The Banality of HEROISM

Circumstances can force almost anyone to be a bystander to evil, but they can also bring out our own inner hero. Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo show how we're all capable of everyday heroism.

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, ONE OF US (Philip Zimbardo) launched what is known as the Stanford Prison Experiment. Twenty-four young men, who had responded to a newspaper ad calling for participants in a study, were randomly assigned roles as "prisoners" or "guards" in a simulated jail in Stanford University's psychology department. The "prisoners" were arrested at their homes by real police officers, booked, and brought to the jail. Everything from the deliberately humiliating prison uniforms to the cell numbers on the laboratory doors to the mandatory strip searches and delousing were designed to replicate the depersonalizing experience of being in a real prison. The men who were assigned to be guards were given khaki uniforms, mirrored glasses, and billy clubs.

The idea was to study the psychology of imprisonment—to see what happens when you put good people in a dehumanizing place. But within a matter of hours, what had been intended as a controlled experiment in human behavior took on a disturbing life of its own. After a prisoner rebellion on the second day of the experiment, the guards began using increasingly degrading forms of punishment, and the prisoners became more and more passive. Each group rapidly took on the behaviors associated with their role, not because of any particular internal predisposition or instructions from the experimenters, but rather because the situation itself so powerfully called for the two groups to assume their new identities. Interestingly, even the experimenters were so caught up in the drama that they lost objectivity, only terminating the out-of-control study when an objective outsider stepped in, reminding them of their duty to treat the participants humanely and ethically. The experiment, scheduled to last two weeks, ended abruptly after six days.

As we have come to understand the psychology of evil, we have realized that such transformations of human character are not as rare as we would like to believe. Historical inquiry and behavioral science have demonstrated the "banality of evil"—that is, under certain conditions and social pressures, ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable. In addition to the Stanford Prison Experiment, studies conducted in the 1960s by Stanley Milgram at Yale University also revealed the banality of evil. The Milgram experiments asked participants to play the role of a "teacher," who was responsible for administering electric shocks to a "learner" when the learner failed to answer test questions correctly. The participants were not aware that the learner was working with the experimenters and did not actually receive any shocks. As the learners failed more and more, the teachers were instructed to increase the voltage intensity of the shocks—even when the learners started screaming, pleading to have the shocks stop, and eventually stopped responding altogether. Pressed by the experimenters—serious looking men in lab coats, who said they'd assume responsibility for the consequences—most participants did not stop administering shocks until they reached 300 volts or above—already in the lethal range. The majority of teachers delivered the maximum shock of 450 volts.

We all like to think that the line between good and evil is impermeable—that people who do terrible things, such as commit murder, treason, or kidnapping, are on the evil side of this line, and the rest of us could never cross it. But the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram studies revealed the permeability of that line. Some people are on the good side only because situations have never coerced or seduced them to cross over.

This is true not only for perpetrators of torture and other horrible acts, but for people who commit a more common kind of wrong—the wrong of taking no action when action is called for. Whether we consider Nazi Germany or Abu Ghraib prison, there were many people who observed what was happening and said nothing. At Abu Ghraib, one photo shows two soldiers smiling before a pyramid of naked prisoners while a dozen other soldiers stand around watching passively. If you observe such abuses and don't say, "This is wrong! Stop it!" you give tacit approval to continue. You are part of the silent majority that makes evil deeds more acceptable.

In the Stanford Prison Experiment, for instance, there were the "good guards" who maintained the prison. Good guards, on the shifts when the worst abuses occurred, never did anything bad to the prisoners, but not once over the whole week did they confront the other guards and say, "What are you doing? We get paid the same money without knocking ourselves out." Or, "Hey, remember those are college students, not prisoners." No good guard ever intervened to stop the activities of the bad guards. No good guard ever arrived a minute late, left a minute early, or publicly complained. In a sense, then, it's the good guard who allowed such abuses to happen. The situation dictated their inaction, and their inaction facilitated evil.

But because evil is so fascinating, we have been obsessed with focusing upon and analyzing evildoers. Perhaps because of the tragic experiences of the Second World War, we have neglected to consider the flip



Brad Aldridge

side of the banality of evil: Is it also possible that heroic acts are something that anyone can perform, given the right mind-set and conditions? Could there also be a "banality of heroism"?

The banality of heroism concept suggests that we are *all* potential heroes waiting for a moment in life to perform a heroic deed. The decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in time. By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few "heroic elect," heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call.

