



Leaders of Equality Utah celebrate with Gov. Spencer Cox after historic bill-signing

Case Study: A miracle of Moral Courage in Utah

By Troy Williams,
Certified Moral Courage Project Mentor

THE CHALLENGE

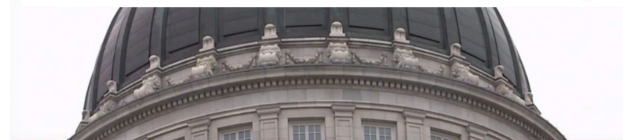
I'm the Executive Director of Equality Utah, my state's premier advocacy group for LGBTQ+ people. With several members of my team, I recently became a certified Moral Courage Mentor. Our challenge: Could we apply the skills of Moral Courage to get a fair hearing in Utah's legislature? Specifically, could we reverse a bill that would allow "conversion talk therapy" to be imposed on queer Utahns?

THE CONTEXT

Equality Utah wanted conversion talk therapy outlawed once and for all in Utah. Conversion talk therapy is a counseling practice that presumes to turn queer folks into heterosexuals. It's discriminatory, it's traumatizing and, by the way, it doesn't work.

LGBTQ advocates blast new conversion therapy bill in Utah

by Daniel Woodruff, KUTV | Wed, January 18th 2023, 1:22 PM EST



Headline from Salt Lake City's KUTV News

In 2020, we stopped conversion therapy in Utah through a rule change adopted by the body that regulates psychologists state-wide. But by 2023, we needed to see that change enshrined *in law*. That's because state legislatures throughout America are introducing anti-LGBTQ+ bills—400 such bills as I write this. Utah lawmakers joined the spree.

On top of that national trend was this local reality: In any given year, the vast majority of Utah's legislators are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (known as Mormons).

Historically, the powerful LDS Church has opposed LGBTQ+ rights. Thanks in part to Supreme Court decisions, Church leaders softened their stances a few years back. Still, Utah lawmakers were now swept up in America's newest culture wars.



Me at the legislature in a low moment

Equality Utah was about discover how far the skills of Moral Courage would take us.

MORAL COURAGE IN ACTION

In summer 2022, Representative Brady Brammer, a conservative Utah legislator, began proceedings to make conversion talk therapy legal again. Because of activist stunts that I'd launched in the past, he (and several other lawmakers) saw Equality Utah as bad-faith actors.

Rep. Brammer even told me that "LGBTQ people are some the most angry and mean I have ever met." That's exactly how I felt about his tribe.

What he didn't know is that I, along with my team, had evolved since 2020. We were weeks away from becoming certified Moral Courage Mentors.

CONGRATULATIONS CERTIFIED MENTORS!



Olivia



Stacey



Troy



Victor



Mindy



Zach



Jessica

As part of our training, we'd learned that Moral Courage doesn't merely mean speaking truth to power. It's more profound than that. Moral Courage means speaking truth to the power of my ego—the primitive and defensive region of my brain—so I can communicate my position in a way that motivates the other side to hear more from me.

Three of my EU colleagues - Olivia, Stacey, and Mindy - are certified Moral Courage Mentors with me

The Moral Courage Project taught me and my team members something that civil right activists learned in the 1950s and 60s: to “educate our emotions.” In effect, to calm our own perception of immediate threat so that we could see our immediate situation more clearly.

Here's the rub. Seeing the situation more clearly implied seeing Rep. Brammer more clearly, too. Instead of viewing him as a stand-in for every Republican or every Mormon who'd ever tried to condemn me, I needed to get curious about him as an *individual*.

What if he was more than a label? What if he was multidimensional, like me?

Then I needed to get curious about myself. Rather than waste precious energy fixating on how much he offended me, what if I spent that energy offending my own ego-brain by speaking truth to its power—the power it wields to make me feel more defensive than I actually need to feel?

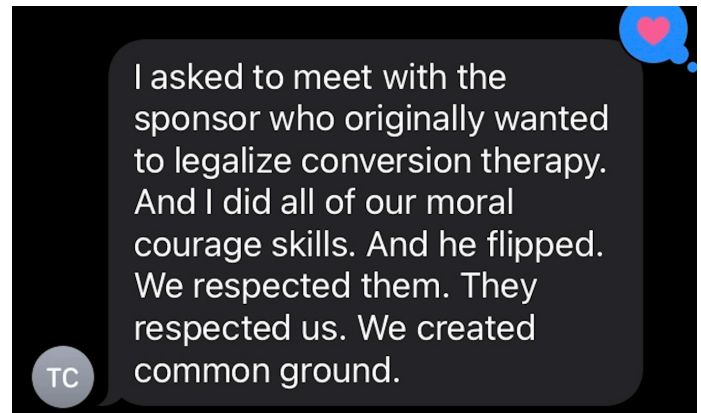
In practical terms, I needed to get curious about my team's next moves. Moral Courage had equipped us to “be like water”—a slice of strategic wisdom borrowed from Bruce Lee, the martial arts master. How might I, like water, flow around my obstacles if they prove immovable?

