I’m often asked: “How did you become interested in the study of moral courage?” My answer is straightforward: I want to learn how to become courageous myself and, as an educator, help cultivate this powerful virtue in students and others. I’m encouraged by the many apparently common, ordinary people who are remarkable for their ability to act purposefully in order to uphold or create something of moral and social worth. They seem prepared to act, even in high-risk situations that engender realistic fear. Depending on the nature of the challenge, their courageous response flows from a resolve to step up, speak out or stand firm.

During the past 15 years, I have had the privilege of following the lives and actions of many South Africans who have courageously fought the unjust laws of apartheid. They are young and old, men and women, well-to-do and unemployed, people classified there as white, coloured or black. Their common denominator: a “conviction that they feel they should do what they could to see justice done.”

My most recent visit to South Africa last winter, made possible through a Greenwall Foundation grant, had as its expressed purpose to record, through 31 in-depth interviews, stories of moral courage — courage motivated by the desire to serve the good of the whole community.

Those interviewed were at first hesitant, almost embarrassed, to be characterized as exemplars of moral courage. However, when I told them that their stories may help others make some of the same choices, most became far less reticent. I discovered five common themes that arose time and again. I call these the “preparations” for morally courageous action. They are the reasons people gave for getting involved in the struggle against apartheid in the first place and, more importantly, why they persevered through harrowing experiences and, sometimes, over many years.

**PREPARATIONS FOR COURAGEOUS ACTION**

1. **Name the Seriousness of the Situation**

Almost everyone who resisted apartheid emphasized how they had to consciously acknowledge apartheid as such a serious threat to the human community that it called for serious personal action. Often a particular incident startled them into acknowledgment: “Suddenly it crashed in on me, the realization that I was allowing…” “After the police left, I saw my mother’s face.”

Some had learned from parents or religious leaders that resistance was necessary. A white, middle-aged newspaper reporter said, “We lived in a wealthy white suburb,
but my dad was a doctor at Baragwanath (the hospital for Black Africans in Soweto), and an activist. From the time I was a toddler, our family prayers focused on all who suffered under the weight of apartheid.” A Zulu farmer recalled, “We lived in a one-room shack with no heat or hot water, but my dad and uncle told us kids daily that what the white government was doing hurt everyone, even the white people, and had to be resisted.”

Did their recognition of apartheid injustices grow out of an especially keen sensitivity to morality that could not be expected of the rest of us? Perhaps. But, from those interviewed, I concluded that this acknowledgment of wrongdoing could have been made by anyone. After all, the extremely cruel situations directly associated with apartheid laws, policies and practices were visible to anyone who chose to look.

2. Believe that Good will Prevail over Wrongdoing

A second theme was the deep conviction that the apartheid system would and could not sustain itself. In short, good would prevail. At the same time, none of those interviewed were sure they would personally see apartheid’s demise. Their conduct was more akin to “hoping faith,” the definition of moral courage by Catholic theologian Karl Rahner.

Many interviewees based their certainty (and the strength that came from it) on religious beliefs. One “Cape coloured” woman exclaimed, in broken English, “Lady, we are all children of God, and in that way we are equal — black, white, green or any other color!” Later that day, I met with the son of a powerful Afrikaans supporter of apartheid. He led me to a far corner of his veranda where the sea crashed far below. The long afternoon sun was beginning to disappear behind Table Mountain. We stood silent for some time before he, an outspoken opponent of apartheid, said, “Just look at the beauty I grew up with. You tell me how a good and just God could condone what has come to pass in this beautiful country. Apartheid is not the work of God. It is evil. It can’t last.”

Their certainty was complemented by another insight, namely that good would prevail because the perpetrators were mere mortals like themselves, not all-powerful. Strength for their lowest hours

This gripping photo by former photojournalist Sam Nzima (pronounced Z-ma) captured the attention of the world in June 1976. It shows a young boy, bleeding from the mouth, being carried by a fellow student after apartheid police had opened fire on unarmed schoolchildren in Soweto. Running alongside crying is the young boy’s sister. (See box, page 22.)
arose from recognition that the perpetrators seemed so unconvinced of the ideas they were defending, or were so ill organized or scared themselves, that apartheid could not survive. Many, but not all, described this realization as a kind of grace reserved for such a crisis moment. Almost everyone identified the deep, shared humanity of the perpetrators as a prompt to persist.

Gille de Vlieg, for instance, had been among the upper-middle class of white South Africa. Her journey of resistance took shape initially through her involvement in the Black Sash, an organization of wealthy and influential women who protested and lobbied for an end to apartheid — often targeting family members, friends or acquaintances in Parliament or other government positions.

