ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

COURSE SYLLABUS

MORAL COURAGE PROJECT

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AND MORAL COURAGE

INSTRUCTOR: **IRSHAD MANJI**

ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AND MORAL COURAGE

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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 Robert F. 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 deployed. We will be equipping you to create impact.

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 aspires 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 will 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 will not be the finish line.

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

Finally, because this is a participation-driven course, it is vital that students attend all classes.

GRADING

Presentations (40%), class participation (40%) and final assignment (20%). My expectations in each of these categories will be discussed in-depth during our first class.

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.

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SESSION THEMES AND PREPARATION

SESSIONS 1–2
INTRODUCTION TO MORAL COURAGE AND ITS RISKS

In session one, students will introduce themselves to each other and speak about the passions that drive their interest in taking this course. I will explain my background as well as the evolution of the Moral Courage Project.

Along the way, participants will be invited to convey their expectations of me, of the class and of themselves. All questions are welcome, especially about making this course among the most engaging and useful experiences of our lives.

Minimal readings for session one:
A) *Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 2011). Entire book.

B) Robert F. Kennedy's speech at University of Cape Town:

http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/speech/rfksa.htm

In session two, we will examine a central question to the pursuit of individual liberty and thus non-conformity: 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?

Above all, this session will introduce the greatest obstacle to moral courage: "groupthink." In small and cohesive groups, critical thinking typically loses to the forces of consensus. That is, unity becomes confused with uniformity.

We will examine the dangers of groupthink, in part by studying how President John F. Kennedy made his first major foreign policy decision. Groupthink undermined moral courage among JFK's advisors – a highly educated, confident cluster of individuals who abandoned their critical thinking skills in the White House. This resulted in the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

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Combining the above insights with our personal experiences, let us 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 for session two:

A) Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), pp. 2-47.

B) John Wesley. "Advice to a People Called Methodist," in F. Lowenstein, S. Lechner and E. Bruun, eds. *Voices of Protest: Documents of Courage and Dissent* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2007), pp. 324-325.

C) Lauren Slater. *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 32-63.

D) David Grossman. *On Killing: The Psychological Costs of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Company), pp. 17-39/141-155.

E) Perry London. "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians Who Saved Jews from Nazis," in J. Macaulay and L. Berkowitz, eds. *Altruism and Helping Behavior: Social Psychological Studies of Some Antecedents and Consequences* (New York: Academic Press, 1970), pp. 241-250.

SESSIONS 3-4
MORALITY AND LEADERSHIP

In the first half of this session, we will explore the question, "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.

Within American 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, would not hazard an answer to that question. You will.

Minimal readings for session three:

A) Susan Neiman. *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2008), pp.1-8 and pp. 325-332.

B) Doris Lessing. *Prisons We Choose To Live Inside* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1986). Entire essay.

C) John F. Kennedy. *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 17-19/57-74.

D) Daniel Webster's speech and contextual background.

Pre-amble commentary: http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Speeches_Webster_7March.htm

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

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In the sesson four, we ask, "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 segregation. 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 Democrats to the same standard of accountability as 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 for session four:

A) Gregory Claeys. *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 177-195.

B) Anne C. Loveland. *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 80-105.

C) Lillian Smith. "The Right Way is Not the Moderate Way," *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), pp. 67-75.

D) Cindy Sheehan's resignation letter and Rabbi Michael Lerner's response:

http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/5/28/12530/1525

http://www.dailykos.com/story/2007/05/30/340934/-My-Response-to-Cindy-Sheehan-s-Resignation

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SESSIONS 5-6
GETTING PERSONAL

A stated goal of this course is to 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"?

In session five, we will 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: 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 for session five:
A) Randall Kennedy. *Sell-Out: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), pp. 58-86/186-194

B) Shelby Steele. *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*. (New York: The Free Press, 2008), pp. 3-42.

In session six, we pose several more questions to ourselves: 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 – a hotel that saved 1,300 lives during the Rwandan genocide – says he had at least one tool that all of us share. I, too, have tools as a Muslim reformist.

In this session, we will 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 for session six:
A) Paul Rusesabagina with Tom Zoellner. *An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking, 2006), pp. ix-49.

B) *Faith Without Fear* online discussion guide: www.faithwithoutfear.moralcourage.com

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SESSIONS 7-8
RELIGION AND RELATIVISM

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? Why bother when dogma is often irrational and thus incontestable?

In session seven, we will answer such questions through three individuals.

Anne Hutchinson defied the authority of John Winthrop, a Protestant leader and among the first governors of the U.S. colonies. An ordinary believer, Hutchinson had an extraordinary impact: Even presidential candidate Mitt Romney has cited Hutchinson approvingly. Today, as in her own time, the transcript of her heresy trial makes for revealing reading.

Then there is 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 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?

Finally, and throughout, we will draw insights from the story of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Islam's Gandhi. A Muslim reformer from the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan – the area now overrun by the Taliban – Ghaffar Khan mobilized a 100,000-member nonviolent "Army of God" that engaged in public service, defended women's equality and fought for Muslim-Hindu unity. All this while battling British imperialists and conservative Muslim clerics.

