



FINDING AWE IN EVERYDAY MORAL BEAUTY

"All high beauty has a moral element in it."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

OVERVIEW

Students respond to a short, written prompt on everyday acts of kindness and courage (also known as moral beauty) that they have witnessed or undertaken themselves. Then, students partake in a sharing circle or gallery walk where they share their anecdotes and witness others' anecdotes of moral beauty, experience an "awe" moment, and reflect on how this exposure to other's everyday moral beauty left them feeling more hopeful, connected, and inspired to be prosocial.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build a positive classroom climate
- To cultivate a sense of belonging, connection, and hope among students
- To encourage prosocial behavior in the classroom

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Access to the following videos:
 - Courage – [Courage Collective's "What does courage mean to you?"](#)
 - Kindness – [What is Kindness? Teens Respond](#)
- Projector and screen, or printouts of the [sheet](#) titled "Prompts for Journal Reflection on Moral Beauty"
- Journal and writing instruments
- Optional: Chart paper, markers, and glue

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Reflect and respond to a short, written prompt on acts of kindness and/or courage that they have witnessed or undertaken themselves
- Share and witness others' stories in a sharing circle or gallery walk, and experience an "awe" moment
- Notice how their feelings and motivations alter in response to hearing others' stories of moral beauty

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Kindness
- Awe
- Curiosity

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self Awareness
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to recall a recent act of kindness or courage you engaged in or witnessed someone else doing.
- What surprised you in the situation? Did you feel a sense of [awe](#)—that positive emotion that makes us feel like we're connected to something larger than ourselves? What other feelings and bodily sensations did you feel, either at the time or right now when recalling it?
- Did it leave you with a greater sense of belonging or connectedness to yourself or others? Did it motivate you to act in a more prosocial way towards others?

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Scientists [define moral beauty](#) as those acts of kindness, charity, self-sacrifice, courage, and the like that elicit an emotional response in the person watching them. Dacher Keltner, the leading expert in the [science of awe](#), has discovered that “moral beauty brings people awe around the world.”
- This practice invites students to share and deeply listen to each other’s stories of kindness and courage that they either engaged in or witnessed. They may be left feeling a gentle sense of awe and hope, enhanced connectedness, or belonging by the end of the class.
- In addition to the supports that are recommended for this practice, take a moment before facilitating the session to check in with yourself on your own emotional well-being, and how prepared you feel to hold space for students to share their stories.
- Note that this session requires students to be somewhat vulnerable in their reflection and sharing. Consider whether your students are in the right mind-space for this today. What norms can you set with them to ensure they feel safe and supported through this exercise? You might do an emotion check-in with students at the start of the session, and if they seem ready, consider setting norms that reinforce:
 - (a) non-judgment for themselves and their peers
 - (b) being courageous in sharing their stories
 - (c) curiously and attentively listening to others’ stories

PART 1: GETTING STARTED (10 MINUTES)

- Introduce the session by telling students:
 - *Today, we are going to think about one of the two words: “courage” and “kindness,” and recall how they have recently shown up in our lives or actions.*
 - *Have we received kindness or witnessed it recently? Have we acted courageously in a situation?*
 - *Think about these questions, and pick any ONE of the two words: “courage” or “kindness” to focus on for today’s session.*

NOTE: In case students do not have individual access to internet or devices to watch videos, please select one word between “courage” and “kindness” that you want all students to focus on for this session.
- Next, ask students to select and watch the video that corresponds to their selected word:
 - Courage – [Courage Collective’s “What does courage mean to you?”](#)
 - Kindness – [What is Kindness? Teens Respond](#)
- Give students a minute to reflect on what their selected word means to them in their lives. Then, have them share their reflections with a partner for another minute.

PART 2: SILENT REFLECTION AND JOURNAL WRITING (12 MINUTES)

- Tell students that they will be journaling on a set of [four prompts](#) related to the word that was picked for the class. Show them the [prompts](#) on the projector screen.
- To model the journaling exercise, share your responses to the sheet with students. A short example response for the prompt on courage could look like: “One part of my identity that I love is that I’m a woman. People sometimes assume that I’m weak and can’t get things done just because I am a woman. I

want people to know that I take care of myself and others in my family, and lead a soccer team in my neighborhood. This is important for me to say because growing up I used to be shy and scared to speak up for myself, and I have slowly and steadily practiced speaking up for myself and taking leadership roles.”

- Ask students to now respond to the four prompts related to the word that they picked in their notebooks, and journal for 10 minutes. Ask them to think of anecdotes that are both mildly vulnerable for them to share as well as within their level of comfort to share with their peers, as they will be sharing these with the entire class shortly. Encourage them to write in detail, and not hold back.

PART 3: SHARING (20 MINUTES)

Based on the level of comfort and ease you’re sensing in the room, choose to either facilitate a [sharing circle](#) or ask students to post their journal responses on the wall for a gallery walk.

Prior to having students share:

- Invite them to take a few calming breaths so that they are able to silently, meaningfully, and deeply engage with others’ stories and share their own.
- Additionally, ask students to notice what thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations come up for them as they hear/ read others’ stories.

PART 4: DEBRIEF AND CLOSURE (18 MINUTES)

- Invite students to share with a partner one or two stories that particularly moved them and discuss the following questions:
 - What surprised you in those stories? What feelings and bodily sensations came up for you? Did you feel a sense of awe—that feeling you get when you feel connected to something larger than yourself?
 - Did it leave you with a greater sense of belonging or connectedness to yourself or others involved in those situations? If yes, for whom and why?
 - What did you discover about each other that you didn’t know before?
 - Did witnessing or hearing the stories reinforce any of your values or what is important to you? If yes, in what way?
 - Did witnessing or hearing the stories motivate you in any way? If so, how?
- Take the last eight minutes to invite students to share with the class some of their responses to the questions.
- Thank students for their courageous vulnerability in sharing their reflections and for their non-judgmental and deep engagement with others’ reflections.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- To what degree were students left with a sense of awe, hope, or greater belonging and connectedness with themselves and each other?
- What worked well about the way you facilitated the session? What would you change next time?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a series of [studies](#), researchers asked mainly white college students to think of a time when they witnessed someone “doing something good, honorable, or charitable for someone else. They found that this recall exercise led to an experience of elevation, or the feeling that “one has been uplifted,” enhancing participants’ desire to emulate the virtue they had recalled. Furthermore, participants reported wanting to become a better person and having greater motivation to do good for others.

The researchers also found that college students who were asked to notice and make a written record of everyday acts of elevation, such as witnessing others doing something good for someone else, were in turn more motivated to be kind to others.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Witnessing moral beauty elicits awe and elevation, both of which enhance prosociality, connectedness, inspiration, and the motivation to be morally better. Indeed, when students [demonstrate kindness](#) towards others, they themselves experience greater positive affect, life satisfaction, happiness, and peer acceptance. These outcomes not only help foster a desirable classroom climate, but also [improve](#) academic success.