

“THE IMPORTANCE OF MORAL COURAGE IN POLICING”

**AN ADDRESS TO THE 7TH ACWAP CONFERENCE
TUESDAY 23 AUGUST 2011, HOBART
BY BARBARA ETTER APM
CEO, INTEGRITY COMMISSION OF TASMANIA**

(Paper developed from an Occasional Address to the University of Tasmania Faculty of Arts Graduation in Hobart on 14 December 2010).

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say, “I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along” ... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

Eleanor Roosevelt

INTRODUCTION

After nearly 30 years in policing, in various jurisdictions of Australia, and as the current CEO of the Integrity Commission here in Tasmania, I have a real passion for integrity and leadership. I know many of you in the audience today would have heard me state previously, in other fora or in articles, the importance of integrity in leadership.

You may also have heard me reflect on what was said at former Queensland Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod’s funeral in Adelaide in 2003. A close friend or relative addressed the crowd at the funeral, which I had the honour to attend. He outlined that he had asked Ray at some stage what were the three essential qualities for a Police Commissioner, to which Ray had responded, “Integrity, Integrity and Integrity!”. That has stuck with me over the years.

I also vividly remember, former Commissioner John Avery of the NSW Police, saying that you had to have “a bit of mongrel” in you to make you a good police officer. I have often thought of this and smiled at how true I believe the observation is especially when people often said to me “But you’re too nice to be a police officer!”.

I believe you do have to be able to give a bit back and react decisively when inappropriately pushed or challenged. I also like the saying by Eleanor Roosevelt to the effect that a woman is like a teabag, you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water!

Over time, as a woman in policing, and particularly with my more recent involvement in corruption prevention and fighting, I have really come to value the concept of moral, as opposed to, physical, courage.

Both Aristotle and Plato wrote about courage as a “virtue” (or a human quality necessary for people to live together).

As head of the newly formed Integrity Commission here in Tasmania, I find this virtue of moral courage of great importance as we work, to not only prevent misconduct and corruption, but actively seek out this invidious phenomenon and deal with it appropriately and as swiftly as we can.

In this respect, and working within the constraints of the legislation, we have taken on a proactive role in relation to a number of matters of significant public interest. Our active oversight of a recent fatal police shooting I believe is an example of this proactive approach.

Moral courage is an essential criterion, in particular, in striving for integrity and in corruption prevention and fighting, but it is also a critical quality for police officers too. The concept itself needs to be distinguished from courage.

A DEFINITION OF MORAL COURAGE

Moral courage is courage demonstrated through holding onto one’s values! Wikipedia defines “moral courage” as the courage to take action for moral reasons despite the risk of adverse consequences.

What makes someone morally courageous is that their behaviour is consistent with their beliefs – morally – no matter what! (Miller, p.14). Kidder states (2003):

What is moral courage? Courage itself consists of two elements. As General T. Sherman put it, courage is “a perfect sensibility of the measure of danger and a mental willingness to endure it”. To know the danger and run away is cowardice. To do something risky with no sense of its danger is foolhardiness. Courage lies in the balance. Moral courage adds a third element: the matter of principle. Simply put, it’s the courage to be moral – to take a stand on matters of integrity, to put conviction into action, to walk the talk that’s implied by those five core values. It’s the courage to be honest, responsible, respectful, fair, and compassionate.

Kidder (2005, p.3) states that moral courage lifts values from the theoretical to the practical and carries us beyond **ethical reasoning** into **principled action**.

I am firmly of the view that to be an effective leader in the fight for integrity, it is important that you have a “fire in your belly” about injustices and wrongdoing. You must

not be afraid to stick your head above the parapet to have a good look at what is going on, even if it means that you might cop a few deadly or damaging arrows in the process!

I am sure for those policewomen in the audience that policing has been a bit confrontational for you at times. Particularly as a woman in a very male dominated profession, it is very noticeable when you stick your hand up or raise your head above the parapet.

I too have had cause to speak up and challenge the prevailing view, entrenched attitudes and poor practice during my long policing career and it has often been at some personal cost. For instance, in my previous role as the Assistant Commissioner in charge of Corruption Prevention and Investigation in WA Police, I had cause on occasions to overturn the findings of the Internal Affairs Unit, or to recommend dismissal of a police officer in difficult circumstances, but in the public interest. The courage of your convictions certainly helps you to be resilient under such circumstances.

There are great intrinsic rewards from knowing that you have done the right thing. I often remind myself of the saying “the softest pillow that you can have at night is a clear conscience”.

We clearly need moral courage in today’s leadership, whether the form of leadership is political, organisational, community-based or personal.

For me, moral courage is what drives me to achieve my end values of “integrity, justice and humanity”. It is that little inner voice that irritates and agitates, particularly in difficult or uncertain times, that tells you what is the right thing to do! At other times, it is the voice that shouts at you “you can’t let that happen!”

