**The Banality\* of Heroism | Greater Good**

By Zeno Franco, Philip Zimbardo | September 1, 2006

[*http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the\_banality\_of\_heroism*](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_banality_of_heroism)

\*banality: so lacking in originality as to be obvious and boring. (dictionary.com)

As you read, think: is there such a thing as a “hero”? Also, ANNOTATE:

* underline sentences that communicate the main idea of the article
* define unfamiliar words in the margin
* make connections between the content of the article and your own experiences
* react to the article’s ideas by writing your opinion in the margin, etc.

Thirty-five years ago, Philip Zimbardo launched what is known as theStanford 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 (fake, imitation) 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 (getting rid of lice) 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 (taking away human qualities) 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 humiliating forms of punishment, and the prisoners became more and more passive. Each group rapidly took on the behaviors associated with their role…

…As we have come to understand the psychology of evil, we have realized that such transformations of human character (ex// fake prison guards causing real harm and pain to fake prisoners) are not as rare as we would like to believe…Under certain conditions and social pressures, ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable. [This has been called the “banality of evil.”]

We all like to think that the line between good and evil is concrete—that people who do terrible things, such as commit murder or kidnapping, are on the evil side of this line, and the rest of us could never cross it. But the Stanford Prison Experiment… 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…

[Given that good people can perform evil acts], 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 thinking 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.

**What is 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.

**(1)** First, heroism involves some type of quest, which may range from the preservation of life (those who helped save lives at the World Trade Center) to the preservation of an ideal (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s pursuit of equal rights for African Americans).

…**(2)** Second, heroism must have some form of actual or anticipated sacrifice or risk. This can be either some form of physical peril (danger) 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, a person who notices that his or her company is performing illegal acts and tells the authorities, even though this might mean losing his/ her job and causing others to lose their jobs, too.]

**(3)** Third, the heroic act can either be passive or active. We often think of heroics as a valiant (brave) *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, **(4)** 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 (done in an instant) 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 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.

**SPA Writing Instructions:**

1. Read over the dimension of “heroism” that you have been assigned.
2. Make sure you understand it.
3. Write a SPA paragraph in which you explain why you agree or disagree with the dimension of heroism. You may use evidence/ proof from your life, another text, or the world, but please be specific. Do not use the proof that the article provides.