Whether as a boulder or as a brother, Brady Brammer had every right to exist alongside me in the river of life. I couldn't wish him away. Nor could I command him to disappear. So what could I do to make peace with his presence and still make waves, as water does?

Having internalized the skills of Moral Courage, this is what Equality Utah decided to do.

Our campaign recruited a respected Republican lobbyist who'd attest to our integrity. After he cracked the door open, I reached out to Rep. Brammer's allies and asked if we could all meet just to get to know each other better. To their credit, they agreed.

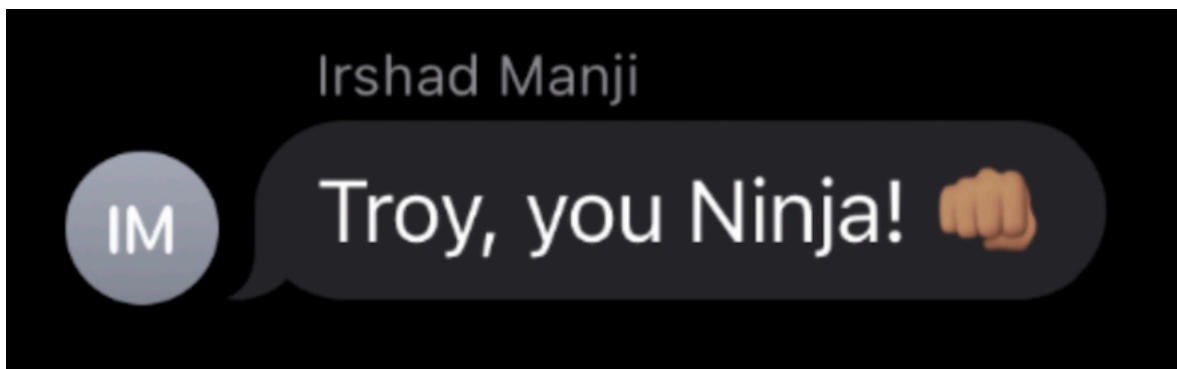
A text I sent to Irshad and Allison at the Moral Courage Project



Before we entered the meeting room, my team and I reminded ourselves to be like water—to hear, not fear, our Other's views. We deliberately walked in without our dukes up. And when we showed our sincere desire to understand the conservatives' concerns, they lowered their defenses to try understanding ours.

During the first day of discussions, I heard Rep. Brammer coo about a book he was reading—a history of prohibition. He only mentioned it as an informal aside. That evening, I downloaded Kindle version. Intrigued by the first few pages, I texted Rep. Brammer to tell him that I got why he found the book compelling. Turns out, I did, too!

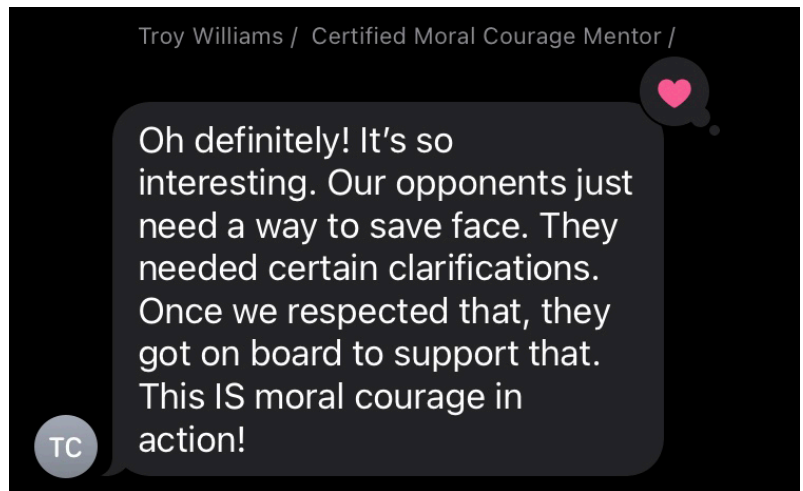
Almost instantly, his tone toward me shifted. It's as if I'd made a new friend. All because I applied something that Moral Courage founder Irshad Manji taught: Do more than listen to your Other. Learn from them. That proves you're paying attention.