I studied her beautiful face, her worldly sophistication. It was difficult to imagine her in a cramped, dirt-floor cell of a makeshift political prison. She admitted that facing imprisonment had been a possibility she had dreaded, and when she was arrested (held beyond the usual two weeks, up to six, then eight), she fought despair. “However,” she said, “I became aware that I was a source of great embarrassment to the prison guards and others who had to watch over me. The guards were so apologetic and clumsy that eventually I became less and less afraid, and more and more bold in my resolve that I would fight apartheid to the finish.”

Others laid claim to finding strength in a long history of questioning authority, or in the belief that every human encounter is an opportunity to touch another in a

The Horror of Apartheid

Perhaps no image captures the brutality and horror of apartheid rule like this heart-wrenching photo by former photojournalist Sam Nzima.

The photo shows 12-year-old Hector Petersen being carried by a schoolmate, Mbuyisa Makhubu, after being shot by apartheid police on June 16, 1976. Petersen’s distraught sister, Antoinette, is running alongside.

Schoolchildren in the South African township of Soweto had been marching that day in protest against the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in their segregated schools.

“Their march was a peaceful one from the beginning,” Nzima later told South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. “They were carrying placards on which were written: ‘We are not educated but certificated,’ ‘Afrikaans must be abolished,’ ‘We are being fed by the crumbs of education.’”

Nzima told the Commission that the police gave the students three minutes to disperse. When the students refused to leave, one of the officers “pulled out his firearm, and he shot directly at the students. Now all hell broke loose. All these policemen were shooting at the students randomly.”

The resulting carnage touched off months of violence. Hundreds were killed. Nzima was harassed by police, quit his job at the newspaper and went into hiding. Petersen, who was fatally wounded, was the first casualty in the uprising — which has been described as one of the defining moments in South Africa’s recent history.

Nzima’s picture was reprinted in newspapers and magazines around the world and became a symbol of South Africa’s apartheid oppression. Paul Velasco, the current picture editor at the Sowetan, South Africa’s largest daily newspaper, said the picture remains one of “the single most important images to emerge from the South African struggle.”
mutually beneficial way. In short, the common denominator was their feeling of renewed strength at a time when they were faced with what they had feared most. A governing component of their steadfastness had been the ability to look their perpetrator in the eye and see another human being as themselves, but one who was misguided and vulnerable.

3. Nurture and be Nurtured by Essential Sources of Support (“Coms”)

“Comrade” was a term I had encountered only in movies and books about militant revolutionaries. So when I heard it used over and over again (usually shortened to “com”), I finally asked what it meant. This term had come to signify all people — family, friends, allies, fellow resisters — who shared a common goal: bringing an end to apartheid injustices.

Martin (a fictitious name), who spent 12 years on the famous Robben Island unjustly convicted of treason, said: “During my years as a leader for human rights and my trial for treason, during floggings and other torture, when I was in solitary confinement and deeply depressed, on the boat trip to ‘The Island,’ I found myself saying, ‘Pray for me, father!’ All those years I could hear my priest’s promise to pray for me. He was a ‘com.’”

Gille said: “(My husband and I) would go sailing most weekends. But the more I became involved in the movement, the more I became an embarrassment to him and our friends in the sailing world. Tembisa (a black township near Jan Smuts Airport north of Johannesburg) had become a very important place for me to be. They accepted me. Invited me into their homes. I went to their public meetings and I was going to their funerals; people came to know me all over that township. They didn’t know where I lived or anything, but we were ‘coms’ because we were all part of the struggle.”

Three academics (two physicians and a Nobel laureate human anatomist) persevered for 10 years to bring to accountability their fellow physicians who had lied about the cause of death of a young activist, Stephen Biko. One of the physicians, Dr. Trefor Jenkins, said they were able to stay the course through threats on their lives, ostracism by colleagues, harassment and eventually a lawsuit by their own professional organization, by relying on “each other, of course, family, friends at home and around the world, even people who anonymously sent funds for our defense when our own had been exhausted.”

Mentors were especially praised. One old pastor told the story of a 14-year-old black teen-ager who had been tortured with electric shocks and later spoke to his church congregation — describing what it felt like, how he faked more suffering than he was actually experiencing to deter further torture, how he remembered his mother and other
people who loved him. “I kept seeing the face of that young man in my parish and I thought, ‘If he survived this, I can too.’ And I did,” the pastor said.

4. Be Prepared for the Cause You Embrace to Embrace You

It may not be surprising that most people I interviewed had no idea at the outset how much their lives would be altered when they first acknowledged the seriousness of the situation. Resistance to apartheid was a centripetal force that drew them deeper and deeper into the cause until, for many, the cause was at the very center of their identity.

