

Yahli Kotler

Mrs. Furer

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Selfless Moral Courage Displayed During the Civil Rights Movement

Introduction

Ted Thomas, Director of the Department of Command and Leadership in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, defines moral courage as, “Lonely courage... it risks being isolated and singled out for painful personal consequences” (Thomas and Chaleff 2017). Correspondingly, the Cambridge Dictionary defines selflessness as “caring more for what other people need and want rather than for what you need and want” (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). Throughout history, selfless moral courage has been displayed during protests to help achieve a goal. For example, in the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, according to Adina Campbell, a writer for BBC, “Among those to have shown support are members of the England football team - whose players have been booed by some fans for taking the knee” (Campbell 2021). Their selflessness had an impact on the movement and impacted fans around the world. Also, in the Civil Rights movement, which went on from 1954 to 1968, many protesters displayed selfless moral courage, which helped achieve equal rights for African Americans. Overall, it took selfless moral courage to achieve equality throughout history.

Influential Figures

Influential figures in the civil rights movement, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, displayed their selflessness and moral courage by fighting for what was right, even

through adversity. Dr. King showed moral courage by promoting peaceful protests instead of violence in response to law enforcement. According to Hanif Abdurraqib, an American writer and cultural critic who has won many awards for his writing, Dr. King stated, “(I hope) that it will be nonviolent. I would hope that we can avoid riots because riots are self-defeating and socially destructive” (Abdurraqib 2017). After his people suffered, Dr. King ensured he would not disturb the peace and promoted nonviolent protesting. He continuously demonstrated the importance of caring for others and selflessness. He was courageous in the sense that he had every right to be violent, but he put the safety of others first (Abdurraqib 2017). Similarly, Dr. King displayed his moral courage by continuing to fight for his cause despite the police trying to prevent him from doing so. The Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit organization that advocates for equal rights, states, “Dr. King and the Rev. Abernathy chose to lead a march in defiance of the injunction and were arrested on April 12, 1963” (“Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy Jailed in Birmingham” 2024). Dr. King did not let corrupt societal norms stop him from protesting. Even after this arrest, he kept fighting for equality in the United States, even though he understood he would likely be arrested again. His selflessness was unmatched; to prove this, the National Civil Rights Museum states, “He refused to allow prison, violence or the threat of death sway his end mission. Instead, he stood beside his goal of achieving rights for all through nonviolent protests” (National Civil Rights Museum 2024). Similar to Dr. King, Rosa Parks displayed moral courage due to her strong belief in her cause through the challenges she faced. Debbie Bell, a civil rights activist, writes, “Though Parks and three other blacks were clearly sitting in the area designated for colored only, the bus driver demanded that they give up their seats. He physically moved the “colored only” sign several rows back so their seats could be taken by whites. The other riders gave up their seats, but Rosa Parks didn’t budge” (Bell

2005). Rosa stood her ground and did what was right, even though she understood the consequences that would come along with it. Her moral courage and selflessness influence the lives of many today. Kayla Richard, a University of Texas A&M student, states, “The life of Rosa Parks is a testament to the true power of selflessness and being willing to sacrifice yourself for the greater good, no matter what the cost” (Richard 2020). Her decision to hold her ground on the bus led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. King. According to the Stanford Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, “the Montgomery bus boycott was a 13-month mass protest that ended with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses is unconstitutional” (Stanford University 2023). Dr. King and Park’s selflessness has impacted the lives of many across the United States today, as they ignited protests that led to equality.

African-Americans Protestors

Many African Americans displayed moral courage by marching for civil rights despite the police brutality that opposed them. A specific example would be the marches from Selma to Montgomery, which began in 1965. The reason for these protests was the killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was murdered by police. Debo Adebile, a lawyer and the Commissioner for the United States Civil Rights Commission, states, “Jackson was shot by a state trooper...he was coming to the aid of his mother who had been brutally beaten during a voting rights march” (Adebile 2015). Jackson’s moral courage and selflessness will never be forgotten, as the marches caused by his death led to equal voting rights for everyone. Jackson’s bravery in protecting his mother from being attacked is an example to many today. He put his life on the line for those who he loved most, and unfortunately, he was killed as a result. Furthermore, the sheer bravery and moral courage of the people who marched numerous times in Alabama exemplify the quintessence of selflessness. This is seen in *Confrontation on the Bridge* by Jacob

Lawrence, a famous artist who used his paintings to portray African American life in the US. The painting depicted a vicious animal attacking African Americans on a bridge. According to the Cleveland Museum of Art, the painting represents police preventing protesters from crossing the bridge that would take them from Selma to Montgomery (Cleveland Museum of Art 2018). Similarly, the Equal Justice Initiative states, “Police used billy clubs, whips, and tear gas to attack hundreds of civil rights activists beginning a march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery” (“Bloody Sunday” 2015). Although they understood police would do anything to stop them, The Equal Justice Initiative goes on to state, “Activists organized another march two days later” (“Bloody Sunday” 2015). The African American people displayed their moral courage by continuing to fight for their cause. Their selflessness in risking their lives for equality and the goal of the collective impacted the results they achieved, which is seen in a quote from the National Archive, a sector of the US Government. They write, “The Selma Marches would become a watershed moment that led to the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965” (National Archives 2020). Overall, African Americans’ decisions to act selflessly to promote the collective goals helped achieve equal voter rights for African Americans.

