LESSON 11

MORAL COURAGE

LESSON PLAN 241
Moral Courage Worksheet 243
ACTIVITY: THE GIRAFFE PROFILE EXERCISE 247
Giraffe Profiles:
Sarah Swagart 249
Danny Seo 250
Brian and Ruth Jackson 251
Kanésha Sonée Johnson 252
David Levitt 253
SUBJECT ADAPTATION SUGGESTIONS 255

"To see what is right and not do it, is want of courage."

—Confucius

Moral Courage

Prework for students: Have students read and complete the Moral Courage Worksheet.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will have a greater appreciation for the courage it often takes to make and act on tough ethical decisions. They will understand that moral courage often involves some personal sacrifice.

Opening

"Moral courage is different from other kinds of courage. How might we define moral courage? What other kinds of courage are there?"

Strategies

- Begin by discussing the examples listed in the homework assignment. Ask for other examples from the class.
- To explore the concept of moral courage further, do the Giraffe Profile Exercise activity.
- Notebooks: Select one or more of the reflection questions below for students to write about in their notebooks.

Reflection Questions

- How is moral courage different from other kinds of courage? Why is it sometimes more difficult to have than other kinds?
- Who do you think most students would identify as heroes? Give some examples. Why do you think this is? What makes someone a hero? Is moral courage necessarily involved? Should it be?
- In the dilemmas you have already explored, how has moral courage played a part?
- Think back to the challenges you have faced or predicted. How does moral courage feature in your solutions to those problems?
- Is it possible to "practice" being morally courageous?

Homework Assignment

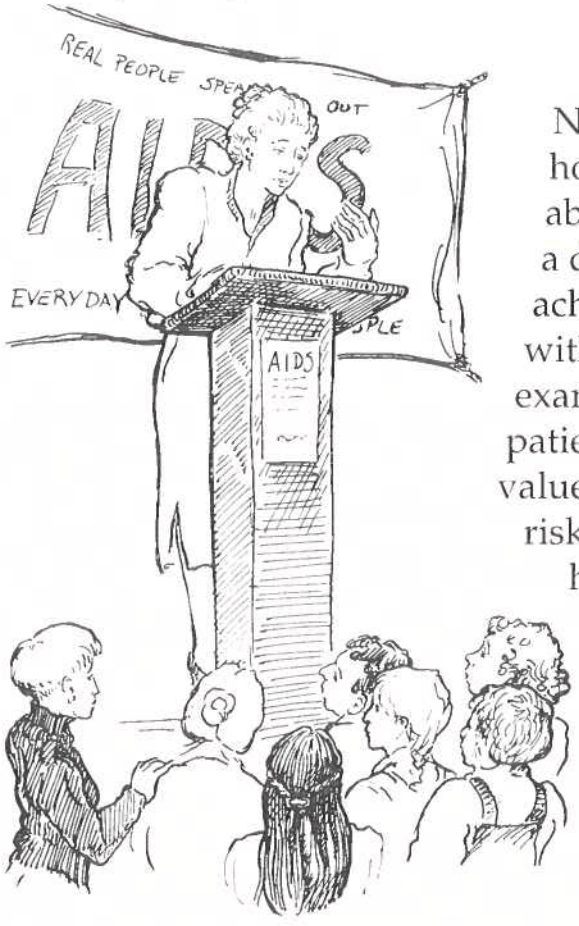
Ask students to search newspapers and magazines for examples of moral courage. Have each student bring in and report on their article, in small groups. Ask: In each story, how did moral courage play a part? What was at stake for the person or persons involved? Did the person's actions benefit others? How?

Lesson Assessment: Revisions for Next Time

MORAL COURAGE WORKSHEET

There are all sorts of courage, just as there are all sorts of values:

- There's the courage shown by an athlete when she tries a gutsy play during an important game.
- There's the courage of a hot-air balloonist trying to be the first to fly around the world.
- There's the courage of a soldier who risks his life to save a buddy.
- There's the courage of an AIDS patient who decides to speak out publicly about the disease.



Not all courage is about moral courage, however. In the first two examples above, the courage shown is more about a decision to take a physical risk to achieve something that has little to do with ethics or morality. But in the last two examples, both the soldier and the AIDS patient chose to uphold their core ethical values even in the face of great personal risk. In fact, we would call the soldier a hero for risking his life for someone else. We would call the AIDS patient brave because she put the long-term interests of others ahead of herself.

DEFINITION: *Moral courage* is about choosing to stick to one's values in the face of opposition and the risk of great personal sacrifice.

▶ Consider the Following Real-Life Examples

Rosa Parks

In 1955, Rosa Parks decided she was no longer going to give up her seat on the bus if a white person asked for it. Her decision—and arrest—led to the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and the eventual integration of buses everywhere.

▶ *Why is Rosa Parks's action an example of moral courage?*

▶ *Is this the kind of person you would admire? Why or why not?*

WHISTLEBLOWER

Rick Broughton, a mechanic at a textile factory in Ohio, "blew the whistle" on unsafe conditions at the factory by reporting them to the federal Occupational Saety and Health Administration (OSHA). As a result, the factory's managers and many of his co-workers treated him with hostility.

