

Second Place Winner
Division II – 10-12th Grades
A World Changed in Ten Seconds

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Every minute of every day, decisions are made that will shape the rest of one's future. Some are moral. Others are not. Some have an even lasting impact. Moral courage is choosing to make these most difficult judgments, in the most strenuous of times, by following the values set true to yourself. It is about overcoming the unavoidable reality of the destructive capabilities of mankind and uncovering the morality, rectitude, and virtue within life. Moral courage is illustrated in the untold stories and unknown names of ordinary people who disregard the status quo, set aside their personal safety, and accept the unjust consequences of action taken in pursuit of what is innately ethical. The story of "Tank Man" portrays moral courage in the highest manner. We don't know his name, we don't know his past, but we know that his decision and the image of what he did is permanently ingrained into the minds of all freedom fighters.

In the spring of 1989 in Beijing, China, one million students were camped down in Tiananmen Square protesting the corruption, lack of freedoms and absence of transparency in the Chinese government, a movement that had been going on for nearly six weeks. On June 4th, this nonviolent demonstration was met with the bloodiest massacre in modern political history. The 27th Army opened fire into the assembly -- sometimes firing into the air and sometimes firing straight into the crowds -- troops bayoneted the injured, and tanks rolled over human chains (Kristof). The number of casualties was never recorded by the government, but according to Sir Alan Donald, the British ambassador to China at the time, as many as 11,000 were killed (Sommerlad). The dead were bulldozed out of sight and the blood was washed down the city drains. The event was never to be remembered by the government again.

One picture has circulated the world since: a photograph of a lonesome man, with shopping bags in each hand, derailing the path of four tanks on their way into the square the next morning. Although the massacre had already taken place, this man stood in front of the tanks, completely still in the face of fear. All of the bystanders were sure that he would have been killed like so many before him, but the tanks stopped. They waited in the middle of the road, one man in a white shirt and dark pants versus four fully loaded, automatic, military grade tanks. The massacre had already ended, yet he was still set on making his point to the world. He did not budge until someone dragged him out of the street (Sommerlad). No one knows what happened to him after this, he might have been killed or he might have escaped to Taiwan, but his actions will impact the world to come. It was evident this decision was made at that moment; he had not planned on effectively changing the entire world that day. His picture became the exemplar for pacifist resistance. The choice he made showed his morality, rectitude, and virtue, in the most difficult of times. In the heat of the moment, many would have chosen to run, to cry, or to scream, but he chose to fight. He chose, in less than ten seconds, to show the world ethics.

His actions that day inspire me and so many others to live every ten seconds like the world is counting on it. Every decision we make has so many unknown consequences, that our lives essentially do count on all the things we say and all the actions we take. Thinking about how this man could stand alone in front of a column of tanks with grocery bags still in his hands, the day after this massacre, makes me think that each small choice that I make could somehow have the biggest impact. His story has inspired me to fight every battle I can that will positively change the lives of others, including interning with the Colorado governor's election, volunteering with an organization for homeless families, and building a better school community through student council. He has shown me that every word I say and every movement I make can have catastrophic consequences in my life, and in the lives of other. Someday, I hope to explain to the rest of the world that each decision made with hopes of the public contentment in mind will push our world into a better light. Although I certainly have not demonstrated the same extent of bravery as this man did, I strive to show moral courage in smaller ways on a daily basis. He has shown what ten seconds can truly signify: an eternity of grace. "Tank Man" has inspired me to strive to be a better person every second of the day because each one counts.

A decision made in less than ten seconds could ruin a man's world; a sentence said could tear a life apart; an action taken could destroy a livelihood. Or these could create peace, they could explain purity, they could build a community. Taking ten seconds to make the right, ethical, humane decision is what shows moral courage. "Tank Man" has demonstrated strength to the world, and from every day forward, I will strive to display the same kind of compassion and fortitude in each decision I make.

Works Cited

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