Even people who have led less than exemplary lives can be heroic in a particular moment. For example, during Hurricane Katrina, a young man named Jabar Gibson, who had a history of felony arrests, did something many people in Louisiana considered heroic: He commandeered a bus, loaded it with residents of his poor New Orleans neighborhood, and drove them to safety in Houston. Gibson's "renegade bus" arrived at a relief site in Houston before any government sanctioned evacuation efforts.

The idea of the banality of heroism debunks the myth of the "heroic elect," a myth that reinforces two basic human tendencies. The first is to ascribe very rare personal characteristics to people who do something special—to see them as superhuman, practically beyond comparison to the rest of us. The second is the trap of inaction—sometimes known as the "bystander effect." Research has shown that the bystander effect is often motivated by diffusion of responsibility, when different people witnessing an emergency all assume someone else will help. Like the "good guards," we fall into the trap of inaction when we assume it's someone else's responsibility to act the hero.

In search of an alternative to this inaction and complicity with evil, we have been investigating the banality of heroism. Our initial research has allowed us to review example after example of people who have done something truly heroic, from individuals who enjoy international fame to those whose names have never even graced the headlines in a local newspaper. This has led us to think more critically about the definition of heroism, and to consider the situational and personal characteristics that encourage or facilitate heroic behavior.

Heroism is an idea as old as humanity itself, and some of its subtleties are becoming lost or transmuted by popular culture. Being a hero is not simply being a good role model or a popular sports figure. We believe it has become necessary to revisit the historical meanings of the word, and to make it come alive in modern terms. By concentrating more on this high watermark of human behavior, it is possible to foster what we term "heroic imagination," or the development of a personal heroic ideal. This heroic ideal can help guide a person's behavior in times of trouble or moral uncertainty.

What is heroism?

Frank De Martini was an architect who had restored his own Brooklyn brownstone. He enjoyed old cars, motorcycles, sailing, and spending time with his wife, Nicole, and their two children.

After the hijacked planes struck the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, De Martini, a Port Authority construction manager at the Center, painstakingly searched the upper floors of the North Tower to help victims trapped by the attack. De Martini was joined by three colleagues: Pablo Ortiz, Carlos DaCosta, and Pete Negron. Authors Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn piece together the movements of De Martini and his colleagues in their book, *102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers.* The evidence suggests that these four men were able to save 70 lives, moving from problem to problem, using just crowbars and flashlights—the only tools available. There are indications that De Martini was becoming increasingly concerned about the structural integrity of the building, yet he and his men continued to work to save others rather than evacuating when they had the chance. All four men died in the collapse of the tower.

These were not men who were known previously as larger-than-life heroes, but surely, most of us would call their actions on September 11 heroic. But just what is heroism?

Heroism is different than altruism. Where altruism emphasizes selfless acts that assist others, heroism entails the potential for deeper personal sacrifice. The core of heroism revolves around the individual's commitment to a noble purpose and the willingness to accept the consequences of fighting for that purpose.

Historically, heroism has been most closely associated with military service; however, social heroism also deserves close examination. While Achilles is held up as the archetypal war hero, Socrates' willingness to die for his values was also a heroic deed. Heroism in service to a noble idea is usually not as dramatic as heroism



All Stanford Prison Experiment photos: Philip G. Zimbardo, Inc.

that involves immediate physical peril. Yet social heroism is costly in its own way, often involving loss of financial stability, lowered social status, loss of credibility, arrest, torture, risks to family members, and, in some cases, death.

These different ways of engaging with the heroic ideal suggest a deeper, more intricate definition of heroism. Based on our own analysis of many acts that we deem heroic, we believe that heroism is made up of at least four independent dimensions.

First, heroism involves some type of quest, which may range from the preservation of life (Frank De Martini's efforts at the World Trade Center) to the preservation of an ideal (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pursuit of equal rights for African Americans).

Second, heroism must have some form of actual or anticipated sacrifice or risk. This can be either some form of physical peril or a profound social sacrifice. The physical risks that firefighters take in the line of duty are clearly heroic in nature. Social sacrifices are more subtle. For example, in 2002, Dr. Tom Cahill, a researcher at the University of California, Davis, risked his credibility as a career scientist by calling a press conference to openly challenge the EPA's findings that the air near Ground Zero was safe to breathe in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. His willingness to "go public" was challenged by the government and by some fellow scientists. Like Cahill, whistleblowers in government and business often face ostracism, physical threat, and the loss of their jobs.

Third, the heroic act can either be passive or active. We often think of heroics as a valiant *activity*, something that is clearly observable. But some forms of heroism involve passive resistance or an unwillingness to be moved. Consider Revolutionary War officer Nathan Hale's actions before his execution by the British army. There was nothing to be done in that moment except to decide how he submitted to death—with fortitude or with fear. The words he uttered in his final moments (borrowed from Joseph Addison's play *Cato*), "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country," are remembered more than two centuries later as a symbol of strength.