▶ *Why is Rick Broughton's action an example of moral courage?*

▶ *Is this the kind of person you would admire? Why or why not?*

Speaking Out Against Gangs

*Fifteen-year-old Norvelle Smith from Chicago refused to join a local gang. Instead, she decided to spend her time speaking out against gang violence at school assemblies all across the city.**

▶ *Why is what Norvelle Smith did an example of moral courage?*

▶ *Is this the kind of person you would admire? Why or why not?*

Sometimes it takes moral courage to make, and act on, a tough ethical decision. Being morally courageous is part of being ethically fit—you have to practice doing the right thing if you are to become good at it.

**Story courtesy of the Giraffe Project.*

The Giraffe Profile Exercise

Background

The Giraffe Project is a national nonprofit whose mission is to get more people to stick their necks out for the common good. Knowing that early learning can lead to lifelong "giraffeness," the Project is in schools with a K–12 curriculum that teaches courage, compassion, and personal involvement in the community at large. The basis for the program is the Project's story bank of more than 900 real-life heroes whose lives show kids what they, too, can do. By the end of the curriculum, the students are in action, doing a service project they design to address a public problem that concerns them. To learn more about Giraffe Project programs, write them at 197 Second Street, Langley, WA 98260, call 360-221-7989, or email them at office@giraffe.org. See also their Web site at www.giraffe.org.

Purpose

- To connect students to real examples of ordinary citizens who have sacrificed their own person interests for some larger good
- To help students understand more deeply the concept of "moral courage"

Preparation and Materials

Prepare copies of the Giraffe Profiles for students.

Process

- Divide students into small groups of five or six.
- Distribute copies of the Giraffe Profiles—one story per small group. Ask the students to carefully read their assigned story.
- In small groups, ask students to appoint a reporter. Then have them discuss the following questions:
  - What ethical values did the actor choose to uphold despite personal risk? Describe the nature of the personal risk.
  - What opposition did the actor face?
  - Did the person's actions benefit others? How?
  - Is this the kind of person you would admire? Why or why not?

- Return to the large-group setting. Ask each group's reporter to give a brief rendition of the story and to summarize the group's discussion.

Homework

Ask students to write up their reactions to the exercise in their notebooks.

SARAH SWAGART

A Giraffe has been sighted in Oak Harbor, Washington

Sarah Swagart may be young, but she knows an injustice when she sees one. Back when she was an eighth-grader, Sarah decided it was wrong for young skateboarders to be treated like criminals. Kids who skated in Oak Harbor's parking lots and on its sidewalks were threatened with fines of as much as $500 and 90 days in jail. The kids were nobody special, she thought—just boys who needed a place to exercise their sometimes awesome and quite legal skills.

She formed "Nobody Special," an organization whose mission is to get the skateboarders their place—and to get the community to recognize them as good athletes, not hoodlums.

Architect Terry Ledesky volunteered to design a skateboard park. But there had to be some place to put it. Sarah wrote up a petition for land and got signatures from kids, teachers, police officers, and even some store owners. Leading a delegation of 40 kids, she stood before the City Council and pointed out that the town had baseball fields, basketball courts, a roller rink, and a swimming pool where kids could do the sports of their choice. What would be so different about accommodating the skateboarders?

The biggest problem, besides the kids' bad image, was insurance liability. What if a skater got hurt and sued the city? Sarah and the skateboarders got information on safety and liability from other towns that had skateboard parks. The City Council finally agreed there could be a park next to the public swimming pool.

The kids are on a major fundraising and volunteer-recruiting drive now. They've got a commitment from the SeaBees at Whidbey Naval Air Station to do the construction work, they're going to businesses to get donated materials, and they're on the sidewalks raising "a mile of money"—26,400 dollar bills. That's a lot of car washes and penny roundups, but Sarah and the members of Nobody Special are determined to get the job done.

Danny Seo

A Giraffe has been sighted in Shillington, Pennsylvania

Maybe it was in the stars that Danny Seo would become a leader in the environmental movement. Seo was born in 1977 on International Earth Day. At the ripe old age of 12, he launched the student advocacy group, Earth 2000.

Originally founded to save 66 acres of forest and wetlands, Earth 2000 is now the largest student group for animal rights in the country. Although that first battle was lost, Seo was encouraged rather than disheartened by the battle. Youth involvement, Seo says, "changes the generation."

Seo is a young man in constant forward motion. Since 1989, he has organized a large antiwhaling demonstration in Washington, D.C., provided vegetarian meals to people with AIDS, worked to pass a resolution to ban the capture of wild animals for classroom displays, lobbied for the passage of two major animal rights initiatives in his home state, headed an antifur campaign against two major clothing companies, and promoted vegetarianism for Generation Xers.

While Seo has gained recognition and received awards, such as the Albert Schweitzer Humanities Institute Award, for his work, he finds the work itself, and the opportunity to get others involved, the ultimate reward. He invests not only his time, but his own college-fund money in his projects.

