

Chapter 6

Essays from the Courage and Moral Choice Project

Kim West, Amanda Lane and Madison Libby

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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SPECIAL ISSUE: A *NARRATIVE WORKS* MONOGRAPH

**LISTENING TO
STORIES OF COURAGE
AND
MORAL CHOICE**

**CREATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT INCLUSIVE CARE
IN OUR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

*EDITED BY
ADELE BARUCH, ROBERT ATKINSON, AND HOLLY KHIEL*

**Chapter 6
Essays from the Courage and Moral Choice Project**

Kim West, Amanda Lane, and Madison Libby¹

In this chapter, participants from the Courage and Moral Choice Project share personal essays about their experiences with the project. Teachers describe the ways in which they sought to connect the stories of moral courage with a deepened awareness of the needs and challenges in the school and wider community. One teacher described the stories as “reminders” that courage and goodness exist in the world, a world often filled with stories of despair. Another teacher, who was once described as an “at risk” student herself, also noted that the stories provide a perspective of hope. One student described how meaningful it was for her to hear stories about the many Danish citizens to shelter and transport their neighbors during the Nazi occupation. She notes, “I think more people need to be like that.”

Keywords: reminders, perspective of hope, risk

¹ Names of schools and student and teacher participants have been changed throughout in order to protect confidentiality.

Kim West (Teacher)

Before I became a part of the Courage and Moral Choice Project (CMCP), I was already doing some work with stories of courage and moral choice in my sophomore classes. As part of a personal narrative unit, we read the book *The Freedom Writers Diary* (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 2009). The book is a collection of actual diary entries by a group of high school students from Long Beach, California, written throughout their four years with their English teacher, Erin Gruwell. In the book we see the students become inspired by reading books such as Anne Frank's (1944/1993) *The Diary of a Young Girl* and *Zlata's Diary* (Filipović, 1993/2006). We see the students struggle to show courage in their own lives as they think about these other teenagers and their stories. And, in turn, the readers of their diary entries learn from them. In the introduction to *The Freedom Writers Diary*, Zlata Filipović writes:

Unfortunately, I have realized that we cannot completely erase all the evil from the world, but we can change the way we deal with it, we can rise above it and stay strong and true to ourselves. And most important, we can inspire others—this is what makes us human beings, this is what can make us immortal. I hope this book will inspire people to write their own diaries, stories, poems, books, to fight prejudice and to choose to deal with what happens to them in a positive way, to learn new lessons and share them with other people. (pp. xiv–xv)

It was in that spirit that I approached the personal narrative unit, with a focus on opening ourselves up to the power of stories of active caring and courageous moral choices and on sharing our own powerful stories. When I was invited to meet with this group of students, I realized quickly how well this work would fit with and help me focus my own work. I wanted to extend beyond just learning about story structures and how they inform our reading and our writing, to why we tell the stories or listen to the stories. I wanted to connect to our work with school culture and community.

We started with the film *The Danish Solution* (Cantor & Kajerilff, 2005), and we were able to bring in as a guest speaker Dr. Leo Goldberger, who, as a boy, escaped to Sweden in a fishing boat during the Nazi roundup of the Jews in Denmark. The students were interested in the story, and having Dr. Goldberger there made it more than just a story.

Here was an accomplished scholar who had published at least five books, and none of it would have been possible if people hadn't stepped up and taken tremendous risks to save him and the other Jews in their country. After watching the documentary and then another film, *A Day in October* (Madsen, 1991), and meeting Dr. Goldberger, the students wrote essays about how they were affected by the story. The essays illustrate some of the important outcomes that I think can come from these stories.

The first is simply realizing that these stories of courage and moral choice even exist. We live in a world where the news is so saturated with negativity that sometimes students have trouble believing that there are examples of altruism out there. One student wrote,

A few weeks back I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Leo Goldberger at school where he shared his story of the Holocaust with myself and my English class. During this time he told us of both altruism and hatred. This still stands to be the only encounter that I know of in the Holocaust that is altruistic.

That says so much about how much we fall into focusing entirely on atrocities, and so seldom focus on the stories of those who show moral strength in the face of those atrocities. And that is sad, because those are the stories that really have something important to teach us. This week, one of my students picked up the newspaper, scanned through the front section, and said, "The world is really messed up." We owe it to our students—and to ourselves—to bring in these reminders that it isn't all like that. We need to remember that there is compassion, and helping, and courage in this "messed up" world, so we don't give up on being helping, courageous, and compassionate ourselves. The same student whose essay I quoted earlier said,

So far I have shared this story with two people, and each of them were shocked to hear a Holocaust story without most of the horror and hatred towards the Jews. . . . This is the only 'success' story that I have heard that has to do with this tragic event, but hopefully there are more just like it.