Irshad's response to my text

Over the next couple of days, the conservatives and the queers delved deeper into dialogue. It became obvious that the two camps weren't as far apart as our earlier, hotter, emotions would've had us believe. The smog of ego pollution steadily lifted. We all saw the situation more clearly.

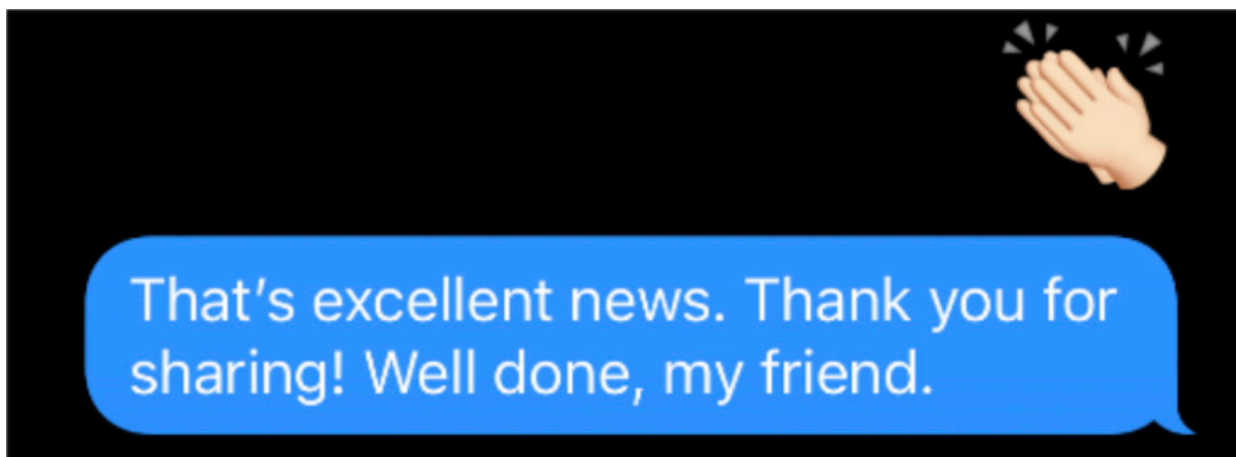
What I mean is, Rep. Brammer and company simply wanted clarifications. For example, when working with clients, what could therapists say that wouldn't be considered conversion therapy? Could a therapist talk about a client's body image issues? What about identity development? Or recurring mental health challenges?



My next text to Irshad and Allison

We happily provided the clarity they sought. And if a "hell yes" or "hard no" couldn't be given, then our legal team found meaningful places to compromise on language (which can be fraught, since a tactically placed semi-colon might change or unravel a protection).

Make no mistake, though, our attorneys conceded nothing that would've sold out the dignity of our community. They knew what provisions were essential to maintain. So even as we gave in good faith to the other side, we preserved our position on conversion therapy.



Allison's encouragement

This is a foundational principle of Moral Courage: that you can stand your ground at the same time as you create common ground.

Standing our ground is about what we believe. Creating common ground is about how we express what we believe. Again, I heard Irshad in my head: “When we leave our Other feeling heard (not agreed with, but heard), enough trust can develop to keep going.”



