

COMX 493: The Expression of Human Strengths and Virtues

Thursdays, 5-7:50pm

LA 204

CRN: 34560

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This course is about the ways in which people express strengths of character and virtue. Philosophers and social scientists have identified a number of virtues that are central to living “a good life,” including courage, humanity, transcendence, temperance, justice, and wisdom. We will begin by examining the nature of these virtues and the character strengths that help fuel them.

After completing a preparatory course, we will travel to four central European cities (Budapest, Krakow, Prague, and Vienna) on a 12-day guided excursion to see the ways in which people in one of the most historically, politically, and culturally complex places in the world have practiced (or failed to practice) these strengths and virtues. In each city are dramatic sites of strength and weakness, vice and virtue, and triumph and tragedy. By exploring and experiencing these locations, we will hopefully come closer knowing what that the good life looks like, and creating one for ourselves and others in the world.

The course is a 5-credit class, with all credits enrolled in the spring semester of 2019. Two credit hours will be spent in the spring semester becoming familiar with the course content, and three credit hours will be spent on the 12-day tour of central/eastern Europe (Budapest, Krakow, Prague, and Vienna), departing during the week of May 6, 2019.

By the end of this course, you will know more about, and be able to:

- (1) Explain the nature of human strengths and virtues.
- (2) Be able to recognize others' expressions of character strengths and virtues
- (3) Identify and explain some ways in which strengths and virtues have been expressed in the various societies we will encounter, including through written or spoken accounts, public art, architecture, memorialization, cultural practices, and other forms of expression.
- (4) Compare and contrast cities and cultures in terms of the ways in which they express various strengths and virtues.
- (5) Recognize and explain the conditions under which expressions of strengths and virtues can also have elements of weakness and vice.
- (6) Enjoyably travel internationally, and know how to solve practical problems related to doing so.

Required Readings

Overall

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Brooks, D. (2015). *The Road to Character*. New York, NY: Random House.

Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA. Beacon Press.

Nyiszli, M. (1960, 2011). *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*. New York, NY: Arcade Publishing. Translated by Richard Seaver.

Zweig, S. (1943). *The World of Yesterday*. New York: Viking Press.

Solomon, A. (2016). Dispatches from everywhere. Chapter 1 in *Far & Away: How Travel can Change the World*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Short stories and articles available on Moodle

Guidebooks (e.g., Lonely Planet, Rough Guide) to Central Europe, or individual books to Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Austria.

Recommended Readings

Strengths and Virtues in Budapest

Korda, M. (2007). *Journey to a revolution*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Martin, K. (2009). *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster

Phillips, A. (2002). *Prague: A Novel*. New York: Random House

Strengths and Virtues in Krakow

Weisel, E. (1960). *Night*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang

Strengths and Virtues in Prague

Albright, M. (2012). *Prague Winter: A personal story of remembrance and war, 1937-1948*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Strengths and Virtues in Vienna

Kandel, E. (2012). *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, From Vienna 1900 to the Present*. New York: Random House.

Class Assignments

Topic reflections (Due: 1/31, 2/21, 2/28, 3/7, 3/14, 4/4, and 4/18; 20% of the total course grade)

Most of our meetings during the spring semester will involve discussions about one or more readings, and/or a film we watch. To ensure participation in these discussions, you will complete seven reflection assignments during the semester. The reflections will be guided; the reflection guides for the specific classes will be posted on Moodle. Complete each worksheet before the class for which it is due (it should be typed), and bring it to the class meeting for which it is assigned.

In-Class and On-Tour Participation (ongoing; 15% of the total course grade)

Attendance and participation are essential components of the class meetings and the trip. Attendance to all ten class meetings during the semester is expected unless prior arrangements have been made. If you know that you cannot attend a given class, please contact me before you miss the class. Any assignment due the meeting you miss must still be submitted.

Participation on the tour will be evaluated in terms of the enactment of strengths and virtues during the trip. Although the displays can be various, of most concern is that you engage the trip in ways that reflect knowledge that you are serving as a kind of ambassador of the University of Montana and the United States.

Site guide (i.e., Presentation; Due 4/25; 15% of the total course grade)

The purpose of this assignment is to help you become familiar with the places we will experience, and maximize the quality of our time there. Your assignment here is to use our itinerary to pick one specific site on our tour and develop an informative presentation to enhance the class's knowledge of that particular site. You'll give this report toward the end of the spring semester in a visually appealing presentation, and again informally while we are traveling to each city in May. The content of this presentation should include:

- A visual display of the location of the site – using Google Earth, Google Maps, and/or photo images.
- A review of what the particular site is known for, and why it is important.
- Highlights of two significant aspects of the site that the class should be aware of.
- Illumination of at least one strength or virtue that you see as being expressed by some aspect of the site, with an explanation of how the virtue is expressed in that aspect.
- Aside from that specific site, a discussion of one thing you feel like you absolutely “must do” during your free time while you are in the country we will be touring while we see your site, and why. Use the itinerary, your guide books, and/or internet searches to explore some of the activities that people recommend doing in the cities we will tour to get an idea of what some of the possibilities are that most resonate with you.

