

February 2003

Dear Friends:

I don't recall just when the word courage entered our conversations. But the other day, during a break in an ethics seminar I was leading in the Midwest, it showed up in a discussion about Iraq.

Some were appalled at the prospect of military action, incredulous that the United States could suddenly abandon its age-old values of justice and respect. Others were appalled that the nation might back down from its long-held commitments to defend the values of freedom and responsibility. Given the context—a seminar on ethics—this was no battle royal of rant and invective. Each side was considerate, reflective, reasonable, but each was willing to risk the displeasure of others—perhaps even to endanger the harmony of the group—to articulate its convictions. And at some point, they began talking about the importance of taking courageous stands in defense of your principles.

Then a father with two grown sons made a thoughtful observation. One of them, he said, was a marine; the other was marching for peace. "I think they both have moral courage," he said.

He's right, but not obviously. When most people think of courage, they gravitate toward war stories. Combat calls forth some of the greatest expressions of physical courage, with individuals risking death, wounds, or capture for something beyond themselves. That "something" can be as close as the soldier at your side—or as distant as the ideal of independence and the homeland. War also engenders heroism among non-uniformed combatants, from Paul Revere's ride through Lexington and Concord to the anonymous hundreds who harbored Jews in Europe during World War II.

But warfare involves more than physical courage. Among the most agonizing choices made by military officers are the morally courageous decisions that risk reputation, respect, friendship, or career for the sake of principles. Who's to say which takes more courage: throwing yourself into the sea to save a drowning sailor, or standing up to superior officers when they scapegoat subordinates?

Less well understood is the courage required of noncombatants, particularly peacemakers. Their lives can unfold along fissures of intensity every bit as harrowing as those facing combatants. Their courage can be enormous. But more often, I suspect, it shows forth in modest ways. Heroes are made not only in the heat of battle but at the hearthside, not only in the crackling immediacy of a crisis but in the patient enduring of the ordinary. If, as John Milton wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait," it's also true that waiting, pondering, and reflecting sometimes require the boldness not to do but to forbear doing. Yes, courage requires action. But action that is ill conceived, rash, or inept turns courage into foolhardiness. Sometimes the moral courage of the peacemaker will be to slow the pell-mell pace and ask, Have we thought this through? And sometimes the moral courage of the combatant will be to answer back, Can we afford not to act?

The standoff over Iraq reminds us why the world needs a balance of peace marchers and marines. On two occasions only a generation apart, the twentieth century experienced this imbalance—and reaped its horrors. In the first, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain refused in 1938 to stand up against Hitler's absorption of Czechoslovakia, paving the way for World War II. In the second, U.S. president Lyndon Johnson charged ahead in 1965 with a military response in Vietnam, aggravating the social explosions of the next decade and beyond. What would it have taken, early in the Johnson era, to ask, Have we thought this through? Moral courage. But what would it have taken in Chamberlain's day to ask, Can we afford not to act? Moral courage.

The present standoff with Iraq—coming, again, about a generation away from Vietnam—makes the case for both brands of courage. Though neither side likes to admit it, the moral arguments for and against a U.S.-led invasion are finely balanced. There is plenty of right on both sides. To see how, consider what happens when you apply three ethical principles to this discussion of whether or not to go to war:

- **Ends-based.** Under the standard of utilitarianism, the most ethical outcome is the one that does the greatest good for the greatest number. Ends-based thinkers are invited to think about consequences—indeed, they must do so, speculating about what might happen if, or if, or if. Posit, then, the world of 2030. Will we look back and say, The war in Iraq created wholesale fragmentation, nearly ruined the global economy, dragged us into impossible nation building, and drove a wedge between Western and Islamic cultures that we're only now beginning to heal? Or will we look back and say, Our failure to deal with Iraq, we now know, made weapons of mass destruction available to terrorists, finally allowing them to bring down the global economy after the catastrophic destruction of (fill in the name of a major U.S. or European city)? If neither of these stark polarities is a pleasant consequence, our task is to imagine better futures—and then have the courage to steer the ship of our collective discourse in that direction.
- **Rule-based.** Under the terms promulgated by Immanuel Kant, the most ethical outcome arises when the highest principle is made universal—when, in other words, the rule you'd like to see applied becomes the absolute that must forever be followed in similar circumstances. What if the rule were, Always stand up to evil tyrannies bent on destroying you? You'd go to war. But what if it were, Always protect the innocent subjects of coercive despots? You'd refrain from attacking. The task is to determine which of these rules—or, perhaps, other more compelling ones—you most want to see enshrined behind the word always. One thing is clear: Both are right. But which is the higher right?
- **Care-based.** Under the Golden Rule, the most ethical outcome arises when we do to others what we'd like them to do to us. Here the problem lies in defining which "others" we mean. Is Saddam the other? That's hard to imagine. But what about his subjects? Suppose we ourselves were trapped in the web of a vicious tyranny. Would we want someone to liberate us with military intervention? Or would we want someone to help us work through our problems with more gentle interventions? But what if we were citizens of other countries?

