

MISD Learning Life's Lessons through Literature

11.4 Assessment Selections:

An excerpt from *The Lucifer Effect* by Philip G. Zimbardo

An excerpt from *A Few Good Men* by Aaron Sorkin

(MI-CE Correlation: CE2.1.1, 2.1.2, 2.1.4, 2.1.5, 2.1.6, 2.2.2, 2.2.3, 2.3.1, 2.3.3, 3.1.1, 3.2.1, 3.2.3, 3.3.1, 3.3.2, 3.3.3, 3.3.6)

DIRECTIONS: The theme for this assessment unit is Under Some Conditions, Good People Do Bad Things. Read the following keeping this theme in mind.

An excerpt from *The Lucifer Effect* by Philip G. Zimbardo

IN 1971, I BECAME SUPERINTENDENT of the Stanford Prison, a mock prison run by psychologists. I was a young psych professor at Stanford University, and I wanted to understand what happens when you put good people in a bad place. To do so, it was necessary to conduct a controlled experiment, so I and my graduate assistants selected college-student volunteers--healthy young men with no history of crime or violence--and randomly assigned them the roles of prisoner or guard. During the extended experiment, we would observe and record everything that happened. The inmates would live in their cells and the prison yard 24/7; the guards would work eight-hour shifts.

Our simulation tried to create a psychology of imprisonment in the minds of every participant, with all-powerful guards dominating powerless prisoners. To increase the real-life feel, we arranged for actual arrests and booking by the Palo Alto police; visits by a prison chaplain, a public defender, and parents; even parole board hearings. Though not part of the plan, there were also prisoner rebellions. And, notoriously, there was chilling abuse and torture by the guards. The experiment was supposed to last two weeks, but we had to pull the plug after only six days because nearly half the prisoners had emotional breakdowns in response to the extreme stress and psychological torments invented by their guards--good young men who'd been overwhelmed by situational forces in the roles they were playing.

Fast-forward to April 2004. Horrific images flash across our television screens: nightmarish abuses of Iraqi prisoners by young American soldiers, the male and female military police reservists stationed at Abu Ghraib. Military commanders condemn the criminal actions of a "few bad apples," asserting that such abuses are not systemic in our military prisons.

The images were shocking to me, but not unfamiliar. They were, in fact, strikingly similar to what I had seen at Stanford: prisoners naked, bags over their heads, forced into sexually humiliating poses. Could the perpetrators of these evils be like the young men in my prison--"good apples" who happened to wind up in a "bad barrel" (in this case, Abu Ghraib and the war as a whole)? Was their behavior shaped by the same sort of social psychological forces that had operated in the Stanford Prison Experiment? My conclusion, after becoming an expert witness for one of the military policemen and reviewing all the evidence of the investigations into these abuses, was that the parallels were palpable. Indeed, one investigative report highlighted the "landmark Stanford study," stating that it should have been a cautionary tale in preventing the Abu Ghraib abuses.

Historical inquiry and behavioral science have demonstrated the "banality of evil"--the fact that, given certain conditions, ordinary people can succumb to social pressure to commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable. To be sure, few of us will ever end up as inmates or guards in military or civilian or mock prisons, but many of us find ourselves in relationships where we dominate other people or are dominated by them. We spend our lives in institutions of one kind or another, from families, schools,

and businesses to homes for the elderly. And many times we bow to the will of the group even when it conflicts with our values.

In the prisons at Stanford and Abu Ghraib, men and women did terrible things to other people in part because responsibility for their actions was diffused, rather than focused on each of them as individuals; we find ourselves in a similar position whenever we witness someone else's trouble but fail to help because we assume others will. Likewise, the prisoners at Stanford and Abu Ghraib were tortured because the guards regarded them as less than human; dehumanization allowed the guards to treat prisoners as lower beings. The same applies to us when we allow members of a minority group to be derogated as inferior. Prejudice leads to discrimination, and in turn to abuse. Situational forces affect us when we're acting in the capacity of a role we've assumed, when rules govern our behavior, when we're in uniforms or dressed in ways that conceal our identity, and of course when we're in a group whose acceptance seems vital to our self-image.

We want to believe that we are "good," moral, and self-aware. We want to believe that we're different from "bad" or "evil" people. Thinking so is essential to maintaining a sense of personal dignity and self-worth. But the line between good and evil is permeable, like the cell walls of our body that allow movement of chemicals across their boundaries. Anything that any human being has ever done--anything imaginable--is potentially doable by any of us in the same circumstance. This is not to excuse immoral behavior; the point is simply that understanding how someone could have engaged in wrongdoing, rather than dismissing it as a bad deed done by a bad person, allows us to identify corrosive social forces--the very same forces we need to counteract if we want to avoid going down the same wrong path.

