Japan's Nuclear Responders: Moral Courage amid Physical Dangers

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When the history of Japan's earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis is written, one theme will stand out: moral courage.

You'll see it in the portraits of rescuers who worked exhausting shifts to save survivors. It will show up in countless tales of victims helping other victims escape danger, reach shelter, and find loved ones. It will trace through the actions of government officials — sometimes by its absence, but also by illustrations of an ethic of warning, where those in charge courageously walked the line between terrifying overstatement and soothing dismissal.

But the most complex chapter in this history may feature the workers at the damaged nuclear reactors. Last week several were hospitalized with burns after stepping into highly radioactive water. Over the weekend, a worker measuring radiation levels at the Fukushima Daiichi plant suddenly saw the reading on his personal dosimeter surge off the scale, causing him to leave the scene immediately.

Such incidents raise a question bristling with significance: Is the courage of these workers best described as moral or physical?

Physical courage, as U.S. Gen. William T. Sherman once defined it, is "a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger and a mental willingness to endure it." Sherman was talking about the kind of courage found in warfare, where bodily danger is real, immediate, and deadly.

Moral courage, by contrast, puts boldness and bravery at the service of deliberate moral intent. True, it still combines the recognition of risk with the willingness to act, but it adds a third dimension: Moral courage occurs when individuals consciously put the collective values of responsibility, compassion, and respect ahead of the personal impulses for self-protection, indifference, and flight. In that sense, it is the courage to put moral values into play — the willing endurance of significant danger for the sake of principle.

To see how it works, contrast Fukushima in 2011 with Chernobyl in 1986. When that Ukrainian reactor blew, the explosion hurled chunks of highly radioactive graphite into the air, much of which fell onto the roof of the reactor. The Soviet response team thought they had a plan for pushing it off the roof with small, purpose-built, radio-controlled tractors. But the radiation was so intense that it knocked out the electronics, leaving the machines stranded helplessly on the roof-top.

That's when those in charge sent in soldiers — equipped only with shovels, dressed only in ordinary fatigues, and never adequately warned about the danger. In the old Soviet system, those soldiers had little choice in the matter. If they had known what we know — if, in

Sherman's words, they had possessed "a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger" — they might have refused to follow orders. But under the Soviet's harsh tyranny, that refusal might strike us as foolhardy and quixotic rather than courageous. The point: Where there is no conscious choice, there is no courage. We can feel deep compassion for those soldiers and profound moral outrage at a command system that put so little value on human life, but we probably won't call their actions *courageous*.

Fukushima is different. The plant workers, the firefighters, and the other responders arriving to help have a real sensibility of the measure of danger. Like the rest of the Japanese population, they know uniquely, from their own history at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the risks of radiation. Like ordinary citizens, they have been drilled in procedures to escape tsunamis and earthquakes. And, given their particular jobs, they know the risks of nuclear power from the time they first sign up. While Japan's potent honor code insists on doing one's job responsibly, the nation also has a potent respect for life — so strong that it sparked national elation when several people were pulled alive from the wreckage after being trapped for days.

Bottom line: The Fukushima workers apparently have a choice, and they have agreed to endure the danger. Clearly, they are courageous. Given that they face severe bodily harm, however, isn't this simply physical courage? Isn't their courage like that of soldiers under fire — or even like that of extreme-sports enthusiasts?

I suspect not. The courage needed at Fukushima is rooted in a moral commitment. It is so colored by the principles and values that define integrity that we can't avoid seeing it as moral courage. That's true not only of the men and women exposed to radiation but of the officials in charge. Given the enormous mental tug-of-war between the nation's need for an immediate end to the radiation leaks and the responders' need for long-term personal safety, it takes moral courage to make the right calls moment by moment.

That's especially true when, as with radiation, the menace is not visible or even sensible. Perhaps moral courage shines most brightly when the earth is *not* trembling, no wave is approaching, and nothing immediate and physical seems to be happening. What's on display at such moments is courage responding to physical danger but rising into the moral realm