More real-time news for Irshad and Allison

THE RESULT

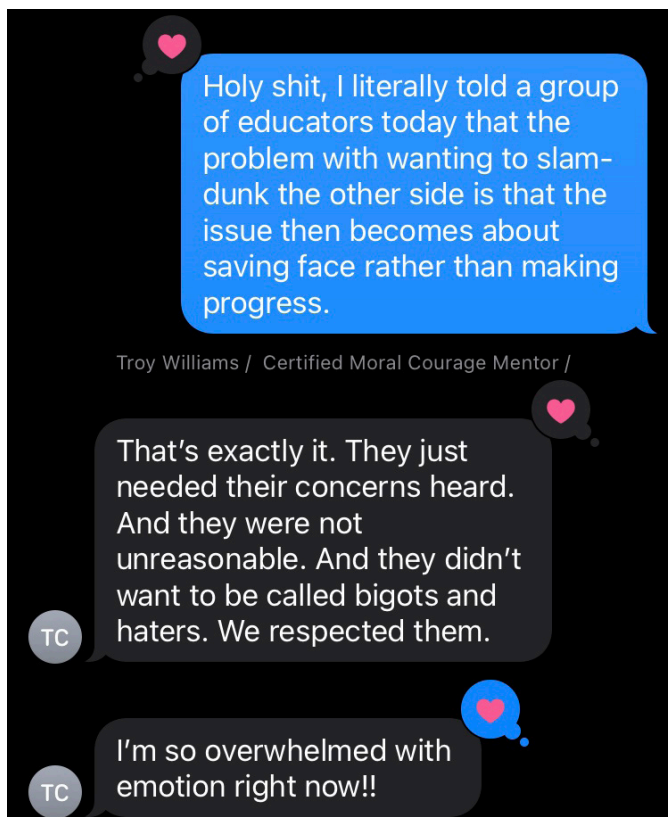
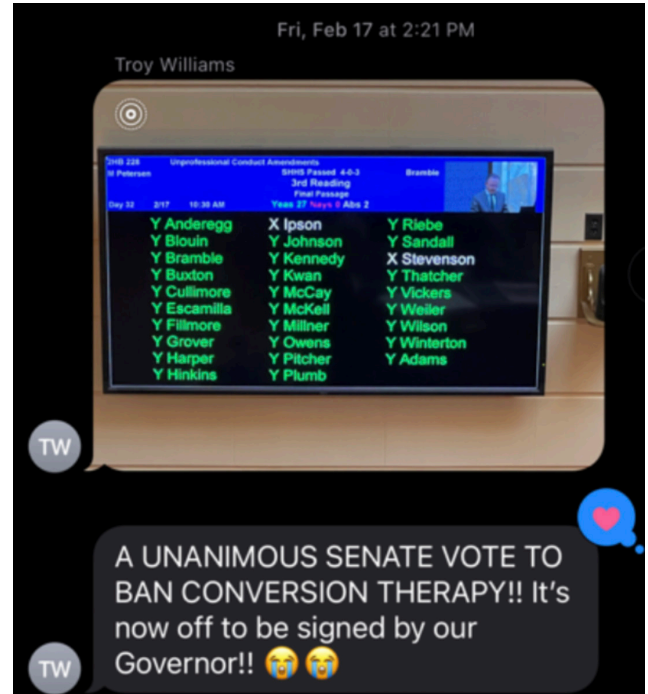
Rep. Brammer amended the bill so that it did, in fact, outlaw conversion talk therapy. Our willingness to work together won the votes of both Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature. And the ban passed in both legislative chambers— [unanimously](#).

No other U.S. state had ever passed a pro-LGBTQ+ bill with the full support of each chamber. Ruby-red Utah just did.

Of course, it was time to party. Thing is, devout Mormons don't drink coffee or alcohol. So Equality Utah brought our unlikely allies multiple cases of Coke Zero. The cans popped, the carbon fizzed, and the imbibing proceeded.

Days later, Governor Spencer Cox proclaimed how happy he was to sign the ban into law.

Unanimous passage in the House and Senate.
Unbelievable.

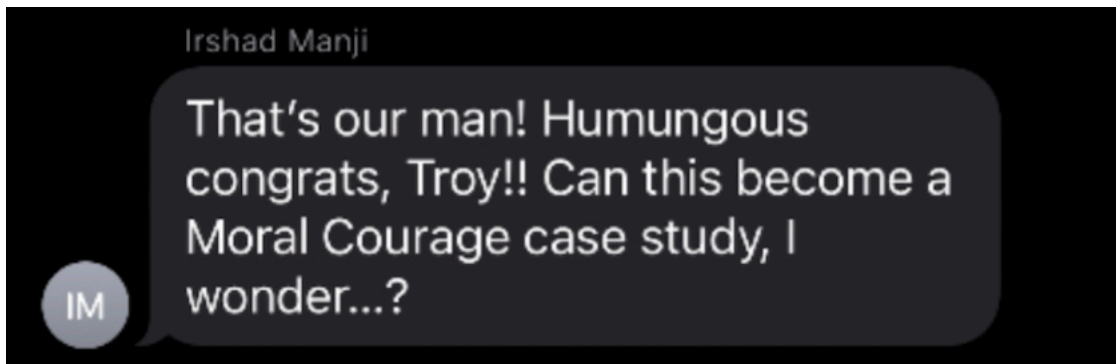


Irshad mentored me until the very end of this process

Maybe most astonishing, though, was a public declaration made by the staunchly conservative president of the Senate. He said that when Equality Utah defends the right of religious people to have their views, it makes him want to defend the right of LGBTQ+ people to have ours.

In our culture of winner-take-all politics, daring to be counter-cultural is crucial for the work ahead.

After the signing ceremony, Mindy Young, our Managing Director, called Moral Courage a "game-changer." [Listen for yourself](#). But more importantly, listen to your Other. Weirdly, they can help get what you want.



Irshad's bright idea (no sarcasm!)

If you'd like to teach these skills to make your company, school, or organization healthier, then become a certified Moral Courage Mentor. Learn more at moralcourage.org.