The presentation should last about 5-7-minutes and reflect your best extemporaneous public speaking skills. Again, plan to make it visually appealing for the formal presentation, and to develop some portable notes that you can use to give the presentation while traveling (you'll give an abbreviated version of this presentation while we are on the bus going to each city). You will sign up for a location to report on, so that we have maximum coverage of site reports with everyone presenting on a different location.

Here are some places you might choose to focus on (others exist too – this is just a list to get you started):

- Budapest
 - Shoes on the Dunube
 - Thermal springs/baths
 - Fisherman's Bastion
 - Heroes square
 - Ruin bars

- Krakow
 - Wawel Hill and Cathedral
 - Jewish Quarter
 - Glowny Square
 - Auschwitz and Birkenow
 - Wieliczka salt mine

- Prague
 - Prague Castle
 - The Charles Bridge
 - The Golden Lane
 - The astronomical clock in the Old Town Square
 - Kutna Hora – the Sedlec Ossuary in the Church of All Saints

- Vienna
 - Vienna opera house
 - St. Stephen's Cathedral
 - The Hofburg
 - Schönbrunn palace

Journal (Due in hardcopy or by email within three days following the end of the tour; 25% total course grade)

The trip will be an immersive and intensive experience, and journaling your thoughts along the way will help you integrate the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the course. The journal should have at least one-two entries for every city we visit – Budapest, Krakow, Auschwitz/Birkenow, Prague, and Vienna (so a minimum of five entries). For each entry, please provide a date and time at which each entry was made. Key to each journal entry is the *specific connection* between what you have learned about human strengths and virtues with what you observe and experience in each city. The best journals will *identify* the specific strengths and virtues you observed and *describe* how they were enacted or manifest in each place, *explain* why the observation/enactment was important and meaningful to you, and *discuss what you conclude* about yourself and the place you are writing about based on your observations and performances of strengths and virtues.

Your journal can be handwritten or typed. If typed, please email it to me at Stephen.yoshimura@umontana.edu upon the end of the trip. If handwritten, please deliver your notebook with your name on it to my mailbox at LA 301 upon returning from the trip.

Your “Paragon” City report (Due by June 15th; 25% of the total course grade)

One of the first things we’ll learn in this class is how to identify our own, personal signature strengths. As we discover our own character strengths, we will also spend time examining the ways in which strengths and virtues have been expressed by people in the cities to which we will be traveling. In those cities, you will find various models (i.e., paragons) of your own strengths and virtues, and ultimately be able to identify a city that most closely represents the strengths and virtues that you have identified about yourself.

In this 6-8 page essay, you should:

- Begin by describing and comparing/contrasting the places we visited based on one primary strength or virtue you noticed being prominently expressed and displayed in each of the cities (e.g., compare the expression of transcendence in Prague vs. Vienna; humanity in Budapest vs. Krakow, etc.).
- Settle upon, identify, and describe the paragon city that you believe most strongly represents your own strengths and virtues (be sure to also identify your strengths that you’ll focus on here),
- In essay format, list and describe the features of the city that you believe best model your own character strengths, explain why/how those urban features represent your own character strengths, and discuss why you believe this particular place or person is your paragon, rather than some other place we visited,
- identify and explain any weaknesses and vices that you observed in the city that are either consistent or inconsistent with your own.
- Conclude your paper with a summarization of the connection you now feel to this city, as it relates to your understanding about the expression of human strengths and virtues.

This paper should be double-spaced lines, have one-inch margins, and be typed in 12-point Times New Roman font. Paragraph spacing should be set to 0.

Course Grades

Because the study abroad component of this class occurs after the end of the spring semester, “N” grades (in progress) will be assigned at the end of the spring semester (May 3rd), and then changed to reflect the assessments once all assignments have been submitted (no later than June 30th, unless arrangements are otherwise made).

Basic Trip Policies

Punctuality and attendance. We have a large group on this trip, and punctuality and attendance are essential to ensure that everything runs smoothly. In this case, punctuality is defined as being present at least 5 minutes prior to the scheduled event. So, for example, if we are scheduled to depart from the hotel at 8am, you are punctual if you are present in the lobby at 7:55am. Everyone is required to attend all aspects of the itinerary, an emergency or illness notwithstanding.

