

Malala and Me

In the past century, many individuals have exhibited courage in the face of adverse consequences. From Irena Sendler and Miep Gies who aided victims of the Holocaust, to influential leaders of civil rights movements in the United States and abroad such as Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr; proponents of positive social change have often ignored harsh repercussions in order to do what is morally correct. Moral courage is doing what is ethical in spite of the threat of brutal ramifications. A marvelous modern day example of moral courage is the story of young Malala Yousafzai. Malala hails from Mingora, Pakistan. In her home country, under the Taliban regime, women had few rights and they could not attend school without persecution. Today, Malala is the youngest Nobel Peace Prize winner, a household name, and “the girl who was shot for going to school”.

Malala was born July 12, 1997 in Pakistan. Her father was an advocate for education and a notable anti-Taliban activist. Malala enjoyed attending a school her father had founded. In 2009, Malala began blogging for CNN under the pseudonym of Gul Makai. She blogged about her right to an education and spoke out on the Taliban’s attempts to infringe upon that right. Towards the end of 2009, Malala’s true identity had surfaced but she still continued to write about her beliefs. At the age of 14, the Taliban issued a death threat towards her, and she ignored it and continued to pursue an education. On October 9, 2012, Malala was busing home from school. A member of the Taliban asked the passengers, “Who is Malala” and her location was given away. She was shot at point blank range. Fortunately, she survived without major brain damage.

On her 16th Birthday, Malala gave a speech at the UN Headquarters in which she discussed her ideals. In her speech, she thanked her inspirations of Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi for teaching her to “be peaceful and love others”. She asserted that “Pakistan is a peace-loving, democratic country and Islam is a religion of peace”. Throughout her speech she discussed the importance of education and her belief that education will trump violence. She ended her speech with the powerful statement of “one child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world”.

In 2014, Malala was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At 17, she became the youngest person to receive such an award. In 2015, on her 18th birthday, Malala opened a school for Syrian refugee girls in Lebanon. She continues her work as an educational advocate today.

Malala’s story of moral courage compares to the moral courage exhibited in the Holocaust in the fact that she risked death under a harsh regime in order to do what was morally correct. Malala’s story represents the fight of many Pakistani girls. She is comparable to the humanitarian, Irena Sendler, who risked her life in order to save thousands of Jewish children from Warsaw ghettos. Both Sendler and Malala defied systematic oppression by committing altruistic acts in order to drive positive change in their communities.

Malala’s story resonates with me because I am a young person passionate about driving social change; we are the same age and she has accomplished so much in just 18 years and I hope to follow in her footsteps. Growing up as a young black woman, I have experienced my fair share of prejudice and discrimination. In her 2013 UN speech, Malala calls upon “communities to be tolerant, to reject prejudice based on caste, creed, sect, colour or gender”. I am fortunate to come from a community as diverse as mine because I have learned to

embrace and respect different cultures and ideals. My upbringing has also taught me the importance of social advocacy. I often hear undocumented immigrants referred to as “illegals” and racial slurs are often spewed without a second thought and are taken as jokes. It is not uncommon to hear derogatory terms towards women and the LGBT community.

In order to combat the intolerance in my community, I have been an active member in my school's Anti Defamation League for 3 years. As a member of ADL, I facilitate activities with freshman and sophomore students that promote tolerance and teach students about discrimination. Students gain insight into the power of their thoughts and actions towards their peers. ADL has established a No Place for Hate in which students pledge to stand up against bullying and discrimination on our campus. ADL has been important to me because through the peer training sessions, I can see the change I am driving in my community. Just as Malala speaks out against violence, I too believe in the power of kindness. When there is leftover class time during ADL facilitations, I often speak to the students about the importance of “paying it forward” by encouraging students to be kind to their peers, it results in an environment of respect and acceptance. Through acts of kindness and introspective thinking, students grow into the leaders our society needs. Often, my generation criticizes society, but we forget that we are society, and in order to address and change social inequalities, we must look inside ourselves for answers.

Although I am privileged to live in a country in which I will not be persecuted for my beliefs, individuals such as Malala and Sendler inspire me to take the steps towards making the world better for those who do. By taking small steps in my community today, I can drive the positive social change to make the world better for those who must exhibit an act of moral

courage in order to do something that is as quotidian as attending school. Malala believes that “we cannot flourish if half of us are held back”, and by taking advantages of my privileges as an American citizen; women who grew up in situations similar to Malala’s can be given the chance to “flourish”.