Moral courage is more than that prick of conscience that makes you aware of a values clash, or something even worse. Moral courage also includes the willingness and motivation to actually do something about the situation! Moral intelligence or moral reasoning are actually quite different to the strength that it takes to action your objections or voice your concerns.

As the famous quote attributed to Edmund Burke says:

The only thing necessary for evil to triumph in the world is that good men do nothing.

John F. Kennedy also spoke of moral courage when he stated:

Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change.

We have all seen some great examples of moral courage. Think, for a moment, about Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, Jr. Or the most recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, dissident Liu Xiaobo, or Burma's former opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has even spoken out about the need for democracy after her release from imprisonment for 15 years. These are great examples of people displaying moral courage. They act like magnets to like-minded people and inspire people to reflect on their own moral health and capacity to act, when required.

However, as Kidder stresses (2003):

The point must come through to the reader that moral courage is not merely a once-in-a-lifetime action that a few great people undertake. It's an ongoing condition in all kinds of lives.

He goes on to characterise moral courage as involving several key attributes such as a willingness to (2003):

- risk rejection;
- bear personal sacrifice;
- exercise tenacity and persistence with no assurance of success;
- refuse to compromise on a comfortable way out; and
- understand the importance of ethics in a world that often doesn't.

Moral courage is also important in policy development and decision-making on a daily basis. Too many organisations, including at times policing, demand conformity, compliance and mindlessness. Dissent is a necessary tool if we are to explore integrity and the most appropriate ethical choices. It is too easy to fall into organisational or even community "group think". It is very important for someone to have the courage to challenge the status quo, when values are at stake.

We need to dare to be different and rock the metaphorical boat. We need to act in accordance with our minds and hearts. We should not be afraid to bring a bit of empathy and emotional intelligence into our decision-making. We shouldn't just rely on the hard facts and figures. We know how statistics and balance sheets can be misleading!

Kidder (2005, p.8) talks about three elements of moral courage: **danger**, **endurance** and **principles**. On the other hand, Rielle Miller from the Ethics Resource Center in Arlington, Virginia (2005), talks about five fundamental components of moral courage:

- Presence and recognition of a moral situation;
- Moral choice;
- Behaviour;
- Individuality; and
- Fear.

Fear is an interesting component. In physical courage, the fear is one of physical harm or death, while in moral courage, the fear is said to be one of social disapproval or loss of moral integrity or authenticity.

Facing the fear is crucial to moral courage. Miller argues that the morally courageous individual does have fear; he or she is not fearless. The courageous individual must face fear and overcome it.

Mark Twain also said:

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear.

Behaviour is also important in Miller's definition because it separates moral courage from moral reasoning.

Interestingly, Confucius said:

To see what is right and not to do it is a want of courage.

Individuality is another interesting factor. Miller states that there is something about moral courage that it seems lessened if everyone is doing it. In fact, its very nature suggests that if everyone were to do the same act of moral courage, it would be doubtful if that act was morally courageous at all.

Miller states:

Acts of moral courage must be done as an individual, like a leader who does not care if she ever obtains any followers. The morally courageous individual is on display for all to see, to judge. She alone must face the consequences of her success or failure.

Miller states that when she first began her research on moral courage (which led to her publication in 2005), she expected that she would be greeted with numerous titles on the subject. But she found that there was not one book titled moral courage "in all the land"! (although Rushworth Kidder released his book called moral courage shortly thereafter).

INHIBITORS TO MORAL COURAGE

It is also important to be aware to the circumstances and conditions that might discourage moral courage. Kidder outlines the crucial inhibitors to moral courage as including (2005, p.211):

- Timidity;
- Tepid ethics;
- Over-reflection;

- Bystander apathy;
- Groupthink; and
- Cultural differences.

MORAL COURAGE WITHIN POLICING

I think there are plenty of opportunities within policing for you to be challenged in an ethical or moral sense and to build capacity in this regard.

I saw some great moral courage and leadership during my time in WA:

- The Mallard matter, where Andrew Mallard spent 12 years in gaol for a murder he clearly did not commit, and the work of investigative journalist Colleen Egan, lawyer Malcolm McCusker QC and politician, John Quigley, in taking on police and the legal system.
- The work of Estelle Blackburn in bringing about the quashing of the murder conviction of John Button, against all odds and at huge personal expense.

I can't say that we have seen a lot of moral courage amongst the key players in the *News of the World* scandal in the UK to date. We must wait to see as the matter unfolds what led to the resignations of both the Chief Constable and an Assistant Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police.

Whilst the WA and UK examples are somewhat grand, we also need to value those lesser profile people who are brave enough to speak up about wrongdoings and to "blow the whistle". I am not aware of too many high profile "whistleblowers" in policing. Simon Illingworth, formerly of Victoria Police, who wrote the book *You Filthy Rat* (2006), certainly would be one of the most high profile whistleblowers in more recent years.

In relation to whistleblowing, policewomen are often in a position to break from the crowd, step forward and demonstrate moral courage, particularly from an integrity perspective. I saw this on several occasions in serious assault allegations during my time in WA - women who were brave enough when confronted by significant peer pressure to speak up and tell the truth, despite the obvious consequences. I had every admiration for those women.

