

***A personal journey from understanding and creating evil to now inspiring everyday heroism***

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I've spent a lifetime in evil; experiencing it as a child, creating it as an adult. I've tried to understand what makes good people turn evil, how and why subtle situational forces can seduce almost any one of us to the dark side of human nature. My decision to study evil is predictable, in hindsight, given that I grew up in the inner city of New York's South Bronx ghetto in the 1930's through the 1950's. My neighbors, friends and family were poor and uneducated. There were always temptations to do illicit things to make spending money, and to downgrade education as wasted time when you should be working at a (low) paying job.

My buddies and I were under constant temptation to do bad things for easy money from influence professionals whose job it was to get us to join destructive gangs, take and sell drugs, steal, beat up kids who were different, or do sex on demand. Some gave in, some resisted. Why?

I was lucky to eventually break out of that environment. (Interestingly, so was my high school classmate, Stanley Milgram, creator of the famous Milgram Experiment in which people surprisingly obeyed orders to deliver "shocks" to their peers that went against their moral conscience.)

But many of my friends were not so lucky. Some became robbers; others fell into a world of drugs. Some of the girls turned to prostitution to make money. Others landed in prison. Still others wound up dead. I needed to know why some of us were prepared to make good decisions, while others followed dangerous routes.

I worked my way through my senior year of Monroe High School and my college years at Brooklyn College working as a concession boy in the St. James Theatre on Broadway. Our boss coached us teenagers in how to cheat innocent playgoers (especially "those simpletons, naïve first timers). We got them to check their hats and coats when they did not want to, and to give big tips that were allegedly optional. They bought expensive show programs when free ones were provided; their kids' open arms were filled with ten dollars' worth of candy during intermission, instead of one candy bar and change. We dumped the ice out of the free water cooler or jammed the spigot so they had to buy our orangeade on hot summer matinees. Initially, these gambits were revolting but soon became just routine, the fun part of the boring job, including ways to deceive the boss herself. I came to admire Oliver Twist.

My favorite book was Robert Louis Stevenson's, "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." Recall that the good Dr. Jekyll created a medicine designed to make people healthy and strong, but instead it did the opposite of making him into the evil Mr. Hyde. When the drug wore off, he returned to the good side of human nature. This story made me aware of the permeability of that line separating Good from Evil people. I thought then, as a teenage kid, could there be other ways besides drugs to transform human nature, and I learned later that psychology held that key.

However, many people often say, "You can't change human nature." But I totally disagree. The presumption that one's character is static is a fundamental misunderstanding of the way humans operate. Certainly personality plays a role, but we consistently discount the effect of situations, which leaves us blind to their impact. There are countless experiments beyond my own that bear this out. Students are far more likely to cheat (or not) under certain conditions; employees far more likely to steal (or not). Prejudice, peer pressure, willingness to challenge authority – all of it is indelibly shaped by specific situational norms and experiences.

Believing that character is simply an innate, immutable fact allows us to forfeit ownership over our choices. Some people are born heroes, this logic whispers in our ears, and some people are born villains. This demonstrably false mindset is an invitation to abdicate the best in our human potential.

In the 1960's, I keyed off of William Golding's **Lord of the Flies** thesis that merely making a person feel anonymous enabled good kids to become killers. In an experiment at NYU, I showed that imposing anonymity on good female students lowered their restraints against delivering painful shocks to other targeted women, as compared to peers randomly assigned to a condition of individuation rather than this condition of de-individuation. Such anonymity can be conferred by life conditions of living in communities when no one knows or cares who you are. I demonstrated this notion by comparing the vandalized destruction of cars that I planted in the Bronx and in Palo Alto California. The Big City Car was devastated by dozens of vandal acts over the course of several days, while the Nice Community Car was not touched once, except by a passerby who lowered its hood when it rained. That simple demonstration became the empirical center of the influential 1975 **Atlantic Monthly** article on *Broken Windows* by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. Its premise was that urban crime could be traced to two sources: criminals and also environmental *conditions* where broken windows are not fixed, graffiti is not removed, and abandoned cars are destroyed or tolerated by uncaring citizens. Witnessing such social disorder encourages criminal behavior, while eliminating them can be shown to reduce crime in big cities.

