Bullying and Courage:
Why The King's Speech Speaks to Us Today

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Could a film about a middle-aged man overcoming a speech defect become a box-office success? It would help, of course, if the man were a British monarch and if the historical tensions were legendary, the settings opulent, and the actors of the caliber of Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush. Still, a key question would remain: Why, in 2011, would moviegoers care about a stuttering king in the 1930s?

The King's Speech answers that question brilliantly. Detailing the agony of King George VI as he forces himself to deliver a key radio broadcast on the brink of World War II, it focuses on two topics of keen interest these days: courage and bullying.

While courage is a hardy perennial, bullying, sadly, is a prolific late bloomer. Long before John Wayne observed that "courage is being scared to death, and saddling up anyway," movies about guts, grit, and boldness were flourishing. But only in 2010 did the bullying-related suicides of 13-year-old Asher Brown in Texas, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince in Massachusetts, and 18-year-old Tyler Clementi in New York call attention to the long-festering problem of the social and moral cruelties of adolescence.

The King's Speech puts a regal twist on bullying. Based on the true story of Albert, Duke of York, assuming the throne (and taking the name George VI) — after his father, George V, died and his elder brother, King Edward VIII, abdicated — it probes the background of his publicly debilitating stutter. At bottom, apparently, was a case of deliberate and persistent bullying by a royal family that willingly addressed "Bertie" (as Albert was known) as "B-B-B-Bertie." Following popular post-Victorian views of abnormality, his parents insisted that his left-handedness be corrected by retraining, that his knock-kneed appearance be altered by painful splints, and that (as his father demanded) he should will his way through his stuttering by learning to "just spit it out!"

At the time, neither the royal family nor Western culture recognized that such aggressive, persistent intimidation of the weak by the strong constituted a potentially deadly threat. Yet in Bertie's case, the harassment and denigration led not to suicide but to an astonishing expression of moral courage. Facing a situation that still strikes fear in the heart of many a perfectly normal adult — the requirement to speak publicly to large audiences — he faced up to the danger for the sake of his moral principles. His sense of duty, and the unorthodox but effective coaching he received from an iconoclastic speech therapist, impelled him onward. In the film's climactic moment, he delivers a stirring nine-minute speech that helps galvanize his nation against Hitler's advances — and is praised by those who know what he's been through as one of the most courageous people of his generation.

As an object-lesson in overcoming bullying through moral courage, the film has deep relevance for today's educators. As old-style bullying morphs into cyber-bullying, many schools are at a loss. In the old educational models, bullying typically was seen as a schoolyard phenomenon — and, therefore, subject to the school's jurisdiction. Today, as bullies resort to relentless, anonymous digital pestering through texts, cell-phone messages, and Facebook postings, the schoolyard has become a cyber-yard. When the offending messages are sent outside of school hours, who's in charge? Educators rightly question whether schools should — or even could — exercise control over their students' private activities.

Yet without the community that the educators create, most cyber-bullying, which typically takes place between individuals who are part of the same community, could not operate. So educators can't shirk their responsibility for addressing this problem. Nor are they helpless. By seeing bullying as an issue rooted in community values, ethics, and moral courage, they can do two things:

- First, help students understand that, as a community, their school needs to operate by humanity's shared ethical values — fairness, respect, compassion, honesty, and responsibility — and that bullying violates all of them. Bottom line: There are no ethical bullies, and ethical communities can have no tolerance for bullying.
- Second, teach students about moral courage — the willing endurance of significant danger for the sake of principle. Help them understand that in the triangular relationship of bully, victim, and onlooker, the bully has only the fake courage of bravado. Real courage resides in the victims who, like Bertie, rise to victory despite the bullying — and in those onlookers who, feeling their own values violated by the disrespect and irresponsibility of the bully, find courageous ways to intervene, speak up, or bear witness in ways that crimp or stop the behavior.

As criminologists, auditors, and anticorruption experts can attest, crime declines when the community's culture says, "We don't do that around here." Building courageous, values-driven educational cultures where individuals know why bullying is wrong — and dare to do what's right — is no longer an option. Given the public anguish over bullying, it's a requirement.