LETTER *from the* PRESIDENT

July 2005

Dear Friends:

The other night, standing the midnight-to-four watch aboard a 137-foot schooner motoring through the Great Lakes, I got to thinking about trust. That's the nice thing about a solitary bow watch: You've got time to reflect on such things as the ways we need to trust—and be trusted—to survive our global future.

The mate had nudged me awake in my upper bunk just before midnight. By then the drizzle had stopped. I found my binoculars and reached my post beside the furled staysail before I realized that the fog, too, had lifted. Earlier that evening, we'd been down to little more than a boat-length's visibility, with no sign of sky. Now the Big Dipper pointed to the North Star some thirty degrees to starboard. Off to port, a mud-brown moon sank toward its reflection in Lake Huron.

Standing on the foredeck, I was aware of a quiet busyness among the five of us who, awake, were charged with taking the rest who were asleep (including my wife and daughter) through the darkest part of the night—steering at the helm, navigating at the chart table below decks, checking the engine below decks, and keeping the lookouts. For the next hour, I had nothing to do but watch, searching out the lights of distant buoys and scanning the water ahead to be sure there were no surprises.

Given the vagaries of wind and weather, that can be a tall order. But that's what we're all trusting: that anything unexpected will be spotted in advance. What keeps a boat like this going, in fact, is a massive infusion of trust. That word has two senses: *trustfulness,* where you rely on things beyond your individual control, and *trustworthiness,* where others put their confidence in you.

I found myself ticking off the things about which I was trustful. First, there was the boat's original 1925 design—the hull itself and the thousands of fittings (mostly wooden pegs) holding its planking and ribs together. Then there were the two masts, towering 103 feet above the deck and linked in an intricate skein of rigging worked out by mariners over the centuries. The massive anchor, the winch that raised it, the wooden rudder and its bronze worm gear milled in Gloucester, Massachusetts—they also had to be trusted. So, too, did the newer technologies: the charts with their thousands of data points, the global positioning system processing millions of satellite signals, the radar seeing through darkness as easily as sound passes through mist. Then there were the physical systems that pumped the bilge, fueled the engine, heated the dishwater, and kept the running lights

INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ETHICS
P.O. Box 563 • Camden, Maine 04843 USA • 207-236-6658 • 800-729-2615 *(U.S. only)* • fax: 207-236-4014
ethics@globalethics.org • *www.globalethics.org* • With offices in New York, London, and Vancouver

burning. And of course there were the human systems, centered on the well-grooved traditions of the watch that parceled out the necessary functions to different people. None of us alone could be responsible for all of these functions. We had to trust in something beyond ourselves. Unless we had confidence in this complex layering of historical experience, technological skill, and organizational patterns, we wouldn't have had the courage to move forward.

Yet at the heart of all of this trustfulness lay another kind of trust—the trustworthiness of each of us on the watch. If the helmsman mused over some distant light on the shore for even a minute rather than checking back with the compass, we'd have swerved off course. If I spent too long studying the knots on the webbing under the spar rather than searching the water ahead, we might have rammed a floating log. What if the mate weren't warned about the water rising in the bilge or didn't spot the mark on the radar moving slowly toward center screen? And what if those who laid the keel eight decades ago had gotten it wrong, or the team that recently rebuilt the ribs had used bad wood, or the rope company had woven faulty lines? Each of us, past and present, were hour by hour proving worthy of the confidence vested in us by others.

To stand the bow watch that night, then, was to stand at the prow of a vast web of trust. It took form in a classic design of wood and metal, rope and canvas, paint and varnish, but it drew its real strength from habits and values, responsibilities and duties, practice and experience. Yes, I was standing the watch, but I simply happened to be occupying that position at that moment. I was just the latest in a line of watchers extending back across nautical history and carrying those traditions forward a few hours into the future. I was, in a way, as old as the world's first mariner, still doing a task that no one has ever figured out how to replace. Yet I was as new as the latest weather report—rested by sleep, braced by the wind from our nine-knot progress, and seeing the world's fifth largest freshwater lake in circumstances no one else would ever exactly replicate.

Standing that watch demanded concentration, yet it was oddly relaxing—a refreshment that I found I craved. Since January, when my new book *Moral Courage* was published, I'd been on the road with few breaks. The book had done well—had in fact sold out its first printing in less than a month. And the audiences had been receptive, engaged, and hungry to hear more about a topic that we at the Institute have watched rise in importance over the last few years. Still, I found myself looking forward to those few days aboard the schooner, almost less for the delight in sailing than for the quiet moments I'd have for thinking about a question that's pestered me for several months: If moral courage is as important as the audiences think it is, how best do we teach it?