That is so powerful. The story meant enough that she shared it. And I love that she said she has hope that there are more stories like it.

And that leads to the next positive outcome that I have seen from the sharing of these stories. Once a student has that recognition that there

is altruism in our world and the hope to find it somewhere, he or she is more likely to begin to notice it when it happens. One student wrote:

I heard stories of altruism in many different ways and from different people. I first heard it when it was our new vocabulary word for the day, which is the belief in or practice of disinterested and selfless concern for the wellbeing of others, and from the movies we watched, which were *The Danish Solution* and *A Day in October*. . . . I have heard similar stories about altruism, like when I came home one day my mom was telling me how my neighbors did such an amazing thing for one of her family members who has arrived to America. She didn't know that much English so everywhere she went my neighbor would be right there by her side helping her. My neighbor wasn't really good in speaking English, but she didn't want to let her sister down and so she did this to help her sister out. She doesn't want her to feel uncomfortable about being in America, because it is scary coming to a place not knowing what's going on and what to say when you don't know English and new in a country.

There is a quotation from Mr. Rogers (2002) that has become quite famous now: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping'" (p. 107). His mother trained him to look for the people who give hope, and I think by sharing stories of courage and moral choice, we can do the same for our students. As evident in my student's response, once we begin to look for the helpers, once we have a label for it—altruism—we will begin to see it. It is easy to lose those stories in our despair as we lament how "messed up" the world has become. The CMCP aims to bring those stories out of the darkness and into the light.

The last huge step that we all hope will be possible when we experience these stories is that we find courage in ourselves when the time comes that we need it. One student wrote that after watching *The Danish Solution* and hearing Dr. Goldberger's story, she had "been trying to ask others to not use a certain word if it is offensive towards others." This might not be the large courageous act we think of writing stories about, but it is no small thing to stand up for others, especially if you are standing up to friends.

In the years since we started working with the CMCP, we have shared stories in many ways. We hosted guest speakers Michele and Ulrick Jean-Pierre; Michele talked about her work to rejuvenate New Orleans' music culture after Hurricane Katrina, and Ulrick shared his artwork, which depicts Haiti's history. One of our art teachers worked with his students as they created visual artwork that paid tribute to the stories of people in their lives who had shown active compassion. They were able to share their works at the Life Stories Conference at the University of Southern Maine, and a larger group of students talked about the ways the CMCP had affected them. This event also gave us another chance to encourage students to be a part of the chain of sharing stories of active caring and courageous moral choices.

At this conference, many of the students attended a performance of *A Finished Heart* by Elliott Cherry (2009). His performance, which combines storytelling, poetry, and music, takes the audience through his journey with his husband Chris, from Chris's cancer diagnosis to his death. The students were profoundly moved by *A Finished Heart*, and the CMCP allowed us to bring Elliott Cherry to perform his work in our community. We met to talk about the themes of the performance before and after attending—exploring the students' thoughts, questions, and experiences surrounding the death of loved ones. I went into these discussions fearing that they would be awkward and uncomfortable for the students, but Elliott Cherry's raw and beautiful honesty in telling his story led the students to open up in amazing ways. Several students told me how much they appreciated being able to talk about all of their emotions and confusion about death, because it is something we so rarely talk honestly and openly about. Students also said that they were glad they had experienced Elliott's story, because now when they inevitably someday experience the death of a loved one, they felt like they have a model of how to work through that experience with compassion and that his sharing of the full range of his emotions might make them feel less alone in the experience.

I know that my life has been enriched by the stories that I have heard and the discussions I have had with students during my years as a part of the CMCP. It is exciting to enter these stories with a group of students, because we all bring our own views and experiences to these stories and we don't really know what discoveries will come from our interaction with them. When I tried to come up with a way to sum up the important realizations that I hope students can gain from exposure to these stories, I couldn't really find anything better than this conclusion

one of my students reached in her essay about *The Danish Solution* and our visit from Dr. Goldberger: “It is important to me that no matter what happens in my lifetime I must always work hard to get back to a more positive state of mind and accept that what has happened can help me help others get through something tragic as well.”

Amanda Lane (Teacher)

When I first heard about the CMCP, I was immediately drawn to the idea. I teach at the Forest School, which addresses the needs of students who are at risk for dropping out of school. These are the students deemed “unteachable” by most, yet our school has had much success in graduating these students for the past 32 years. As a former student in the program, I have had firsthand experience with altruism and how it has encouraged me to grow from being a 16-year-old homeless youth to a college-educated teacher. Many people showed unselfish concern for me along the way, and their example enabled me to give back to others. Both receiving and giving kindness has been instrumental in my becoming the person I am today. I often tell my students that if they want to break out of poverty, abuse, or whatever is in the way of their achieving their dreams, they must first surround themselves with people who possess the qualities they would like to have. I believe that teaching my students about courage and moral choice can profoundly change their lives.