Bernard Spong went to South Africa from England to become a missionary in 1961. He was young, in his 30s. While he was aware that apartheid was inconsistent with his understanding of the Christian story, he did not know how it would affect his work directly. Bernard was soon identified as an able leader and became a general secretary of the region. But his success as a missionary society leader was running abreast with a growing awareness “that I had to go from being needed to being accepted. People I came to serve as ‘them’ had to accept me, they had to say ‘you are one of us.’ Little did I know that this meant I also had to let them help define who I was and what I should do. Nonetheless, we worked at it together and I learned that they wanted justice. To help bring about justice, I had to have my feet in grassroots.”

“At times I was scared stiff,” Spong continued. “But I didn’t dare to pack it up and leave even though by now I had decided to cut my ties with the missionary society. Already I was getting deeply into it. I know that now because I remember asking myself, ‘Where would I go (if I were not here)?’”

At the time, there had been growing tension about the conditions of the Soweto schools. On June 16, 1976, thousands of schoolchildren in Soweto marched in protest against the government’s insistence that the Afrikaans language be used as the medium of instruction in schools. Bernard, who had helped build a community center in Zola, deep in Soweto (“like Harlem in the U.S. or the East End in London”), remembers the day well.

“We set up a community center where young people could meet, study, et cetera,” he said. “This day I was with a local (black) pastor and five or six young people who had come there instead of going to school. Someone came in hollering, ‘Police are combing the area. If they find students, they will be detained (arrested).’ The local pastor exclaimed, ‘We’d better go!’ We gathered up the students into my old car along with the pastor. Everyone was very frightened because there were police with machine guns everywhere. On the way to the gate I thought, ‘What am I doing? I could simply drive out of here!’ When we came to the gate of Soweto, they assumed I was taking these kids to be arrested because I was a white man. They simply lifted the gate and saluted me. I saluted back. I don’t think my friends saw it, but I was shaking so hard I could hardly hold the wheel.”

Later, outside the schools, the police opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators. The carnage touched off months of violence, and hundreds were killed in the resulting riots. The day after the initial uprising, Bernard went back into Soweto to be with the families of the students who had been killed in the shooting, but this time he had to stow back in the trunk of a black South African’s car. “I smelled gas fumes. I smelled smoke. Every time the car was stopped by police I didn’t know if they would discover me in the trunk. But this time
there was no thought, ‘I could just drive out of here.’ Something had broken, a barrier. You know, it’s incredible how these things happen. This time, I couldn’t do anything different.”

Bernard and I sat on the old couch in their living room, each drinking tea. As he spoke, my eyes wandered to the African paintings and, in a dominant place, a photo of the carnage following the Soweto uprising. By the time he had finished, we had talked through most of this hot December afternoon about his more than 30 years in South Africa. Finally we lapsed into a long silence. When he spoke again he said, “All I know is that I had a vision, and, in ways I never imagined, it became an inner part of me.”

5. Make Use of Ritual and Symbol

Spong’s mention of “vision” was echoed by many others. One Indian nurse who had helped desegregate a local hospital said, “You hold a vision before you and then each day you work according to that, wherever you are and in whatever way you can.”

I was deeply moved that their vision allowed them to be creative in honoring the cause to which they were committed when usual avenues of resistance were cut off.

Some examples: An anthropology book by a world-famous South African includes 30 blank pages as a protest to text that was censured because it was deemed too critical of apartheid. An artist in prison used “everything but food and sometimes food” that came into her cell to create mobiles and other pieces of art, reminding herself that “beauty can be made from garbage.” A man named Molefe, who as a prisoner had no human contact for several weeks, tamed a mouse as a friend “to remind me that I’m not alone.” In churches, synagogues, and other places of worship the Amnesty International candle (a candle encased in barbed wire) burned prominently. Chairs at conferences, in classrooms or at board meeting tables were left empty to acknowledge members in exile, under house arrest or imprisoned. Around the world, apartheid resisters in exile set up apartheid-free zones in universities, churches, neighborhoods and other public places.

These rituals and symbols are powerful reminders that the anti-apartheid crusade for justice went beyond a particular place and time; rather it reached high into the essence of human community.

As the poet Wilferd A. Peterson prayed, “...inspire me to send my roots deep into the soil of life’s enduring values that I may grow toward the stars of my greater destiny.”

This article ends where it began. The powerful stories of my South African interviewees are witness of a seed of moral courage in us all. The fears and hesitation we may experience in our life challenges were expressed by virtually all the people whose lives I would now count as exemplary. They were able to step up, speak out or stand firm and successfully link arms against injustice.

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