Seo believes that participation in the real world is essential. "What we lack in classrooms," he concludes, "is giving students the freedom to learn in their own interpretative way." Seo felt he learned more about civics and government in one day of lobbying than a month in class. Other kids ask him all the time how he does it, and he simply tells them his own story. The message, he says, is clear: "If I can do it as an average kid, so can you."

Brian and Ruth Jackson

Mother and son Giraffes sighted in San Francisco, California

Brian Jackson isn't your typical college kid. Although he works two jobs to pay for his studies, Jackson gives up his weekends and most of his other free time to coach 60 neighborhood kids in sports. Aware that the children in the Visitacion Valley housing projects have few male role models, Jackson has been trying to fill that gap since he was in high school. He takes his lead from his mother, Ruth Jackson, who takes in kids in trouble, runs a day care center, and comes up with the cash to buy vans that take Brian's charges to games and cultural activities. Brian teases his mother, telling her, "You have your children and I have mine."

Brian and Ruth Jackson live in a house that stands between two giant housing projects. The Jackson family grows periodically, as it did recently when they took in a boy and his twin sisters who were living in the street. Although she has the means to live in a safer place, Jackson refuses to flee the inner city and its problems, saying that it is up to the people to solve the problems of their own neighborhoods. Her group, Visitacion Valley Parents for Youth, is devoted to expanding the horizons and opportunities of the young people there. She has faced down drug dealers, warning them to keep away from "her" kids. Although she works for the school district, she challenged their management of the local youth center, saying it wasn't adequately serving neighborhood kids. She is working to involve local business owners as well, telling them that "the kid you help today won't be breaking your window for a few bucks tomorrow."

KANÉSHA SONÉE JOHNSON

A Giraffe's been sighted in California

When Kanésha Sonée Johnson started fifth grade in Hawthorne, California, she saw that the African American kids in her class often taunted the school's Asian kids. And the tougher kids went a lot further, bullying and tormenting the kids from Asian families. Kanésha, an African American, thought that was wrong, so this one small girl broke ranks.

She began making friends with kids who couldn't speak English, helping them with their homework, teaching them the ropes, and telling other kids to lay off them.

"I just decided to, because I know how it feels when people laugh at you," Kanésha explains. "That old poem says, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me,' but some words do hurt." When Kanésha herself was tormented by the bullies for standing against them, she cried—at home, where they couldn't see her—but she held her ground.

And one small girl succeeded, even ending de facto segregation on the playground. After seeing Blacks and Asians choose only each other for their teams, Kanésha talked them all into playing together—integrating the class teams. And in class, she got them working together, seeing each other as real kids like themselves, not African Americans and "those foreigners."

David Levitt

A Giraffe's been sighted in Seminole, Florida

David Levitt was all of 11 years old when he decided he could do something about feeding the hungry. Like, what about all the food that wasn't served each day in the school cafeteria? He was told that several adults had tried to get the school to donate, but the response had been "too much red tape." Undaunted, he took the question straight to the county school board and got their agreement to donate food from all 92 schools in the county.

When his accomplishment made local papers, some classmates taunted and insulted him. David forged on, enlisting restaurant owners and the hosts of private events to donate unserved food, getting manufacturers to donate the proper containers for transporting food to shelters and soup kitchens, and taking food from a local supermarket to a feeding agency.

At David Levitt's bar mitzvah, he asked guests to bring food donations in support of his project. More than 500 pounds of food were donated, and he was presented with a Giraffe Project commendation for sticking his neck out to champion the hungry.

Now 14, Levitt hasn't let up a minute. He and his 16-year-old sister have drafted a resolution that has been introduced in the state legislature; David is lobbying for its passage. If he gets the votes, his efforts will be replicated all over Florida.

Subject Adaptation Suggestions

History and Social Studies

- Obtain a copy of the Institute for Global Ethics's video *Tough Choices: Today and In History*. The video includes three individuals' real-life stories from the 20th century: the story of an Armenian immigrant escaping Turkey in the 1920s, the story of a black medical student during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the story of a newspaper editor in Alaska in the early 1980s. In each example, the individual involved had to demonstrate moral courage. The video was designed to accompany subject matter typically included in the seventh- through eighth-grade curriculum. A teacher's manual accompanies the video.

Language Arts

- Assign a writing prompt: Ask students to write about an example of moral courage in their own lives, or invent an example as a short story.

Math and Science

- Propose a research project to identify and study the heroes of science and math. Who are the people who dared to present unpopular conclusions based on a new view of science not yet accepted by others? What hardships did they have to overcome? What values did they exemplify? How did moral courage play a part?

Visual Arts

- Design an award for moral courage. What would it look like? What would it say? Suggest ways in which the award might be used.
- After viewing the video *Tough Choices: Today and in History*, post the following quote, or another quote of the students' choosing:

  "That's what freedom's all about. With freedom comes responsibility."

  —Gloria Johnson-Powell.

  Ask students to design a banner featuring the quote. Have students suggest places around the school or in the classroom where the banners might be hung.