Finally, heroism can be a sudden, one time act, or something that persists over a longer period of time. This could mean that heroism may be an almost instantaneous reaction to a situation, such as when a self-described "average guy" named Dale Sayler pulled an unconscious driver from a vehicle about to be hit by an oncoming train. Alternatively, it may be a well thought-out series of actions taking place over days, months, or a lifetime. For instance, in 1940, a Japanese consul official in Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara, signed more than 2,000











Many of the guards in the Stanford Prison Experiment didn't speak out when they witnessed disturbing abuse by their fellow guards; nearly 30 years later, guards at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq acted in nearly the same way.

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visas for Jews hoping to escape the Nazi invasion, despite his government's direct orders not to do so. Every morning when Sugihara got up and made the same decision to help, every time he signed a visa, he acted heroically and increased the likelihood of dire consequences for himself and his family. At the end of the war he was unceremoniously fired from the Japanese civil service.

What makes a hero?

Our efforts to catalogue and categorize heroic activity have led us to explore the factors that come together to create heroes. It must be emphasized that this is initial, exploratory work; at best, it allows us to propose a few speculations that warrant further investigation.

We have been able to learn from a body of prior research how certain situations can induce the bystander effect, which we mentioned earlier. But just as they can create bystanders, situations also have immense power to bring out heroic actions in people who never would have considered themselves heroes. In fact, the first response of many people who are called heroes is to deny their own uniqueness with statements such as, "I am not a hero; anyone in the same situation would have done what I did," or, "I just did what needed to be done." Immediate life and death situations, such as when people are stranded in a burning house or a car wreck, are clear examples of situations that galvanize people into heroic action. But other situations—such as being witness to discrimination, corporate corruption, government malfeasance, or military atrocities—not only bring out the worst in people; they sometimes bring out the best. We believe that these situations create a "bright-line" ethical test that pushes some individuals toward action in an attempt to stop the evil being perpetrated. But why are some people able to see this line while others are blind to it? Why do some people take responsibility for a situation when others succumb to the bystander effect?

Just as in the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram studies, the situation and the personal characteristics of each person caught up in the situation interact in unique ways. We remain unsure how these personal characteristics combine with the situation to generate heroic action, but we have some preliminary ideas. The case of Sugihara's intervention on behalf of the Jews is particularly instructive.

Accounts of Sugihara's life show us that his efforts to save Jewish refugees was a dramatic finale to a long list of smaller efforts, each of which demonstrated a willingness to occasionally defy the strict social constraints of Japanese society in the early 20th century. For example, he did not follow his father's instructions to become a doctor, pursuing language study and civil service instead; his first wife was not Japanese; and in the 1930s, Sugihara resigned from a prestigious civil service position to protest the Japanese military's treatment of the Chinese during the occupation of Manchuria. These incidents suggest that Sugihara already possessed the internal strength and self-assurance necessary to be guided by his own moral compass in uncertain situations. We can speculate that Sugihara was more willing to assert his individual view than others around him who preferred to "go along to get along."

Also, Sugihara was bound to two different codes: He was a sworn representative of the Japanese government, but he was raised in a rural Samurai family. Should he obey his government's order to not help Jews (and, by extension, comply with his culture's age-old moré not to bring shame on his family by disobeying authority)? Or should he follow the Samurai adage that haunted him, "Even a hunter cannot kill a bird which flies to him for refuge"? When the Japanese government denied repeated requests he made for permission to assist the refugees, Sugihara may have realized that these two codes of behavior were in conflict and that he faced a bright-line ethical test.

Interestingly, Sugihara did not act impulsively or spontaneously; instead, he carefully weighed the decision with his wife and family. In situations that auger for social heroism, the problem may create a "moral tickle" that the person can not ignore—a sort of positive rumination,

where we can't stop thinking about something because it does not sit right with us.

Yet this still leaves the question, "What prompts people to take action?" Many people in similar positions recognize the ethical problems associated with the situation and are deeply disturbed, but simply decide to ignore it. What characterizes the final step toward heroic action? Are those who do act more conscientious? Or are they simply less risk averse?

