

Character and . . .

Courageous Compassion

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Courageous Compassion and the Other

Annalee R. Ward

A scared young African man seeking asylum in the United States shows up at our University to begin studying. The community discovers he's had to flee for his life from a political conflict, leaving behind his wife and children. He's from a country on the U.S. watch list for State Sponsors of Terrorism. As an immigrant, is he a threat or is this an opportunity for the community to help?

How we frame the issues of the world shapes our responses. Do we lash out in fear or reach out in compassion? When we give in to fears of difference, of change, of the unknown, or of being vulnerable, our reactions may be the classic fight or flee. Certainly, stepping forward into our fears does not come naturally. Yet, acting despite fear demonstrates courage. Looking away from our self-interest and toward the interests of others, even others who are different from us or outside our level of familiarity, calls for a heart of compassion.

Taken together, courage *and* compassion empower us to bear the uncomfortable, take risks, and make sacrifices for others. In other words, courageous compassion is action—action that might even bring suffering on ourselves—but action that expresses empathy in meaningful ways.

Global Crisis

Human beings—mothers, fathers, children—are suffering all over the world, forced to leave their homes, their cultures, their way of life. Hope is in short supply.

This issue of *Character and . . .* wrestles with how to define courageous compassion, apply it to the issue of immigration and reflect on how best to live with what one perceives as the Other. As the Wendt Character Initiative’s Research Team debated ways to think about these topics, current cultural conversations swirled around the global immigration crisis. Presidential candidates postured and pontificated on best policies. Racial and ethnic tensions intensified. If one had images of a peace-filled, safe world, surely the events and discussions of these times shattered those notions.

Wars rage in many places around the world. The U.N. estimates that over 65 million people have been displaced in recent years by these conflicts (Sengupta). What that has meant, according to the United Nations *International Migration Report of 2015*, is that “the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow

By the Numbers

- **244 million** migrants worldwide.¹
- **98,400** migrant children worldwide traveling without a parent or guardian.²
- 43 million Syrians are refugees.³
- 6.6 million Syrians, half of them children, are displaced within their own country.³
- **42.4 million** immigrants in the United States.⁴
- In October and November of 2015, **10,588** migrant children entered the U.S. from Mexico without a parent or guardian.⁵

rapidly over the past fifteen years reaching 244 million in 2015, up from 222 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000” (1). The United States allows only a small number of foreign-born people to enter, remain, and become citizens. Migration has become a global issue.

Recent statistics from the Migration Policy Institute, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Department of Homeland Security show that “the U.S. immigrant population stood at more than 42.4 million, or 13.3 percent, of the total U.S. population of 318.9 million in 2014. . . . Between 2013 and 2014, the foreign-born population increased by 1 million, or 2.5 percent” (Zong and Batalova).

Otherizing

How to respond to global crises that overwhelm our sensibilities, challenges us. A common response to human crises is, in *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof’s words, to “otherize” people. He writes: “There’s a profound human tendency, rooted in evolutionary biology, to “otherize” people who don’t belong to our race, our ethnic group, our religion. That’s particularly true when we’re scared.” We look to blame someone else. We fear difference. We want what is familiar.

Solutions to global crises are not easily created. What we hope to do in this issue is begin by acknowledging the problems and how overwhelming they can be. That doesn’t mean we retreat to inertia. This journal issue takes a step forward toward a solution by digging into what a courageously compassionate response to the Other might look like. Through both general reflection and case study, the authors struggle to respond with integrity, allowing deeply held beliefs to shape horizons of action. The concepts of courage and compassion together imply action.

In “Outsiders and Insiders: Courageous Compassion and the Immigration Crisis,” Jonathan Barz names our fears when it comes to immigration. He challenges us to reform our immigration policies with compassion, “compassion which may require genuine courage in order to resist the current climate of fear.” Using the young-adult novel, *The Outsiders*, Barz helps us imagine the courage and self-sacrifice that action entails—and it does take imagination. Moral imagination. The kind that engenders empathy. For when we put ourselves in another’s shoes, we gain perspective, and hopefully, softer hearts.

