

Building a Better World

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11-12th Grade Category, Second Place**

When Judith Meisel watched rioters rally around the Bakers', a black family's, home, she was deeply hurt. Watching the mob become increasingly violent reminded her of her childhood during the Holocaust, and she knew she had to do something. Instead of simply ignoring the situation, Judith stood up against the hatred in her community and baked her new neighbors some cookies. (Bialis)

Through her seemingly insignificant action, Judith Meisel showed more moral courage than many people exhibit in their entire lives. After surviving the Holocaust, Judy thought the nightmare of extreme prejudice and discrimination was over, but the civil rights movement in America only showed her that needless hate was still significantly alive in her community, and that she had to take action to end it. After baking cookies and taking them over to the Baker's house, Judith decided to start telling the story of her life during the Holocaust. If it could help in some way, she was willing to relive the pain.

Judith Meisel is a perfect example of a person with moral courage. She was willing to sacrifice friendships with her racist neighbors to prove that she would not tolerate racial discrimination. Individuals with moral courage are willing to sacrifice their comfort and convenience for the benefit of others, without thinking about reward or repayment.

What is the difference between an average person and one who is morally courageous? Do they wear their hair differently? Is there a certain righteous air around those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for others? Do they have markings on their faces so they can be identified? The difference is in none of these things, for the only trait that sets the morally courageous apart is their willingness to stand up for what they believe in, no matter what the cost may be.

My mother is another great example of one with moral courage. In March of 1993 when our home was robbed, my mother sacrificed herself to protect what she valued most: her children. As strangers ripped through our belongings, my mother kept calm and made sure we were safe. Finally, when the thieves could not find what they were looking for, my mother tried to negotiate with them, and in frustration, one of them fired his gun, wounding my mother. The burglars fled. My mother was left with bullet

shards in her left eye, but through her pain she managed to place us safely in a friend's home and drive herself to a hospital.

My mother is not a social activist, nor is she famous. She was, however, willing to sacrifice her sight for her children. This may seem like a small story, seemingly unconnected to any larger event, but "its very smallness is telling. Moral courage plays itself out daily in the interstices of our lives. Without it, our brightest virtues rust from lack of use. With it, we build piece by piece a more ethical world." (Kidder 2)

Every day, teens in student activist groups such as the Gay/Straight Alliance work hard to help build a more ethical world. They hold weekly meetings, place posters up around school, and encourage others to join in their quiet battle against prejudice. These students are teased and derided for simply standing up for what they believe in, but they refuse to be discouraged. Millions of people just like them fight small battles every day. One person's effort to exercise moral courage may appear tiny, but the sum of a million small efforts is monumental.

As a teenager living in America, it can sometimes be difficult to understand the weight of the world's problems. When studying the Holocaust as part of history, it remains just that in our minds: history. Many people are unable to see it as an event that still affects their lives today. Even fewer people see how events similar to the Holocaust are currently taking place, and fewer still take a stand and try to stop the slaughter. As a planet we have seen what can happen when cruelty is allowed to flourish, and we should not allow ourselves to fall into the same trap of apathy and indifference.

People should not allow themselves to make excuses for their lack of concern. Every person may not be able to raise millions of dollars or cure a deadly disease, but every person *can* do something small to help make a change. Whether by baking cookies for the new neighbors across the street, making friends with someone different, or creating posters to raise awareness, no effort goes to waste. With every small action, we can build a better world.

Bibliography

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