Would we want someone to save us from weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorists, or to save the world from the horrendous dislocations inherent in war?

It would seem, then, that there's a moral imperative for peace—and a moral imperative for war. Determining which side occupies the higher ground will be a matter of individual intuition, experience, and wisdom. One thing is obvious, however: Neither side is wrong. Both have powerful values-based reasons to support them, so neither can prevail ethically by vilifying the other. And each demands moral courage of its supporters.

As we move toward some resolution of the Iraq situation, how will that moral courage show through? As it always does: by persistence when the going really gets tough. The toughest challenges to moral courage, I suspect, arise because of three latent fears: confusion, exposure, and discomfort.

1. **Confusion.** To say that the world is getting more confusing is to understate the obvious. As complex issues increasingly surface—and as simple issues proliferate and compound themselves—it takes discipline to grasp them and understand their significance. We may yearn to make decisions in full possession of all relevant facts and interpretations. In practice, we do the best we can with muddled arguments and incomplete details. The courage to trust your intuitions is really the courage to persist in the face of confusion.

Such confusions are manifold in decisions about Iraq. Do we know all we need to know? Hardly. Are we sure we can trust those who say we must go to war, or those who say it's safe to avoid it? Not really. Yet can we walk away from the confusion and refuse to face the issue? Only if we lack the courage to be moral. Pressing each argument to its ethical end point, refusing to be frightened by confusion, we can demand new clarity from both the peace marchers and the marines.

2. **Exposure.** It also takes courage to stand up to the fear of exposure. If that sounds strange, consider the courage needed to cope with stage fright, whistle-blowing, or civil disobedience. The desire to shrink from prominence, find hiding places, and avoid leadership roles is a disturbing human response. Facing up to it, however, is more problematic than facing up to confusion—because while few people covet confusion, many an egotist longs for fame, popularity, and adulation. The courage to endure exposure, then, starts with an exploration of motives: Am I seeking the limelight for mere personal gratification, or am I opening myself to public scrutiny because the community needs real leadership?

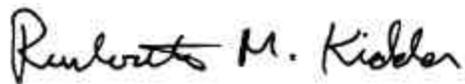
Here, too, the Iraq issue calls forth our moral courage. If I feel strongly about war or peace, am I willing to say so openly? If I haven't formulated a position, do I have the courage to admit I don't know? If I honestly don't know how I feel, can I avoid a kind of moral chameleonism that appears to agree with whatever attitudes happen to be coloring my immediate context? Or have I the courage to push back, question both sides, and expose whatever logic (or lack of it) needs to come to the surface?

3. Discomfort. In the end, however, perhaps the greatest threat to moral courage comes from complacency. Courage is rarely found among those afraid to put at risk the tidy pleasures of the unruffled life. Moral courage can be messy, uncomfortable, and disturbing. It's easier to believe that neatness and order ought to prevail, that it's impolite to rattle the world's equanimity, that what e. e. cummings called the "furnished souls" of our lives are too nice to want to abandon.

Contemplating Iraq reminds us that moral courage may force us to shed our comforting preconceptions, either about war or about peace. It reminds us that the hardest choices are those that cut us loose from mental moorings and send us into unfamiliar waters. It makes us do what we least want to do, hazard the things we most cherish, and put something higher than the desire to be unafraid.

Demanding clarity, risking prominence, enduring discomfort—that's some of what moral courage is all about. The other day a friend reminded me of Dante's famous comment. "The hottest places in hell," he wrote, "are reserved for those who, in time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality." Dante wasn't calling for war. Nor was he pleading for peace. He was simply crying out for engagement, for the courage to take a stand when, as now, the chips are down.

Sincerely,



Rushworth M. Kidder