Minimal readings for session seven:
A) Transcript of Anne Hutchinson heresy trial in F. Lowenstein, S. Lechner and E. Bruun, eds. *Voices of Protest: Documents of Courage and Dissent* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2007), pp. 317-321.

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

Martin Luther King Jr.'s response: "Letter from Birmingham Jail":
http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/letter.html

C) Easwaran, Eknath. *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan, a Man to Match His Mountains* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press,1999). Entire book.

In session eight, we will explore the dilemmas of multiculturalism and speaking truth to power about "other" cultures as much as our own.

Relativism – the doctrine that no cultural or moral norms are better than others – has gained

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traction over the past 60 years both at universities and beyond. In November 2010, the head of Iran's human rights commission declared that "cruelty is a notion which is very much culturally relative." He then exonerated his country's willingness to stone women to death.

How did relativism become so influential? And what problems does it pose for engaged global citizenship? The human rights scholar Karen Engle offers provocative clues.

Can there be universal standards of morality? Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and the British Council's think tank, Counterpoints, examine this question from multiple perspectives – ancient and contemporary, Western and not.

Now for an uncomfortable question: What practices of *other* groups do we find unjust, but are afraid to say so because we will be perceived as "offensive," "racist," or "out of line"?

Minimal readings for session eight:
A) R. Schweder, M. Minnow and H. Markus, eds. *Engaging Cultural Differences: The Multicultural Challenge in Liberal Societies.* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), pp. 344-362.

B) Saad Halawani et al*. Do Human Rights Travel?* (London: British Council Counterpoints, 2004), pp. 4-57.

C) Jonathan Haidt. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom.* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 155-179."

SESSIONS 9-10
INTEGRITY VERSUS IDENTITY

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 or wholeness – 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 session nine, we will watch a documentary about Rustin to prepare for an intense discussion about the themes of identity, individuality and integrity.

In session ten, our core concepts of moral courage and public leadership are brought back to the personal front. Globalization means that today's generation lives 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 be "citizens" before we consider ourselves members of specific and special groups? To answer that question, consider this: If Rustin had been out

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as a gay man in the 1960s, would the fight for civil rights have been jeopardized?

Beyond this thought experiment, we have the piercing philosophy of Jean Bethke Elshtain. One of American democracy's clearest thinkers, Elshtain believes that the most courageous label we can give ourselves is "public citizen." To be a public citizen is to set aside group designations and therefore move past "us-versus-them." Otherwise, "private identity takes precedence over public ends or purposes; indeed, one's private identity becomes who and what one is in public and what public life is about is confirming that identity. The citizen gives way before the aggrieved member of a self-defined group. Because the group is aggrieved – the word of choice in most polemics is 'enraged' – the civility inherent in those rule-governed activities that allow a pluralist society to persist, falters."

Drawing on the definition of moral courage that we have discussed throughout this course, how do you become a public citizen today?

Consider the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A German pastor in the 1920-40s, he famously resisted Nazism, going as far as to participate in a plot to kill Hitler. In so doing, Bonhoeffer confronted the tidy dogmas of his most important constituencies: fellow Germans, Lutherans and pacifists. What timeless lessons can we take from Bonhoeffer about becoming a public citizen?

Minimal readings for session ten:
A) Jean Bethke Elshtain. *Democracy on Trial* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), pp. 36-90.
B) Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2010). Entire book.

FINAL SESSION
GETTING PRACTICAL

In this final session, students are encouraged – and mentored – to apply what they have learned to rethinking the public good and, by extension, public policies on the most sensitive issues of our day.

Someone who has done just that is the Scandinavian anthropologist Unni Wikan. A former UN researcher, she specializes in child development. For the past 15 years, Wikan has analyzed how her country of Norway strips immigrant Muslim children of their human rights by putting the culture of their parents on a pedestal. Policy makers, social workers and teachers have assumed that Muslim children are owned by the cultures from which their mothers and fathers come – an assumption that steals from these children any meaningful sense of belonging to their de facto home, Norway.

For her efforts to revise immigration and integration policies, Wikan has absorbed a great deal of backlash from "liberal" Norwegians. Yet she has persisted. Wikan's moral courage shows that you do not have to be a Kennedy, a King, or a Khan to assert yourself as a public citizen and update public policy – for good.

Apart from inspiring students to appreciate their own capacity for courage, Wikan's

mission raises fundamental questions about how to persist in securing small yet significant wins. Do you need a support network to build and sustain moral courage? If so, what part can the members of this class play in your future?

And because the aim of this course has always been to produce leaders, not just study them, how do ***you*** propose to help others become morally courageous? How will you equip your communities to feel less threatened by the moral courage of individuals within?

Readings throughout this course point to tactics and strategies. One final source is the latest book by social entrepreneurs Chip and Dan Heath. The title? *Switch: How To Change Things When Change is Hard.* Enough said.

Minimal readings for final session:
Unni Wikan. *Generous Betrayal: Politics of Culture in the New Europe.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Entire book.

Chip and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.* (New York: Broadway, 2010). Entire book.