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The mechanics of courage

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Apr. 24, 2008

COURAGEOUS RESISTANCE: THE POWER OF ORDINARY PEOPLE
By Kristina E. Thalhammer, Paula L. O?Loughlin, Myron Peretz Glazer, Penina Migdal Glazer, Sam McFarland, Sharon Toffey Shepela and Nathan Stoltzfus
Palgrave Macmillan, 210 pages, $26.95

Human history is ?not only a history of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage,? says historian Howard Zinn. Amid the chronicles of our binges in destruction are countless examples of people behaving, as Professor Zinn puts it, ?magnificently.?

A bit of that ?magnificent? history is recorded in *Courageous Resistance: The Power of Ordinary People*, a slim, potent book that examines why people risk their lives for others and what we can learn from their acts of altruism. The book?s authors, seven academics of various disciplines, writing in a single voice, analyze numerous and diverse examples of individual, collective and institutional opposition to injustice. Included here are accounts of rescuers, whistleblowers and ordinary folk who refused to be perpetrators or bystanders when abuse or atrocity became the norm. More than just an inspirational read, the book identifies personal behaviors and social conditions that are likely to promote acting on behalf of others. While there is no algorithm that assures courageous decision-making, the authors argue that moral courage is not genetically predetermined and can be cultivated.

Writer Sharon Toffey Shepela confesses she and her coauthors would like to ?change the world with this book.? Aside from that, she hopes its stories and analytical framework will increase the discussion about examples of courageous resistance.

Most of us are well-versed in cynicism, says Ms. Shepela, ?but what we don?t have is a vocabulary about goodness and efforts to make change.?

Heroes of the moment are not the focus of study here.

Courageous resistance, as defined by the authors, is ?conscious, voluntary, sustained, other-oriented behavior in a high-risk environment.? It is more widespread than most of us realize. The case studies included in the book cross a broad spectrum of time, geography and circumstance. Rwandan Paul Rusesabagina, made famous in the

film ?Hotel Rwanda,? appears in this collection, as do the residents of the French village of Le Chambon whose story is told in Philip Hallie?s work *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.

A quick-thinking hotelier, Mr. Rusesabagina saved more than a thousand Tutsis and Hutus during the 1994 genocide in his country. Steeped in Christian hospitality, Le Chambon?s residents saved 5,000 lives, harboring refugees, many of them Jews, during the Nazi occupation of France. The villagers did not regard their efforts as extraordinary. As one Chambonais put it, ?Who else would have taken care of them [the Jews] if we didn?t? They needed our help and they needed it *then*.?

A chapter examining acts of collective courageous resistance profiles a fascinating and ultimately successful effort to thwart a mega-development project on the Caribbean island of Old Providence.

One of the book?s most compelling examples of resistance is the account of 24-year-old Joseph Darby. A reservist stationed at Abu Ghraib, Army Specialist Darby decided to give military investigators a letter and photographs documenting the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners by members of his unit. The decision cost him dearly. Because of the possibility of serious retribution from his fellow soldiers, he and his wife remained in military protective custody until he left the Army. Old friends and family members shunned him, and he is still no longer welcome in his hometown. Yet when asked if he would make the same choice again, knowing what he knows, Mr. Darby unequivocally answered yes. His story is a testament to the durability of conscience and the oft-forgotten truth that moral courage, like holiness, is not confined to a particular category of people. Even perpetrators can choose to do the right thing.

An analytic model, described at the beginning of the book, provides the framework for examining each tale of courageous resistance. Our ability to make courageous decisions, we are told, is affected by who we are (preconditions), where we are (context) and who we know at the particular time in which we become aware of an injustice (social network). People predisposed to ?extensivity,? or a strong sense of universal connection with other human beings, are likely to oppose persecution and injustice. ?We don?t know Jews. We know only men,? said Le Chambon pastor André Trocmé when explaining why he refused to cooperate with Nazi authorities in the roundup of Jews.

Courageous Resistance synthesizes existing research on altruism that, thankfully, is explained in clear language. The book relies heavily on the work of sociologists Pearl and Stan Oliner, whose groundbreaking study on the rescuers of Jews has inspired much research of pro-social behavior, and the research of psychologist Ervin Staub, whose studies include the personal and social origins of genocide and torture and the evolution of caring, nonaggressive societies.

Dr. Staub argues that human beings move toward good or evil incrementally and consequently can develop themselves in either direction. The small efforts in life matter and there are no neutral acts. ?While bystanders may see their silence in the face of injustice as having a morally neutral effect, they often actually contribute to the power of those behind injustice,? write the authors of *Courageous Resistance*.

How then to promote movement toward the good? The book?s six-step guide for fostering other-centeredness recommends practicing empathy, broadening our social networks, and developing a variety of skills. ?Studies have shown that a willingness to promote and defend human rights requires a belief that it is possible to improve our world and that an attitude of fatalism inhibits that willingness,? the authors write. ?The more skills we have, the more positive responses we will have, the more empowered we will feel, and the more likely we are to feel responsible.?

Courageous Resistance?s preoccupation with the minutiae of heroic goodness is reminiscent of other thinkers. There is a banality to goodness as well as evil, argues Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo in his latest book, *The Lucifer Effect*. In her own investigation of that lofty goal of loving God and neighbor, the French St.

Thérèse of Lisieux concluded love was often best realized as a science, a succession of experiments in self-giving.

Some readers of *Courageous Resistance* may find its analytical approach a tad tedious. Moral courage, when so thoroughly dissected, loses its romantic appeal. But in their dogged commitment to examine and identify the variables of right action, the authors make known the mechanics of goodness. Moral bravery, it seems, is more ordinary and therefore more accessible than we thought.

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy lives in Worcester, Mass. and writes frequently for NCR.

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