



Philip Zimbardo, PhD **Inspiring a Generation of Everyday Heroes**

Attendee Notes for Menlo School Keynote: Feb. 4, 2012

Philip Zimbardo, PhD, is a professor emeritus of psychology at Stanford University and host of the PBS-TV series *Discovering Psychology*. He earned his PhD in social psychology from Yale University. He is renowned for the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, which demonstrated the power of social situations to distort identity, values and morality and dramatically revealed how quickly good people can do bad things. More information about Dr. Philip Zimbardo may be found at www.heroicimagination.org.

Dr. Zimbardo's mission for today's lecture is to help parents in our Menlo community learn to raise a "hero." Dr. Zimbardo founded a non-profit organization in San Francisco, called the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP). HIP believes that everyday heroes can change the world. Its mission is to advance everyday heroism as an antidote to inaction, inhumanity and injustice. HIP's charter is to help catalyze positive action. At the current time, HIP is affiliated with many schools. Clint Wilkins is the project's VP of Education, and Eric Stangvik is the VP of Development.

In a dialogue with a typical parent, the question is: Why should I want my child to act *heroically*? Heroes take risks to help others in need. But is it worth it?

Heroes do positive things, aware that there is a personal risk. HIP's philosophy is that "yes" the benefits outweigh the risks. "Altruism is Heroism Light." Everyday heroes can initiate "social change." Dr. Zimbardo teaches kids how to be effective positive social change-makers, in the family, in school, in a neighborhood, and in their nation.

In order for this to come about, kids need to have active roles in the family, helping parents make decisions. An example is: kids need to help their parents stop smoking. This is how kids can take a positive role to be "health heroes." Another example would be to help seniors in nursing homes do things like learn computer skills. He also wants kids to be "eco heroes." Heroes put their best foot forward to help humanity.

Heroes must ACT! Ordinary people become extraordinary heroes through action. Standing up, speaking out, taking action. Reluctant heroes have the right virtues, but take no action. We are a nation of reluctant heroes.

Being a hero is learnable and coachable. HIP has developed a tool kit, based on research, to measure pre and post changes in attitude. An old notion is that a child has to be *special* to be a hero. Actually, most heroes are everyday people, whose actions are extraordinary. We are all agents of social influence, but are often unaware of the impact we have. When you do something positive, that anybody sees, you become a social model for positive things. When you do something negative, you can become a model for breaking the rules.

Dr. Zimbardo gave the example of Rosa Parks, a seamstress in Alabama during the civil rights movement, who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Because most people do nothing, and she did something to stand up for her rights and the rights of her race, she became a hero. When a person does nothing, they support the ways of the perpetrator.

If you look the other way, for example in the case of observing bullying going on in your school, then you perpetuate the act of *evil*. Bystanders represent the bell-curve of the population as it relates to Heroes and Evil-doers. The problem is that villains are organized and resourceful. They use money to get young people to do bad things for them. Heroes are modest, humble and unorganized, usually with no resources.

Through education, we need to fortify young people against the power of the dark side. Coaches are able to, step-by-step, inspire youth to get on the path of heroism. Thus, in a problematic situation they will act wisely and effectively. Heroes transform the egocentric *me* into the socio-centric *we*. So, in order to come to one's aid, they are trained to notice other people in need. Heroes are people whose whole vision is externalized and less focused on themselves.

Why do good people become evil and how can it be prevented? Poverty specifically (when living in a run-down, unaesthetic, crime filled environment), is a "systemic" evil. Where we live or work, the situation one is in, can make someone more vulnerable to evil. 20% of today's American children live below the poverty level. Research has shown that poverty changes the programming of DNA, which also leads to health problems such as obesity and diabetes. This science is called "Epigenetics" and is an example of where poverty controls one's biochemistry.

There is a link between delayed gratification and lack of concern for future consequences. Kids who do bad things live for pleasure to avoid pain. Kids that do good things have an awareness of future consequences, and there is a feedback loop that blocks the bad behavior. As with the famous story by Robert Lewis Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

There are three kinds of evil:

- Dispositional evil is where certain personality types, or personal dispositions are “bad apples.”
- Situational evil is where someone in a physical, psychological or social setting can be seduced to be bad. This is defined as the “bad barrel.”
- Systemic evil is where there is organizational, political, economic or legal structures or systems in place that create evil. An example is Abu Ghraib, where prisoners were brutally mistreated. These are the “bad barrel-makers.”

The conclusion is that we all have potential to do good and evil; it depends on the situation. So, if a child goes to Menlo School, all of the constructive things that come with this environment inspire good deeds and behavior. Good schools reorganize teen’s thinking to focus on a positive future (vs. an overwhelming present or a bad past).

In our culture, we are not trained to rebel against unjust authority. Dr. Zimbardo cited a study, which was designed by a psychologist, Stanley Milgram, who tried to understand why ordinary people stood by and watched atrocities being done in World War II. He wondered whether the Holocaust could happen anywhere. The now classic and oft-repeated experiment involved a teacher (authority figure), the subject and a learner (researcher) with an objective of testing whether pain improves learning. The research involved a series of shock treatments with increasing intensity, to determine at what point an observer would recognize that harm was being done to people and speak out on their behalf. The study revealed a surprising amount of passivity, even when people were screaming in pain (simulated). 65% of observers allowed subjects to receive shocks starting at 15 volts, and then going up to 450 volts, despite hearing recorded screams and receiving cues that the learner had become nonresponsive. All evil begins with 15 volts – most people will listen to an “unjust” leader (450 volts) who starts out and gains trust as a just leader (15 volts). With subsequent alterations to the experiment, further conclusions of the study revealed that peers are tremendously potent to the outcome of the experiment. 90% of people are reluctant to defy authority when other peers follow suit. However, when there are allies to defy authority, there is a dramatic reduction (10%) in the numbers willing to carry out the evil deed.

One of the most powerful influences on evil behavior is boredom. This is seen in prisons. Evil is about power and the misuse of it.

HIP creates new research on all aspects of heroism. Their programs fortify individuals against anti-social passivity, inspire individuals to take positive civic action, and coach the necessary skills and habits that translate into action. HIP is creating new Hero Education curricula at all school grades, in-class courses, on-line web based programs and summer camp leadership training programs. In addition, there are corporate initiatives with companies like Google.

Kids face challenges everyday, like peer pressure, gossip, and bullying. How do you get your kid to get involved, or to stand up to a teacher or coach if they see mistreatment taking place in school? Dr. Zimbardo’s training course asks kids to take a look at who they are and who they want to be. Examples of these lessons are: “Littering is easy, cleaning up is hard.” “Being a bully is easy, challenging bullies is hard.” To say “I hate you” is easy. To say “I forgive you” is hard. “Reacting is easy, reflecting is hard.” “Living for the moment is easy, delaying gratification is hard.”

HIP encourages kids to take small steps in doing the right thing. There is a phenomenon called *the power of one*. HIP challenges one's awareness of "if *you* don't act, who will?" The *power of two* advocates one to be an ally to those that are acting alone, or who are outcasts.

The knowledge of the *bystander effect* brings about an awareness that helps people take action. The more people present (bystanders), the less likely someone acts. There is a perceived diffusion of responsibilities - "someone else will do it." Bystanders conform to the "secret rule" of inaction. But, the minute *one person* acts. Others immediately follow.

Dr. Zimbardo asks: What will your ripple effect be?