

Stand Up by Lauren Meyer, Burke High School

Rarely do we find obvious examples of moral courage in our daily lives. The Anti Defamation League (ADL) defines moral courage as “the ability to take a strong stance on a specific issue and to defend it based on one’s personal beliefs or convictions regardless of danger or threats to personal safety.” In a typical modern lifestyle in the United States, dangerous situations or threats to personal safety are generally unknown to most of society. Despite this, there are many opportunities in everyday life to face behavior listed on the ADL’s Pyramid of Hate: harassment, ridicule, name calling, belittlement, social exclusion and avoidance, stereotyping, and scapegoating. More than one of the above listed actions most likely is considered by the general public to not be a “big deal.” Of course, there are those that stand up against such acts, whether it is something as small as a racist joke or as immense as genocide.

Passover, April 1943. The Warsaw ghetto’s inhabitants had had enough. Its major resistance force, the ŻOB, the *Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (the Jewish Fighting Organization), led the way against the Nazi forces; signs were posted throughout the ghetto stating “Jewish masses! The hour is near. You must be ready to resist....Our slogan should be: We should all be ready to die as human beings” (Understanding, 167). These forces were poorly armed, each man or woman having only a dozen rounds of ammunition at most at their disposal. Molotov cocktails, a deadly combination of gasoline and glass bottles to be lit on fire and dropped on the enemy, were in a more plentiful supply but were the only armaments against German tanks and armored cars. Provisions were low as they usually were in the ghetto; starvation was always just around the corner. The ŻOB was preparing for a protest. The Germans came early.

January 18th, the January *Aktion* began. German goals were to deport another 8,000 Jews from the ghetto to the nearby Treblinka death camp. For nearly a month, over a thousand Nazi forces had to be called in to fight; the Jews were resisting. ŻOB forces fought from hiding, acting as a partisan force, striking from cellars and rooftops, and then vanishing into buildings and underground bunkers, leaving behind bewildered and often injured enemy soldiers. Molotov cocktails rained down on armored cars and unsuspecting soldiers, and traps sprang from dark corners and hallways, spraying bullets that could catch even the most

cautious German. Twice German soldiers were pushed completely out of the ghetto. Young Mordecai Anielewicz's, commander of the ŻOB, dream had been realized: self defense and armed resistance from the Warsaw Jews. Many of his fellow commanders were determined not to be captured at the end of the long resistance; as German soldiers flooded their command bunker with smoke, and many of the Jewish fighters committed suicide or suffocated themselves by staying in the smoke-filled room. Few escaped. Those left alive remained in the ghetto or were sent to the nearby Treblinka death camp.

Mordecai Anielewicz and his resistance fighters faced overwhelming odds, the threat of deportation, injury, and, above all, death. Like the rescuers, they fought for their ideals; even if they could not be free, they were going to die, telling their oppressors that they were not going to let them control and treat the Jewish people like animals waiting for the slaughterhouse. It takes both physical courage and the ever elusive moral courage to face bullets and fire for something that only exists in your heart and mind. It would be much, much easier to simply give in and let the Nazis take you to the death camp of Treblinka to end your miserable life. But, that would mean letting down an entire people, and that is not something that young rebels with nothing left but determination like to do.

I have had my own moments of what some might call "moral courage." As a member of the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual) community, I hear and see things that easily fall into the list of behavior I mentioned earlier. "Gay" or "homosexual" is commonly used as an insult. Movies like *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* demean the GLBT community by showing homosexuality as something to be laughed at and mocked, reducing serious issues such as gay union/marriage to a subject of comedy. The only time I could personally say that I have demonstrated moral courage happened in my high school technology class last year. The class had started talking about homosexuality: "Them gays is so nasty!" "What's it called when you're afraid of gay people? Uh, uh, homophobic! I'm that!" "Yeah, I am too!" At that point, I'd had enough. "Well I guess you better be afraid of me then, huh? Shut your mouths already, you can never tell who's listening!" They were, to say the least, somewhat shocked that someone they had thought was "normal" turned out to be different. What followed was a barrage of questions mainly asking if I was being honest or if I had ever had sex with another girl. Since then, when another person finds out about my sexuality, they are unsure of how to react; should they ask questions to satisfy their curiosity, or stay quiet?

I understand that many people are afraid of what they don't understand or what is different from what they are used to. This is where the pyramid of hate finds its base. This is why people need to ask questions and learn about what they don't know. In reality, there is no difference between a Jew and a Christian and a gay couple and a straight couple. Both religions worship God. Both couples love each other. Acceptance is the key to peace, and that is the simple truth.

WORKS CITED

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