If being surrounded by discrimination, government malfeasance, corporate corruption, or military atrocities brings out the worst in people, it also, in some cases, brings out the best. In all the research that my colleagues in social psychology and I have conducted (including experiments in which ordinary subjects blindly obeyed instructions to administer increasingly painful electric shocks to innocent people), we find that although the majority conform, comply, yield, and succumb to the power of the situation, there are always some who refuse, resist, and disobey.

When everyone else is doing the bidding of unjust authorities or bending to the will of corrupt systems, the few who resist are heroes. But you don't have to be a Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King Jr. You can be a Joe Darby, the army reservist who revealed the Abu Ghraib photos to a criminal investigator and thereby ended the abuse.

The heroic act of this average young man (whom residents of his hometown describe as the most ordinary of Joes) reveals what I call the "banality of heroism." We think of social heroes as superhuman, beyond comparison to the rest of us. But in fact, the first response of many such people is to deny that they're special ("I'm not a hero"; "Anyone in the same position would have done what I did"; "I just did what needed to be done").

What is it, then, that enables some people to refuse to participate in or condone wrongdoing? In part, it's their sensitivity to situational pressures (being aware when someone is trying to con them), and their willingness to be rejected by the group when they know they're right. They know intuitively how to spot and identify wolves dressed in sheep's garments (the sweet-talking cult recruiter or the friendly neighbor who wants you to help discourage a gay couple from moving in next door). They're also aware of how their own thinking can distort what's going on around them (as when you want something so badly--say, a promotion, or other people's acceptance--that you ignore the warning signs that something's not right with what you're being asked to do to get it).

There are a number of ways you can train yourself to resist unwanted influence--beginning with always being mindful of what is going on around you, and not slipping into automatic pilot and acting without critical awareness. You can engage in critical thinking--go beyond accepting other people's definitions of a situation, ask questions about what's going on and what happens down the road if you follow the prescribed path. You can develop the personal hardiness to be "different" or "difficult" by practicing saying no and arguing for the unpopular point of view. If the thought of interpersonal conflict scares you, think of it instead as simply challenging others to support their means and their ends. Take nothing for granted; be a hard-headed behavioral accountant. And be willing to admit your own mistakes. Too many people continue acting immorally even after they realize they shouldn't merely because it's too painful to admit that they've done wrong. But if you can speak those most difficult words--"I made a mistake, and I'm sorry"--you'll never have to rationalize away earlier actions. Finally, our stalwart band of resisters insists on retaining their personal sense of identity and self-worth, on not allowing others to dehumanize them. You should always demand the respect you deserve, from everyone.

I BELIEVE WE CAN ALL BENEFIT from exercising our "heroic imagination"--our capacity to envision facing physically or socially risky situations, to mentally struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider our actions and their consequences. It might mean stopping the cabdriver as he starts telling his favorite racist or sexist joke. It could mean intervening when a relative slaps her child at a family event. It should mean willingness to risk losing your job by exposing fraud and deception--as Sherron Watkins did at Enron--or facing even greater risks, as Deborah Layton did in exposing the dangers of Jim Jones's People's Temple cult in Guyana.

Strengthening the heroic imagination may make us more aware of the ethical tests inherent in complex situations, while allowing us to mentally transcend, to some degree, the costs of heroic behavior. Seeing ourselves as capable of the resolve necessary for heroism may be the first step toward taking heroic action.

There will come a time in each of our lives when three paths lie ahead. To the left, we can follow the lead of others mindlessly practicing discrimination or injustice or abusing their fellows. This is the path of perpetrators of evil. To the right, we can follow the lead of those who smilingly look the other way. This is the path of the evil of inaction. Straight ahead, we make up our own minds to act responsibly as individuals standing up for what we believe in, to do the right thing when it is easier to do the wrong thing or nothing at all. This is the path of "ordinary heroes."

Named Works: *The Lucifer Effect* (Book) Excerpts

Source Citation: Zimbardo, Philip G. "For goodness' sake: whether your boss is urging you to fudge some numbers or you're being asked to ignore one person's abuse of another, evil is only a choice away. Drawing on the insights of his new book, *The Lucifer Effect*, famed psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, shines a light on the 'ordinary heroes' who stand up for what's right--and offers mental exercises to help you do the same.(reading room)(Excerpt)." O, The Oprah Magazine 8.4 (April 2007): 199(3). General Reference Center Gold. Gale. Library of Michigan. 18 Feb. 2008 <<http://0-find.galegroup.com.elibrary.mel.org:80/itx/start.do?prodId=GRGM>>.

Gale Document Number: A161207349

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2007 Hearst Communications, reprinted with permission of Hearst.