



INSPIRING VIRTUE WITH MORAL BEAUTY

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern.”

-Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

OVERVIEW

Students identify and reflect on the experience and display of moral beauty, and consider the importance of moral beauty in their lives.

LEVELS

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To encourage prosocial behavior in students
- To help students identify what virtues they value
- At the start of the school year to build a positive classroom community

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤30 minutes

MATERIALS

- Writing Materials
- Moral Beauty [Video](#) (3:05)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will:

- Define moral beauty and identify someone who displays moral beauty or an act of moral beauty that they have witnessed
- Reflect on the virtues that they find important and consider how they might enact such virtues
- Consider the value of experiencing 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

- Awe
- Morality
- Kindness
- Compassion

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- We experience *moral beauty* when we witness others' acts of charity, kindness, love, compassion, forgiveness, courage, self-sacrifice, or any other strong display of virtue that moves and uplifts us.
- Take a moment to reflect on an act of moral beauty that you have witnessed or on someone whom you believe displays moral beauty. How would you describe this display of moral beauty? What about the situation or this person moves you? What thoughts or feelings come to mind when you reflect on this situation or this person's actions or life story? How might you reflect the same kind of moral beauty in your own life?

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

- Start the lesson by asking students whether they have heard of the concept of moral beauty. If they have, ask them to share what they know about it, and if they haven't, ask them to share their thoughts about what they think it is.
- Explain to students that [moral beauty](#) refers to those acts of charity, kindness, love, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, resilience, or any other strong display of virtue that move and uplift us.

WATCHING AND DEBRIEFING THE VIDEO

- Have students watch the following [video](#) (3:05) that includes several examples of moral beauty. Invite them to notice their emotional reaction to the video as they watch it.
- After showing the video ask students the following questions:
 - *What emotions or thoughts came to mind when watching this video?*
 - *Why do you think you experienced those emotions or thoughts?*
- Note: Witnessing moral beauty often makes us feel more hopeful, empathic, unselfish, and forgiving, and a deeper sense of connection with our community, with nature, and with all of humanity. If students' answers to the questions above reflect any of these responses, you might point out that this is a natural reaction to seeing moral beauty in action.

WRITING ABOUT MORAL BEAUTY

- Ask students to write a short paragraph or essay either about an act of moral beauty that they witnessed or about someone whom they believe displays moral beauty. Provide students some time to do some research if needed.
- The following questions may be used to guide their writing:
 - Describe the act of moral beauty that you witnessed. Who was involved? What happened? How did it make you feel? OR Who is the person who displays moral beauty and why do you think they do so?
 - What virtues become salient in your mind when you think about this experience or person (e.g., justice, kindness, courage, self-sacrifice)?
 - What moves you about this experience or person?
 - How might you reflect the same kind of moral beauty in your own life?

CLOSURE

- Invite students to share their stories with a partner, small group, or whole class.
- Close the activity with by asking students the following questions:
 - *What insight did you gain from this activity?*
 - *Why might witnessing moral beauty be important?*

SOURCE

[Dacher Keltner, Ph.D.](#), University of California, Berkeley

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- What kinds of feelings did students report when reflecting on moral beauty (e.g., [awe](#), a sense of connection, elevation, joy, pride, inspiration)?
- Did you notice any changes in the ways in which students interacted with each other either during or after the lesson (e.g., were they more attuned to each other, more willing to collaborate, more helpful)?
- Are students more aware of acts of moral beauty in their lives as a result of this practice?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a series of [studies](#), researchers used multiple methods to induce elevation—the uplifting feeling we experience when witnessing moral beauty—including recalling a personal experience of moral beauty, videos, and letter-writing. Among college students (70-80% white), the experience of moral beauty was related to an increased desire to engage in prosocial behavior or to connect with others (e.g., doing something good for another person or meeting new people).

Another [study](#) with 77 female college students in the UK found that when participants viewed an elevation-inducing video, they spent more time helping the experimenter with an additional, unrelated task compared to participants who simply watched a nature video.

A [review](#) of research on moral beauty and elevation found that moral beauty, which can elicit awe and elevation, is related to greater prosocial behavior, charitable donations, a desire to be a better mentor for others, a desire to be an organ donor, increased cooperation, and an overall desire to be a better person.

Furthermore, a 2-week online [study](#) with 481 mainly Dutch adolescents (ages 10-18) found that when adolescents reported being moved by stories they found in the media, they also reported giving more emotional support to family and friends, and helping others, including strangers.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

With so much [negative news coverage](#), it's easy for students to feel hopeless or disconnected from others. Moral beauty can help counter this feeling by grounding students in the goodness of humanity. Experiencing moral beauty not only triggers positive feelings, but it inspires greater compassion and generosity.

What's even more beautiful is that the desire to help, elicited by moral beauty, transcends traditional group boundaries. In fact, some research has found that experiencing moral beauty can increase people's desire to [donate to charities](#) benefiting other social groups, decrease [beliefs in hierarchy](#), increase [feelings of connection](#) with those from different racial/ethnic groups, and generally [improve attitudes towards outgroup members](#).

Thus, exposing children to moral beauty in schools could be key to fostering safe and welcoming classroom environments in which children can flourish and be inspired to make our world a better place.

TERMS OF USE

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