

Teaching Moral Courage
by Robby Ballard

I am privileged to teach 5th-6th Grade American History at the Altamont School in Birmingham. My first responsibility as a teacher at Altamont, as outlined in the school's own mission statement: to "...improve the fabric of society by graduating compassionate...individuals."

Today I live with the borderline surreal reality of having to teach my students that Nazis are not, in fact, "very fine people." I find myself having to remind them of the same lesson, a lesson that I, and presumably many of us, had assumed was both self-evident and non-negotiable: that 6 million people gave their lives to educate us all that the ideals of hatred, intolerance, xenophobia, bigotry, racism, and antisemitism represented and cherished by Nazism warrant neither justification nor permission for earthly existence. Nazism is ideological smallpox.

How do we combat this? I find inspiration from former West German president Richard von Weizsacker. On May 8, 1985, as the rest of the world celebrated the 40th anniversary of the unmistakable and marginally absolute obliteration of the Third Reich, Weizsacker gave a speech to his countrymen, essentially asking "What do we do today, while the rest of the world celebrates the most justifiable shellacking in human history?" His truly rousing and awe-inspiring speech hinges on one central linchpin. Weizsacker charges: "Our young people are not responsible for what happened over 40 years ago. But they are responsible for the historical consequences." In short, Weizsacker reminds us that a lack of guilt does not imply a lack of responsibility. This mindset drives everything I do as a history teacher.

One of the first lessons I want my students to digest is the difference between doing the right thing, and doing the courageous thing. Throwing your trash away is doing the right thing. You don't get a cookie for doing what you're supposed to do in my room. Helping somebody who has broken their arm is doing the right thing, but it requires no courage. I ask them, "What have you done today/this week/this month that required moral courage?" Doing something morally courageous is different from doing the right thing. Moral courage is required to do something that you think is right, but that others may think is wrong. Moral courage is required when inaction would be substantially easier emotionally than taking action.

Working in a soup kitchen, volunteering at the animal shelter, and picking up trash in the park are all good things, but none require moral courage. A good example: A student responded to my question one morning, saying "I did. I mowed my neighbor's lawn because she's old and can't do it." I told the student that while that was a nice thing to do, it wasn't necessarily morally courageous because he wasn't really stepping out of his comfort zone or doing something he might be criticized for. The student then responded: "Yeah, but she's really scary and kind of crazy and nobody on my street likes her. I made my parents promise not to tell my brother because he'd make fun of me and call me her boyfriend." This was, indeed, bona fide, certifiable, gold standard moral courage.

Another student reported that she was at her brother's club soccer game and asked her parents if they could sit on the side of the bleachers where the Hispanic families sat because, as she said, "We're in Birmingham. Having them over there and us over here doesn't look good." Her family moved, and she said it was definitely uncomfortable, with the people they usually sat with watching them. This was a sterling example of moral courage. We have a storied history of young people acting morally courageous in this city. From the children's marches, to the first

students to enroll in integrated schools, and now, hopefully, to my own students, in their own way, exercising their own moral courage.

Of utmost import is what I teach them with regards to the genesis of Nazism. How did it start? What prompted the mass appreciation of a sadistic ideology? And, most importantly, what were the effects of this adoption on the victims of its evils? When Holocaust survivor Dr. Robert May visits my classes, everything that I have droned on and on about regarding moral courage suddenly coalesces into a human form in my students' minds. They see, hear, and even touch the hand of heroism and survival.

One of my students told me, after Dr. May's annual visit two years ago, that after he shook his hand, he went into the bathroom and started crying. He said he had "never felt anything so important." When they hear Dr. May, my students are inescapably confronted with the humanity of just how dangerous intolerance, mob mentality, anger, and, most importantly, fear are. They begin questioning these forces in their own lives. They begin asking these questions. They talk about these questions with their friends, their parents, and me. We talk about Dr. May's visit for four or five days after he comes. They want books about survivors, they want more stories, they want more heroes. They simply want more. Then, they start asking about the intolerance, mob mentality, anger, and fear that they see, hear, and read about daily.

Finally, they ask, "What can I do?" They have gone from listening, to asking, to doing. It is at that point I feel I have satisfied my contractual, moral, and ethical obligations and privileges as their teacher. The stories of Dr. May and other survivors are invaluable, inescapable when heard, and indispensable tools in the fulfillment of my, and my school's mission. Without the BHEC's efforts and Dr. May's willingness to share his story, I would lose what is perhaps *the* critical tool in my arsenal as a teacher. I benefit from him and the BHEC, my students benefit, and, hopefully, we will all bear marvelous witness to the fruits of his labor – and the labor of other survivors -- in the lives my students lead.