Interestingly, three of the world's most famous whistleblowers were in fact women – Cynthia Cooper from WorldCom, Coleen Rowley from the FBI and Sherron Watkins from Enron (Lacayo & Ripley 2002). The three women were *Time* Persons of the Year in 2002. The *Time* article stated that "they took huge professional and personal risks to blow the whistle ... and in so doing helped remind us what American courage and American values are all about".

On the issue of gender, it is interesting to note that the concept of courage may well reflect a fundamental gender bias. Kidder points out that clichés of courage are driven so deeply into the language that they show up in terms like *manly* (meaning courageous) and *sissy* (from sister and meaning “a coward”).

So, why is moral courage important in policing? I would argue that it is absolutely essential in policing because of the powers conferred on police officers and the trust that the community places in them. Having said that, many Royal Commissions and inquiries have demonstrated the potential and opportunities for misconduct and the power of the police organisational culture. It is therefore essential that individuals retain the strength of their own personal convictions and values and have the courage to speak up or take action, when required.

You might also wonder how you can demonstrate moral courage in policing. Opportunities would arise in a number of ways, for example when you:

- give evidence or a statement about what happened in a problematic incident;
- challenge a colleague about unethical behaviour or resist pressure from a colleague to break the rules;
- raise a sensitive issue in a meeting that others would rather ignore; or
- report a colleague to a supervisor for unethical or improper behaviour such as sexual harassment or bullying.

We all need to engender a culture that values honesty, openness and moral courage. There is still too strong a culture here in Australia where you don't “dob in your mate” and you shun the person who was brave enough to speak out. Clearly there is a real tension between truth and loyalty within policing (referred to as a dilemma paradigm by Kidder) due to the very powerful, and sometimes very necessary, camaraderie within policing.

Policing also needs a culture in which managers are prepared to take action, when required, and not turn a “blind eye” to incidents.

The newly released fictional novel “The Brotherhood” which is based within Tasmania Police and written by a former Tasmanian policewoman, Yvette Erskine, clearly demonstrates how powerful and influential the police organisational culture can be.

Most importantly, given the nature of this conference, policewomen need to have the moral courage to be true to themselves and bring their special qualities and skills to policing.

SOME USEFUL TESTS IN DETERMINING WHETHER TO ACT

Kidder (2005, p.239) actually provides some useful tests to use in determining whether you are actually acting appropriately in relation to moral courage.

These tests are based on a perception of risk and benefit, an awareness of a potentially self-righteous response, and the effect on innocent parties.

The **risk-benefit test** asks whether the risk incurred is proportionate to the benefit received. Will this bold stand make a difference? Will my actions be commensurate to the situation? These questions focus largely on consequences. One needs to properly assess the potential dangers and the rewards.

The **self-righteousness test** asks whether I'm really just getting on my high horse about a deeply held personal belief. Could it be that I am wrong? Am I daring, or am I just stubborn? The line between proper self-regard and intellectual or moral vanity is often blurred. The role of self-confidence and trust in one's own abilities can provide a significant impulse towards morally courageous action.

The **innocent-parties test** asks who else will be affected by my actions. What impact will my bold stand have on those around me?

We need to check our thinking to be sure that our action is proportionate, that we are not being driven by selfish emotion and that nobody around us is getting hurt unnecessarily. These are interesting tests to consider if one is thinking about "blowing the whistle" and probably explain why so few do, when you think about the likely impact on career and family.

CONCLUSION

Moral courage is a much needed modern virtue. **It is the difference between talking about ethics and acting ethically.** I do hope that I have managed to enhance your understanding of just how critical moral courage is within policing and encouraged you to be aware of, and display, moral courage more often in the workplace and in your personal lives.

As women in policing, it is so important to believe in yourself and be true to yourself. Policing needs the different skills and perspectives that women can bring.

We need more moral courage in today's leadership, whether the form of leadership be political, organisational, community-based or personal. We need to become clearly intolerant of misconduct, corruption and even that "nod and wink" or "mates rates" culture.

While education is an essential tool in opening and challenging the mind and empowering people to do the right thing, it is said that moral virtues are developed through habit.

I leave you with a quote from Miller (2005 p.26):

To develop moral courage, moral courage must be habituated and practiced.
Moral courage is one of those things that can only be properly attained by doing it.
To get courage, be courageous.

REFERENCES

Illingworth, S. (2006) *You Filthy Rat* Fontaine Press

Lacayo, R. & Ripley. A. (2002) "Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Rowley and Sherron Watkins"
at <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/personoftheyear/2002/poyintro.html>
retrieved 7 February 2007

Miller, R. (2005) "Moral Courage: Definition and Development" Ethics Resource Center
March

Kidder, Rushworth M. (2003) Letter from the President Institute for Global Ethics July

Kidder, Rushworth M. (2005) *Moral Courage* Harper