Conduct. Please note that all aspects of the UM Student Conduct Codes apply, as do the policies of the UM Office of Global Engagement, (OGE) and the policies of EF Tours. The student conduct codes can be found at: <https://www.umt.edu/safety/policies/default.php>. The UM OGE will provide you with health and safety policies and procedures, as will EF Tours. All travelers on this trip are expected to be familiar with, and to adhere to the applicable policies. Violation of the university or tour policies can result in the termination of the individual’s trip at her/his expense.

Gratuities. As part of this trip, each person on the trip is expected to provide our tour director with a gratuity of 6-7 USD per day, in Euros (Depending on the exchange rate in May, about 70 Euros total). I will need to collect this amount from you in Euros before we start our tour. You can order the currencies

you need using [AAA's financial services](#); I suggest doing so before March 31. In addition to Euros, I advise ordering at least a small amount of “starter” currency in Hungarian Forints, Polish Zloty, and Czech Koruna (about \$20-\$40 in each currency should be enough to at least get you started). Doing so will help you avoid the hassle of needing to find an ATM right away.

Course Calendar

January 17: Introduction to Each Other and The Course

This week, we will get to know each other and become familiar with the concept of character strengths and virtues. We'll discuss the pairing of virtues and vice, and begin to explore the ways in which character strengths and virtues are manifest in people and urban environments and cultures.

January 24: Character Strengths in Action

This week we will examine our own signature character strengths, and discuss how those get communicatively performed in everyday life. We'll also discuss how to recognize strengths in others through not only individual behaviors, but through architecture, artifacts, practices, and policies too.

January 31: Wisdom and Knowledge

This week's topic is about the acquisition and use of knowledge in ways that contribute to living a good life. Basically, wisdom is about applying knowledge and experience to everyday situations to do the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. Even by merely taking this class, you are showing many of the strengths organized under the virtue of wisdom and knowledge. But how do you see these strengths get manifest around you? What are some examples are the individual and community level that display these strengths?

- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Open-mindedness
- Love of learning
- Perspective

February 21: Courage

Courage involves strength in one's emotion and will, and the ability to keep moving toward one's goals despite all the internal and external forces pushing against us. Henry David Thoreau wrote in “A Week on The Concord and Merrimack Rivers,” courage involves the ability to “*Keep a stiff fin then, and stem all the tides thou mayest meet.*” What do you suppose would be some ways in which entire communities display courage?

- Bravery
- Persistence
- Integrity
- Vitality

February 28: Humanity

The virtue of humanity is about the strengths required of us to connect and care for others. Although all the strengths and virtues we discuss are social in nature, this virtue is perhaps the most obviously displayed through communication and social interaction. How do people create and care for places that communicates strengths of humanity? In a connected yet increasingly isolated world, how do you see this virtue being performed?

- Love
- Kindness
- Social intelligence

March 7: Justice

People often think of justice being enacted at the state level; as something that exists in the domains of law enforcement and judicial policies. However, much of justice is also performed at the interpersonal level, in social interactions between individuals and others. When someone decides to help a neighbor clear a downed tree, offers to go “above and beyond” for the sake of a group at work, or do the right thing despite the fact that it might be financially, physically, or psychologically costly, they are enacting aspects of justice. What examples can you think of in which you’ve seen justice enacted?

- Citizenship
- Fairness
- Leadership

March 14: Temperance

Whereas many of the strengths we learn about in this class are about things that people do, temperance is more about what people DON’T do. Being spiteful, self-indulgent, reckless, and impulsive are easy. Doing the right thing often requires withholding these inclinations.

- Forgiveness and mercy
- Humility and modesty
- Prudence
- Self-Regulation

April 4: Transcendence

At some point in life, we benefit from the ability to attach ourselves to something bigger than ourselves alone. This is perhaps one of my favorite virtues because the practices involved in these strengths are the ones that usually bring us a strong sense of meaningfulness in our lives, and the times that we experience and enact these strengths are the things that photographs and life-long memories are made of.

Transcendence involves the practice of actions that heighten our sense that we are deeply connected to something that is bigger and will last longer than we ourselves could ever be or do. Done right, the trip you are about to embark upon will give you a sense of transcendence immediately that ends up lasting for 12 days. Hopefully, your inclination to build it into your life on a regular basis will continually grow.

- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
- Gratitude
- Hope
- Humor
- Playfulness
- Spirituality

April 18: Putting it all together

This week, we will watch “Life is Beautiful” and discuss how all the character strengths we have learned about can be used to create a good life for ourselves and others.

April 25: Presentations