Stories of such courage are relevant in that they provide a perspective of hope in the lives of students who have had negative life experiences. As at-risk youth, each student has his or her own story that needs to be told. Hearing success stories, whether from a Holocaust survivor, someone raised in poverty, or someone otherwise disadvantaged, may help them see that it is possible to overcome their own struggles. As they learn to recognize altruism in their own school or community, it may foster a change in their focus from hopeless to hopeful.

Much of the research I have read on effective strategies for teaching students who are at risk says that the school curriculum should be relevant to their lives. There are many stories of tragedy that my students relate to, and most have researched the Holocaust at one point during their school careers. I began this unit by letting my students teach me about the Holocaust. They told me gruesome stories about death camps and how millions of people died. Then I introduced them to a story of courage that happened in Denmark during the Holocaust. My students

were astounded at how the Danish community came together to protect their Jewish neighbors. We watched *The Danish Solution* (Cantor & Kajerilff, 2005) and *A Day in October* (Madsen, 1991), and took notes when we saw altruism. Many of my students were in attendance at the public library when Dr. Leo Goldberger spoke, as well as at the high school library on the next day. They were impressed by his genuineness and how they could relate to him as he retold the story of his youth. As a follow-up activity, each student was asked to write an essay that recapped the event, what was meaningful to them, and how it may have influenced them. I am pleased that many of the students' observations have been included in this book.

Madison Libby (Student)

When I first heard the story of the Danish Jews, I was in awe. I never really learned much about the Holocaust, and I definitely didn't realize how many Jewish people escaped. Two weeks ago in my 10th-grade English class, we first saw *The Danish Solution*, a documentary on what happened in Denmark. It was more informational, and presented facts about what happened. Then we watched *A Day in October*, which is a story of a family going through a series of events during this time. Personally, I liked the documentary more. It made you feel like it was real, with all the people who survived it telling their stories. I also heard Dr. Leo Goldberger, who was a survivor, speak. He and his family escaped from Denmark to Sweden. I believe he said he was 13, and me being 15 can't imagine something that drastic happening. I wouldn't know how to handle it. It was so amazing hearing these stories. I wish that I knew someone who went through the Holocaust and survived, because I would have a million questions. I think it is a time period that needs to be more emphasized.

The Nazis slowly moved into Denmark, first without causing any commotion. But everyone knew what they were there for. The word got out that the Germans would be gathering all the Jews and taking them to concentration camps. Nobody wanted that. Who would? Luckily they heard about this a few days in advance so they could get out of Denmark as quickly as possible, and stay with family or friends elsewhere. So they thought. But they found out that the Germans would search their families' homes also. Therefore, many of the Danish Jews found Sweden as their only escape. The Danish people put their own lives in jeopardy to help the Jews across the water to Sweden. They called fishermen and asked them

if they could help get the Jews across before the Nazis took them. Many of them said they would help. Slowly, they took people across in the largest possible groups, hiding them in the bottom of the boat. They packed them in like sardines and covered them with blankets. They made them cram away from the opening to get to the bottom so that if they were to get stopped by the Germans, they wouldn't see any of them by just glancing down in the hole. Eventually, they made it to Sweden, and they felt safe at last. They could only wish that their loved ones got away safely as well. Can you imagine having to wonder if your family is safe, or if they are dead?

I think the importance of this story is that people helped each other. People helped others get through hard times, even when it was putting their own lives at risk. But that didn't matter because others were in danger. Sometimes, in today's world, I think that people need to be more like that. They need to understand that others need help through hard times as well. The greatest value of all about the story of the Danish Jews is that they put others before themselves. That doesn't happen much anymore.

Every day I see people pushing people out of the way here at school and talking to others like they mean nothing. Learning about the story of the Danish Jews and how they were so thankful that others helped them get away, I wish we could be more like that. Whether you get something out of it or not, you should still help out. And you never know, maybe someone someday will remember what you did for them and help you when you need it later on down the road. And then it will turn around and you will get something out of it. No matter who you are, when you help someone and they are thankful for it, you walk away with a smile on your face. It is a great feeling.

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Kim West and Amanda Lane are pseudonyms for teachers who participated in the Courage and Moral Choice Project.

Madison Libby is a pseudonym for a student who participated in the Courage and Moral Choice Project.