In 1971, I conducted what came to be known as the *Stanford Prison Experiment*, which showed how good college students could be transformed by situational forces into sadistic manipulators as mock prison guards or into neurotic mock prisoners suffering emotional breakdowns—in what they all knew was an experiment.

In the years that followed, I researched the mind control strategies used in cults, most notably by Jim Jones in his Guyana jungle prison of Jonestown, which ended in mass suicides. I also studied and wrote about police interrogation tactics and brutality.

In 2004, I waded through thousands of photographs of the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, most of which the world has never seen, attempting to explain to a military tribunal how an unsupervised prison environment turned American prison guards into sadistic torturers of their Iraqi prisoners every night for three months. My situationally-based defense of one of these guilty guards helped to cut in half his court-determined prison sentence.

Now it is a time for heroes. In my own work, I have launched the **Heroic Imagination Project**, both to support academic research into heroism (which has been, surprisingly, almost

nonexistent), as well as to establish the best ways to instill the practices of everyday heroism into young people and corporate employees alike. But it is also time for inspiring a new generation of heroes in our communities, in our nation, and in our world.

**[THE FOLLOWING NEEDS REWRITING, AND MORE THAN ONE EXAMPLE]**

From a street in China where a two-year-old girl lay bleeding to death after being run over as dozens walked by passively, to cities in America and Europe, too many headlines are riddled with horrific events that occurred while others stood silent and inactive—when a little action could have saved human lives. Yet this inaction is not inevitable.

**Heroism** – the decision to take risky action in the face of a challenging situation with no expectation of material gain – can be taught. Heroism is not the province of caped crusaders, but a trainable, cultivatable mindset that plays itself out in everyday situations. By explicitly teaching individuals the principles of social psychology, namely the degree to which the parameters of a situation influence how people act, we can prime our minds to recognize and overcome our natural tendencies to go along with an action-reluctant group norm, and instead unleash our personal potential for courageous social action.

Imagine, just as one example, If every man, woman and child in the world had a deep understanding of the *Bystander Effect*, the all-too-human instinct to do nothing when in a group and witnessing a crisis situation, expecting that someone else will act. If we were able to notice and check that paralysis as it began to overcome us, how many fewer acts of bullying would go unchallenged? How many more whistles would blow on unethical company practices? How many tragic headlines would be scrubbed from the front pages?

I have spent a lifetime in evil, but in studying where evil comes from, I have discovered that the antidote lives there as well.

So let us cross to the other side of that mental bridge, and open our eyes to the fact that we are all primed to become everyday heroes. It will require refashioning our old ideas of good and evil. It will require adopting the more nuanced view that **situations and psychology and personality** intersect in a complex dance over which we ultimately have control, but, if we are caught unawares, can instead come to control us. Recent psychological research has shown that when you teach students the truth that intelligence is malleable, they begin to experience far more academic success. So too can we teach the world that heroism is malleable – we just have to work hard to embrace it. And the key is trying, practicing, investing time and effort, and also believing that all abilities and talents can change and improve.

**NEED TO REWRITE LAST SENTENCE?**

That is the world we all can envision:

- A new world where any and every one of us can be a hero-in-training, doing daily deeds of compassion turned into positive social actions
- A kind and caring world where ordinary people regularly do extraordinary acts
- A world where as a society we rise up, speak out and act for the greater good.

It is a world we can consciously create through the daily exercise of our Heroic Imagination.

Thinking socio-centrally, instead of ego-centrally, can make our world more wonderful each

day, in small ways, by making someone else feel special and respected. By doing so, our perspective changes from ME to US, from I to WE; and then from being passive observers of human nature into active social agents ready to unleash our moral courage into everyday heroism. JUST DO IT -- HEROICALLY!