judgment you'll face for it and 2) not immediately judging those who stand for something that you consider to be wrong.

Why is it important not to instantly judge those who take the "wrong" point of view?

Because of the iron-clad law of human psychology -- namely, if you wish to be heard, you must first be willing to hear. Thus, building moral courage isn't about "being nice" or "being civil" for the sake of civility. It's a matter of enlightened self-interest. When activists learn to listen to their opponents, those activists are in a much better position to move the needle on the issues they care about.

Why is diversity of viewpoint central to preparing a new generation for global challenges?

Learning to communicate across differences, especially disagreements, is a key leadership skill as global challenges become civilizational and even existential ones. These challenges include the rise of populisms right and left, climate change, mass migration, artificial intelligence and widening socio-economic disparity. Massive disruptions like these shove uncertainty at people, which ensures that agendas for how to move forward will clash.

The people who will come up with enduring solutions are those who can turn agendas into visions. Agendas are narrow and driven by tribal politics. By contrast, visions are inclusive and generous networks for progress.

Turning agendas into visions requires the skills of moral courage: speaking truth to the power of one's own ego as much as to any external authority. To ensure solutions that are durable, a new generation of students will have to stand up for what's right -- without shaming or humiliating those who have a different point of view.

Bottom line: Moral courage is the tool to transform disagreement into engagement and, ultimately, into shared action.
With all this in mind, Irshad Manji has founded Moral Courage College. MCC teaches institutions, organizations, and individuals to develop the skills of moral courage -- skills such as public listening and not just public speaking. A related skill is how to determine when to step up for the sake of honesty and when to step back for the sake of humility.

In teaching such skills, Moral Courage College gives people the tools to deal bravely, and effectively, with highly emotional issues that arise in their own environments. So this work is not merely about nurturing future leaders. It's also about practising leadership for what's rocking your community, your family, your workplace -- right now.

What, specifically, would Irshad do for you? She would combine a number of activities depending on your needs. For example, with universities, Irshad does the following (and not necessarily in this order):

- Deliver a marquee lecture for the general university population;
- Conduct a training workshop with pre-selected student leaders and coaching sessions via video afterwards if desired;
- Lead a faculty seminar on how to teach moral courage;
- Give in-person, interactive classroom lectures for interested faculty, whether or not they attend the seminar;
- Speak at off-campus organizations with which the university would like to forge relationships that will help them sustain the work of moral courage. Recent example: At a university in the Midwest, Irshad did all of the above and engaged the Chamber of Commerce on the importance of supporting the University's efforts to teach diversity of viewpoint, since viewpoint diversity is critical to innovation.

With every activity, Moral Courage College helps clients to cultivate their own "moral courage mentors." These mentors, in turn, will coach at least one other person in morally courageous leadership so that the values become exercised on a wide enough scale to influence culture.

To witness Moral Courage in action, watch this video from the Moral Courage Channel on YouTube. It features two young people, Genesis and Louis, as they engage about racial injustice in Mississippi. Their story is fully told in Irshad’s latest book, Don't Label Me -- which, in turn, contains a step-by-step guide for fostering honest diversity in your particular context.

Got questions? Email us: team@moralcourage.com.