People of Other Races

Although most protesters were African American, the sacrifice and selflessness of other races were significant factors. White people tremendously impacted the civil rights movement, as they showed unity among races. However, they faced difficulties along their journey. J. Spencer Clark, Director of the Rural Education Center at Kanas State University, states, “White citizens were viewed as traitors by their southern communities, and many times distrusted by the Black communities they sought to assist” (Clark 2009). White people continued to protest despite hate from people of the same race, which exemplified their selflessness. Their moral courage was

seen by many as they joined the African American people in their fight. A specific example of this would be a man named James Reeb, who the Ku Klux Klan killed as a result of his decision to protest alongside African Americans. Writers at Learning for Justice, an organization that teaches people about civil rights issues, write about his selflessness. They state, “Reeb watched in horror as television news showed the attack by Alabama state troopers on civil rights marchers in Selma. The next day, when Martin Luther King Jr. sent out a nationwide plea for ministers of all races and religions to come to Selma, James Reeb knew he had to go” (“James Reeb” 2016). The article states that his wife asked him not to go, but he told her he had to, as he cared for others and felt he could no longer watch the suffering. Unfortunately, he ended up getting murdered by people of his race for his choices (“James Reeb” 2016). His decision to attend the protests despite the risks and requests of his wife portrays immense selflessness and moral courage. He put the goal of others before the dangers he would face, and his decision to do so helped spread the importance of unity to others in America. Later on in the article, the Learning for Justice Staff writes about how, after Reeb’s death, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Voting Rights Bill to Congress. He stated that the fight against segregation was no longer an issue in Selma, but for equality throughout the country (“James Reeb” 2016). The impact of the Jewish people on the civil rights movement is often not recognized. However, it was crucial to the success of the protests. Seth Berkman, a writer for Jewish news organizations, writes about the infamous march in Washington, D.C. He states, “Many American Jews were active participants and leaders in the march” (Berkman 2013). With regard to this is an article by the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford, stating, “The march was successful in pressuring the administration of John F. Kennedy to initiate a strong federal civil rights bill” (Stanford University 2023). A significant contributor to this march who acted

selflessly in his pursuit of equality was Rabbi Joachim Prinz. Allan Nadler, Professor of religious studies and director of Jewish Studies at Drew University, writes about Prinz, “In 1960, (Prinz) organized and led the picket line in front of Woolworth’s flagship Manhattan store on Fifth Avenue to protest the store’s segregated lunch counters in the South” (Nadler 2011). Later in the article, Nadler states, “Prinz was especially embittered by his fellow rabbis’ abandonment of the Civil Rights cause” (Nadler 2011). Prinz's Sacrifice to the cause, including resentment from those close to him, demonstrates his moral courage and selflessness. Prinz chose to ensure equality for others and put this above his acceptance in his community. To conclude, white people of different religions’ decisions to be selfless helped coerce the government into signing bills that ended segregation and impacted the lives of many today.

Counter-Argument

Many people agree and believe that those who marched for civil rights displayed moral courage. However, others may argue that the protests and demonstrations were illegal and people were killed or punished as a result of others’ decisions to be selfless. For start, people may argue that the courage displayed was bad courage. Jeremy Smith, Editor and Scientist for the Greater Good Magazine, which UC Berkeley publishes, defines bad courage as “bravery in pursuit of goals that result in the destruction of oneself or of other people” (Smith 2015). Although the movement eventually led to equal rights, many families were destroyed and suffered as a result of losing family members. Unfortunately, the officers who killed these people had no choice, as they were doing their jobs, but the protestors would not comply and, in some cases, even attacked law enforcement. Jeff Wallenfeldt, writer and manager of Geography and History at Encyclopedia Britannica, writes about the marches from Selma to Montgomery. He states, “George C. Wallace, Alabama’s segregationist governor, forbade the march and ordered state

troopers to take whatever means necessary to prevent it” (Wallenfeldt 2018). It is clear that the officers were just doing their jobs, the people protesting were breaking laws, and violence had to be used to stop the marches as it was a direct order from the Governor. As the last consideration, influential civil rights activists displayed how many marches were illegal, as they were all arrested many times like Dr. King. Christopher Klein, writer for companies such as National Geographic and the New York Times, writes about Dr. King: "The civil rights leader went to jail 29 times. He was arrested for acts of civil disobedience” (Klein 2019). Although many people look up to him for what they consider bravery, his actions at the time were illegal. This demonstrates how King’s request to tell people to protest ultimately cost people their lives because officers killed them for breaking the law and not complying with their requests. To close, the selflessness displayed by different people during the Civil Rights Movement resulted in the death of many and had detrimental impacts on others.

Conclusion

To conclude, the influential leaders of the civil rights movement, the people who marched despite the recommendations of others, and the white and Jewish people who protested all displayed selfless moral courage. They risked their own safety to fight for what they believed was morally and ethically correct. Although they struggled along the way, they achieved equality in the United States with the signings of the Civil Rights Act in 1954 and the Voter’s Rights Act in 1968. To finish, society’s ability to be selfless is what causes these changes that benefit society as a whole.

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