That's not a new question, of course. Aristotle noted that you learn courage by doing courageous acts. Through the centuries, the learning of courage has been the centerpiece of the rite of passage whereby young people become adults. How does a young tribesman become a warrior? He gets handed a spear and sent into the woods to bring back a bear. In later cultures, he runs away to war or to sea, to learn among guns or ropes the responsibilities of maturity. We sometimes forget the hunger we once possessed to grow up, to become adults, to prove our worth by showing our bravery in the face of danger.

But our world no longer needs routine expressions of physical courage. Bears are notably absent in most places, and it takes little courage for us to negotiate our daily lives. That's as it should be. As we care more deeply about one another's safety and well-being—about what our ancestors called our *commonweal* and later created politically as our *commonwealth*—we outgrow the need for daily physical bravery. While that's good for us as a whole, it may not be so good for our youth. What, these days, will be their rite of passage? Some of them, seeking to fabricate reasons for courageous actions, will engage in extreme sports. Others, in defiance of social norms, will seek out risks through behavior that can lead to early pregnancy, drugs, or gang involvement. Different expressions, sure, but the same impulse: to prove they dare to be adults.

Can we answer that impulse by shifting the focus from physical to moral courage? A quick look around suggests that if the requirement for physical courage is waning, the need for moral courage never has been more evident. Given the ravages of greed and corruption, the bullying and abuse in social relationships, the intimidations of elitism, the fierce and dispiriting exclusions of tribalism, there's a desperate need for voices of principle willing to stand firm for our core values.

What if every young person passed into adulthood through channels that taught him or her to be morally courageous? I think that's what got me thinking about trust that night. In my interviews for the book, it became increasingly clear that moral courage requires trust. Why else, after all, would you endure dangerous situations for the sake of principle—which is how moral courage can be defined? If there were no trust that the danger might be faced down and normalcy restored, why would anyone hazard reputation, position, self-confidence, honor, or esteem? Listening to the interviewees, it seemed to me they were talking about four kinds of trust—in their own past experiences, in their inner character, in a faith in something beyond themselves, or in their intuition—to carry them through. Without at least one of these kinds of trust, they would not have acted in the name of moral courage.

One answer to the question about how we teach moral courage, then, must be to teach trust. For most people, that translates into trustworthiness—teaching students to be responsible, accountable, and dependable. That's reason enough to let eleven-year-olds baby-sit and mow lawns, thirteen-year-olds travel with their sports teams on overnight trips, and sixteen-year-olds learn to drive. How else, Aristotle would ask, do we expect them to learn to be trustworthy except by letting them do trustworthy acts?

But somewhere in the red glow of the compass light, after the shift changed at 1:00 A.M. and I took the helm, I found myself wondering whether you can teach people to be trustworthy if they aren't willing first to be trustful. Can you become *worthy of* the confidence of others without first learning to *trust in* others? Can the next generation express responsibility without having seen it expressed toward them? How could any of us, alone at the helm of our thoughts, steer the ship of our lives forward into the darkness unless we trusted that there were others—even just a few—standing the watch with us?

If it were left to me to chart the course toward the teaching of moral courage, I'd start with trustfulness. And I'd do it not as a theory or abstraction, and not simply through examples from the great stories of our culture, but through practice and persistence and patience. I'd put students into situations that seem solitary, separate, and alone—on a ship, in the wilderness, at a library, in a practice room—and have them reflect on how much even their isolation depends on the web of trust that surrounds them. I'd have them discover that while personal ethics is essential to their success, so is the ethical culture of the organizations, systems, and relationships that embrace them. I'd have them focus strongly—as we're doing now at the Institute—on their obligations to strengthen the moral climate of those organizations. And I'd help them understand that never, ever, has there been a self-made man or woman.

But before I did that, I'd make sure that we, as adults, were both trustworthy within ourselves and trustful of the next generation. And I'd have all of us remember that in life, as on the water, there are no superheroes who can do it all—that the commonwealth of our experience depends on our communal course toward moral courage. It's a course we travel together or not at all.

Sincerely,

Rushworth M. Kidder

Rushworth M. Kidder