We don't know the answer to these vital questions—social science hasn't resolved them yet. However, we believe that an important factor that may encourage heroic action is the stimulation of heroic imagination—the capacity to imagine facing physically or socially risky situations, to struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider one's actions and the consequences. By considering these issues in advance, the individual becomes more prepared to act when and if a moment that calls for heroism arises. Strengthening the heroic imagination may help to make people more aware of the ethical tests embedded in complex situations, while allowing the individual to have already considered, and to some degree transcended, the cost of their heroic action. Seeing one's self as capable of the resolve necessary for heroism may be the first step toward a heroic outcome.



Sylvia Wright/UC Davis News Service

Two everyday heroes: Researcher Tom Cahill (above) and New Orleans resident Jabar Gibson (opposite page) both acted to help others when they witnessed a crisis.

How to nurture the heroic imagination

Over the last century, we have witnessed the subtle diminution of the word "hero." This title was once reserved only for those who did great things at great personal risk. Gradually, as we have moved toward mechanized combat, especially during and after the Second World War, the original ideals of military heroism became more remote. At the same time, our view of social heroism has also been slowly watered down. We hold up inventors, athletes, actors, politicians, and scientists as examples of "heroes." These individuals are clearly role models, embodying important qualities we would all like to see in our children—curiosity, persistence, physical strength, being a Good Samaritan—but they do not demonstrate courage or fortitude. By diminishing the ideal of heroism, our society makes two mistakes. First, we dilute the important contribution of true heroes, whether they are luminary figures like Abraham Lincoln or the hero next door. Second, we keep ourselves from confronting the older, more demanding forms of this ideal. We do not have to challenge ourselves to see if, when faced with a situation that called for courage, we would meet that test. In prior generations, words like bravery, fortitude, gallantry, and valor stirred our souls. Children read of the exploits of great warriors and explorers and would set out to follow in those footsteps. But we spend little time thinking about the deep meanings these words once carried, and focus less on trying to encourage ourselves to consider how we might engage in bravery in the social sphere, where most of us will have an opportunity to be heroic at one time or another. As our society dumbs down heroism, we fail to foster heroic imagination.

There are several concrete steps we can take to foster the heroic imagination. We can start by remaining mindful, carefully and critically evaluating each situation we encounter so that we don't gloss over an emergency requiring our action. We should try to develop our "discontinuity detector"—an awareness of things that don't fit, are out of place, or don't make sense in a setting. This means asking questions to get the information we need to take responsible action.

Second, it is important not to fear interpersonal conflict, and to develop the personal hardiness necessary to stand firm for principles we cherish. In fact, we shouldn't think of difficult interactions as conflicts but rather as attempts to challenge other people to support their own principles and ideology.

Third, we must remain aware of an extended time-horizon, not just the present moment. We should be engaged in the current situation, yet also be able to detach part of our analytical focus to imagine alternative future scenarios that might play out, depending on different actions or failures to act that we take in the present. In addition, we should keep part of our minds on the past, as that may help us recall values and teachings instilled in us long ago, which may inform our actions in the current situation.

Fourth, we have to resist the urge to rationalize inaction and to develop justifications that recast evil deeds as acceptable means to supposedly righteous ends.

Finally, we must try to transcend anticipating negative consequence associated with some forms of heroism, such as being socially ostracized. If our course is just, we must trust that others will eventually recognize the value of our heroic actions.

But beyond these basic steps, our society needs to consider ways of fostering heroic imagination in all of its citizens, most particularly in our young. The ancient Greeks and Anglo Saxon tribes venerated their heroes in epic poems such as the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*. It is easy to see these stories as antiquated, but their instructions for the hero still hold up.

In these stories, the protagonist often encounters a mystical figure who attempts to seduce the hero away from his path. In our own lives, we must also avoid the seduction of evil, and we must recognize

