

City University of New York: John Jay College of Criminal Justice

CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay Contest

Courage Wears a Hijab:

How Courage (Yǒng, 义) Empowers Justice (Yì, 勇)

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## Courage Wears a Hijab: How Courage (Yǒng, 义) Empowers Justice (Yì, 勇)

Whenever I felt anxious or uncertain, my grandmother would always say, “El Haraka baraka! (الحركة بركة!),” meaning “Movement is a blessing!” This phrase became famous during Egyptian protests against police brutality, when ordinary people showed immense courage to uphold their values and religion, even in the face of imprisonment or torture. At the time, I felt it was incredibly foolish to outwardly protest in a country that could simply imprison and torture you, especially after my aunt’s cousin was detained when returning home from college simply for being seen near protestors. Merriam-Webster defines courage as the “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.” In Confucian philosophy, courage, or *yǒng* (勇), is the virtue that compels one to act once one has recognized what is right (*yì*, 义) (Cua). Yet having a sense of what is right means little without the courage to act on it. I realized this phenomenon personally during the pandemic, when I was relieved to be one of many *hijabi* students trying to blend in behind closed cameras and cartoon avatars while virtually attending high school. Over time in college, I saw that many Muslim women face similar fears, hesitating to wear their hijab in public or professional settings.

The need for courage became even more apparent as I followed news about the United States’ support for Israel amid the conflict in Palestine. As campuses across the U.S. erupted in protest, I watched professors and students get arrested for demanding a ceasefire, reminding me that the courage to stand for justice often carries real consequences. In 2024, more than 2,000 students and faculty were arrested at U.S. universities during pro-Palestinian protests, revealing the real risks faced by those who act on their moral convictions (Associated Press). Standing up to injustice is needed now more than ever, requiring the courage to be oneself even in the face of

fear, stereotypes, or societal pressures. Through these experiences, I have learned that courage is what enables individuals to act on justice and remain true to their principles.

My grandmother's saying has always reminded me that courage is not just about grand gestures; it is also about everyday actions. I first learned what quiet courage meant after 9/11, when being Muslim or Southeast Asian came with unspoken suspicion. In grammar school, classmates often assumed I was an English as a Second Language (ESL) student because of how I looked, even though I was among the top of my class. Research by the Pew Research Center shows that since 9/11, Muslim and South or Southeast Asian students have often been stereotyped as outsiders, creating lasting barriers to belonging. Such discrimination continues to shape how Asian Americans are perceived in schools, workplaces, and communities today. Many of my ESL peers became isolated because students avoided speaking to them in English, fearing association or simply not knowing how to engage. I felt that being in a regular, more diverse class allowed me to bridge both worlds—helping my friends practice English while showing others that Muslim and Asian students are capable, curious, and fully American. That experience taught me early on that courage is not always loud—it sometimes means showing up, connecting, and quietly resisting prejudice. Kohlberg's stages of moral development helped me understand my own journey toward courage. Early on, my hesitation to show up fully and speak up reflected a pre-conventional focus on avoiding punishment or embarrassment. Over time, I became more aware of societal expectations and norms, reflecting conventional reasoning. Yet it is in moments when I act despite fear—advocating for fairness, pursuing challenging research, or breaking stereotypes as a hijabi Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)—that I embody post-conventional morality, guided by universal principles of justice and ethical action to fight for human rights.

Wearing a hijab as a Muslim woman in professional and academic spaces often draws stares, judgments, or stereotypes. Whether I am in a classroom, a lab, or on an EMT shift, I am reminded that courage means maintaining my identity despite curious looks, comments, or assumptions that I am less assertive or knowledgeable. Even subtle moments like these reveal how bias still lingers in spaces built on objectivity and merit. Yet facing them has strengthened my self-confidence, refined my moral compass, and deepened my sense of purpose. I now strive not only to embody courage for myself but also to inspire my peers—especially those pursuing careers in healthcare or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)—to ask questions, engage with mentors, and confidently claim their place in environments where they may feel underrepresented.

Pursuing molecular biology at John Jay College, a school primarily focused on forensic science and computer science, required courage to navigate unfamiliar territory. I encountered challenging labs, dense coursework, and high expectations. Yet, I persevered, learning to ask questions during office hours to deepen my understanding of chemistry so I could explain it clearly to myself and others.

My experience in the CUNY Research Scholars Program in BMCC tested this perseverance even further. The project focused on epigenetics, a field I found both fascinating and daunting, especially since I lacked a formal biotechnology background and had a general science background instead. My mentor preferred students with more prior lab experience, but I still chose to take on the challenge anyway. I understood this research would be hard work, and I might struggle more than others, but courage meant showing up, asking questions, and embracing the steep learning curve. Each experiment required me to persist even when I felt out of place. Rather than seeing my gaps as limitations, I treated them as opportunities to grow and

learn, further fueling my desire to do well in coursework. Through this process, I gained not only technical skills but also a deeper appreciation for the courage it takes to step into new, uncertain spaces in science.

Another critical lesson I learned at John Jay is that rules are not always just, and advocating for fairness requires courage. Unlike community college, professors at a four-year university may not always be accommodating, and even they can make mistakes in their syllabus or course policies. Having the courage to point out these issues helps ensure fairness, benefiting both professors and peers. Acting justly requires preparation: gathering evidence, documenting work, and collecting supporting materials such as photos, data, notes, and emails. Sometimes acting justly involves collaborating with classmates to request extra credit, deadline extensions, or policy clarifications. The act of documenting in science and research is an act of love and justice, making life easier for future scientists and lawyers who rely on this paperwork to help people. Through these experiences, I realized that courage, combined with the wisdom of unity and careful preparation, empowers us to act for justice and uphold integrity in academic spaces.

Courage also enables advocacy and leadership in STEM and beyond. Speaking up during group projects, presenting ideas, and asserting my understanding in settings where few people share my identity all require moral and mental strength. Each small action, whether asking a question, volunteering in the lab, or sharing my perspective, contributes to building momentum toward justice, inclusion, and representation.

Courage is both a personal and communal force. It allows us to face fear, maintain integrity, and act on justice. For me, courage manifests in everyday choices: wearing a hijab, persisting in STEM despite challenges, asking questions to deepen my knowledge, and

mentoring peers to find their voices. These acts of courage, when wisely planned, empower justice, creating ripples of moral and social impact in academic, professional, and personal spheres. As astronaut Ronald E. McNair once said, “True courage comes in enduring, persevering, preparing, and believing in one’s self.” This quote encapsulates my journey and reminds me that courage is a lifelong practice, one that enables us to stand firmly for what is right and inspire others to do the same. To me, courage is the bridge between dreams and reality—the blessing that keeps us moving forward, just as my grandmother said, “Movement is a blessing.”

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