Ours is not the first generation to experience otherizing. Roger Ebertz’s “Courageous Compassion in a Time of Terror” engages the power of story to remind us of earlier generations’ responses to people of another ethnicity or race. Ebertz invites us on a cross-country trip through the eyes of two key players in a drama that unfolded in the 1940s. Through the intersecting stories of Herbert Inouye, a young Japanese-American man, and Ralph L. Carr, Governor of Colorado, we discover a model of leadership that exemplifies courageous compassion.

Kristof writes of those times: “It’s difficult to conceive now that a 1944 poll found that 13 percent of Americans favored “killing all Japanese,” and that the head of a United States government commission in 1945 urged “the extermination of the Japanese in toto.” Fear sets a stage for extreme reactions.

A Call to Action

Basic issues of life and death come into stark and painful focus in Christine Darr’s “Courageous Compassion: Cultivating Virtue in a Complicated World.” When slapped in the face with the reality of a child’s death due to the desperate conditions of the refugees seeking to find a safe home, Christine Darr asks, what does a compassionate response look like? What can or should we do? She unpacks the nature of compassion as a virtue and challenges

us to exercise it courageously in pursuit of human flourishing that begins in the personal, but also engages systems and institutions.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow reminds us that as we live into a life informed by grace, courageous compassion has power to combat anti-human forces of modernity.

The life of compassion also symbolizes our fears of the impersonality of modern life and the corruption and exploitation that can occur in a bureaucratized society. It provides a way of expressing our concerns about materialism and its corrosive effects on human life. In this sense, compassion stands for something larger even than itself. It reminds us of our humanity and therefore of the deeper qualities that are essential to our common human existence. (303-304)

Focusing on our common humanity is a good place to begin countering fears and ignorance of others. Bonne Sue Lewis' article, "Courageous Compassion and Interfaith Friendship," illustrates a community willing to try a different way. Living out her commitment to courageous compassion, Lewis reflects on the power to change Otherness to friendship through a model of communal dialogue. The organization, Children of Abraham, is a community that celebrates and interrogates their differences, all the while seeking to build friendships. With a call for hospitality and genuine love, Lewis reminds us that true community is possible because of God's love for us.

Finally Ripley Smith provides an insightful response essay in "Courageous Compassion: A Response to Barz, Darr, Lewis, and Ebertz." Smith reminds us of that while an emphasis on our identity as created in God's image, provides a key starting point. But to genuinely engage difference, we must move from sympathy to empathy. Empathy has power to change not only relationships, but our own understandings and attitudes.

This Journal Project

In the Wendt Center for Character Education at the University of Dubuque, we promote excellent moral character and ask questions about how character is shaped by or shapes current topics. Hence, this journal *Character and . . .* is an effort to connect with a wide range of audiences in order to provoke discussion and reflection that leads to positive action.

The journal emerges from a communal process of regular team meetings, common readings, and much discussion. Faculty from diverse departments bring their experiences and strengths together to challenge and encourage each other. The journey that brought us to these final essays was both exciting and tedious. Insights. Connections. These energized and moved us forward. But, as is true of many writing projects, it also takes disciplined work to mine the jewels from the rocks. Our hope is that you, our readers, find worth in this work and accept the challenge to express courageous compassion.

Conclusion

The current climate of American hubris is at odds with what this journal is calling for—courageous compassion. And genuine compassion calls for action. Not out of a sense of false pride, but out of a humility that leads us to wisdom, because “humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time” (Brooks 8). As we work to face our fears with courage, we may discover the richness of new relationships, the joy of friendship, and the peace our world so longs for. True, we may not solve all the problems. We will encounter challenges, even setbacks. But armed with courageous compassion, we live purposeful lives in service of God and others.

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Notes

¹ See *International Migration Report*.

² See Sengupta.

³ See Jonson et al.

⁴ See Zong and Batalova.

⁵ See “I’m Alone.”

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