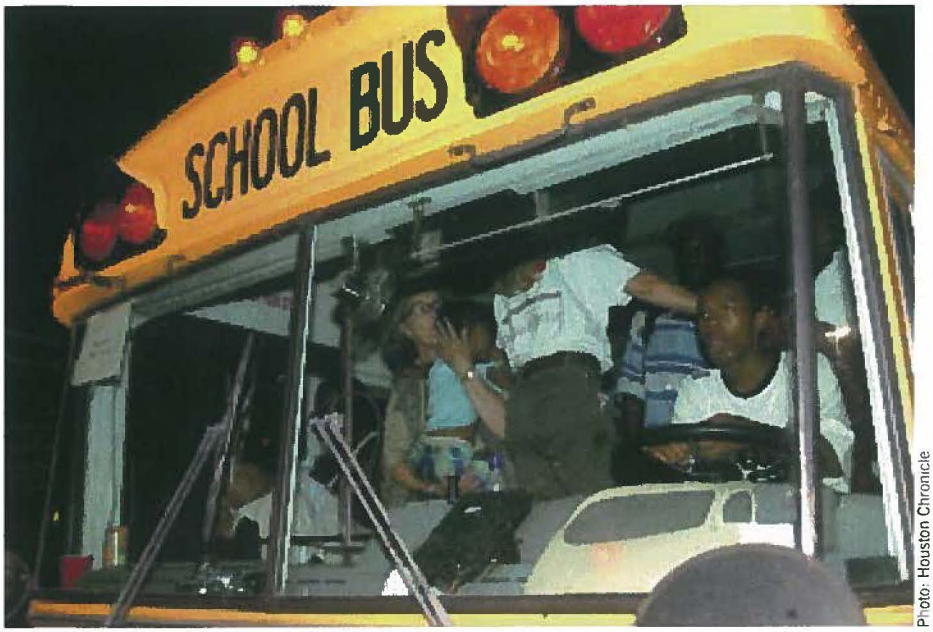

Photo: Houston Chronicle

that the seduction will probably be quite ordinary—an unethical friend or coworker, for instance. By passing a series of smaller tests of our mettle, we can cultivate a personal habit of heroism.

Epic poems also often tell of the hero visiting the underworld. This metaphorical encounter with death represents an acceptance and transcendence of one's own mortality. To this day, some forms of heroism require paying the ultimate price. But we can also understand this as a hero's willingness to accept any of the consequences of heroic action—whether the sacrifices are physical or social.

Finally, from the primeval war stories of Achilles to Sugihara's compelling kindness toward the Jewish refugees in World War Two, a code of conduct served as the framework from which heroic action emerged. In this code, the hero follows a set of rules that serves as a reminder, sometimes even when he would prefer to forget, that something is wrong and that he must attempt to set it right. Today, it seems as if we are drifting further and further away from maintaining a set of teachings that serve as a litmus test for right and wrong.

But in a digital world, how do we connect ourselves and our children to what were once oral traditions? Hollywood has accomplished some of these tasks. The recent screen version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* brought us a classic story that is based on the epic tradition. Yet how many of us have stopped and talked with our children about the deeper meanings of this tale? As the sophistication of video gaming grows, can the power of this entertainment form be used to educate children about the pitfalls of following a herd mentality? Could these games help children develop their own internal compass in morally ambiguous situations? Or perhaps even help them think about their own ability to act heroically? And as we plow ahead in the digital era, how can the fundamental teachings of a code of honor remain relevant to human interactions?

If we lose the ability to imagine ourselves as heroes, and to understand the meaning of true heroism, our society will be poorer for it. But if we can reconnect with these ancient ideals, and make them fresh again, we can create a connection with the hero in ourselves. It is this vital, internal conduit between the modern work-a-day world and the mythic world that can prepare an ordinary person to be an everyday hero.

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The Prison Guard's Dilemma

BY JASON MARSH

Thirty years after the Stanford Prison Experiment ended abruptly, its findings resonated in the photos that escaped from Abu Ghraib prison: prisoners with hoods over their heads, put in humiliating positions; young guards pandering to the camera as they abused their subjects. The soldiers at Abu Ghraib were ordinary young men and women thrown into an environment in which abusive and degrading behavior became the norm.

But if Abu Ghraib revealed the banality of evil, it also exposed the banality of heroism. While the culture of the prison persuaded everyone else to perform or accept prisoner abuse, Sergeant Joseph Darby, a 24-year-old Army reservist, saw what his fellow soldiers were doing, and he acted to stop it.

Another soldier gave Darby a CD with photos of the abuses on them. "It was amusing at first," he said in a recent interview with ABC News. "[But] after I'd looked at all the pictures, I realized I had a decision to make."

Darby decided to turn in the CD to a superior. The military initiated an investigation but didn't disclose who at Abu Ghraib had reported the abuses. For a month and a half, Darby lived in a perpetual state of fear, hoping his identity as the whistle blower wouldn't be revealed, sleeping with a gun under his pillow. But he remained convinced that he had done his duty as a solider.

"[The abuse] violated everything I personally believed in and all I'd been taught about the rules of war," he said during a pretrial hearing for one of the perpetrators. "It was more of a moral call."

In the two years since the photos first came to light, eight soldiers have been punished for their role in the abuses, and Darby has been hailed as a hero. He has also been vilified by people in and out of the military. Vandalism and threats against his wife and mother forced them to move from their Pennsylvania home; Darby went into protective custody, and now lives in hiding. Still, he has expressed no regrets about blowing the whistle on Abu Ghraib.

"It had to be done," he told ABC News.