

Why the world needs heroes

By Philip Zimbardo

Professor Emeritus, Stanford University

Can thoughts ignite revolutions? How can one person's *imagination* empower millions to challenge tyranny and injustice in the name of freedom and democracy?

In recent times, the world has been witnessing just such a mindful, viral transference of power in the uprisings and revolutions spreading across the Middle East. In Cairo, Egyptian youth, with neither a political leader of an opposition party, nor armed weapons to fight against the government militia, have been able to create a largely peaceful coup d'état. Remarkably, they achieved their goal in less than one month. Their success inoculated untold numbers of others in that region with a newfound moral courage, which is critical for translating personal intentions into civic action. We also have to acknowledge the power of the Internet and TV media for creating connectivity among the revolutionaries and the global spread of the unfolding events witnessed by millions worldwide, hour-by-hour.

Now let us return to an earlier era when mail was in the form of written letters, "snail mail," not the digital magic of instant messaging. And we also must move our clock back to the late 1960's, while changing our Google maps from the Middle East to middle Europe, then mostly dominated by Soviet Communist regimes. Specifically, we focus our analytical lens on a young playwright whose personal vision of his nation as free from external oppression got him into continual trouble with the administration. He was frequently jailed for his vocal opposition to the Czechoslovakia Communist government. Yet, he continued to write "dissident" letters from his jail cell to his wife, and others, deploring the sad state of his country. After years of Nazi cruel rule, the Communists came along to more insidiously dominate all aspects of Czech life.

Who is to blame, he asked rhetorically, for the continued suppression of individual freedom, the constraints on creativity and the pursuit of happiness. His reasoned answer was not focused on the Communist regime, its dictatorial policies, nor even its military might that had earlier crushed the “Prague Spring” of 1968. His target audience was his own people, friends, family, co-workers, and ordinary Czech citizens. Before recalling his message, let us first revisit that time zone.

Recall that time of the Prague Spring, 1968, when the people of a brave nation attempted a remarkable social experiment — seeking to put a 'human face' on its political agency. Many Czech people and their leaders believed the time had come to enhance rather than diminish the Human Condition through institutions that promoted freedom of expression and human dignity. Sadly, that hope of peaceful liberation was dashed by the mighty armor of the State. During my visit to Prague in July 1969 (for a psychology conference), I personally witnessed the resignation of many people I met about ever being freed from their external domination. They had tried, but failed to throw off the yoke of oppression. It seemed hopeless to try again. They had internalized a present- fatalistic mindset, in which capricious fate not personal action guides one's life.

Changing Resignation into Resilience and Revolution

Our young playwright, Václav Havel, identified the psychological reason for the effective control of the masses as *self-imposed passive resignation*. Havel said in letters sent from his jail cell, “We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unchangeable fact, and thus helped perpetuate it. In other words, we are all...responsible for the operation of totalitarian machinery. None of us is just a victim. We are also its co-creators.” His call was in a sense, to remove the “cortical cataracts’ that have been blinding the vision and thinking of his people. First, they needed to see and be aware of their communal complicity in being dominated, and then to look inward to their personal and communal power to change current unacceptable reality to a more desirable state of being and existence. They needed to engage their sense of personal and community resilience to challenge unjust authority and systems that demean and degrade human dignity. Once the people realized the wisdom in that analysis, they were able to work collectively to free themselves from the oppression they had been passively enduring. Without firing a shot, a peaceful revolution unfolded that dazzled the world by its immediacy and vibrancy. Václav Havel has become one of my personal heroes, at that time a very ordinary young man, a playwright, whose values, thoughts and words creating a revolution in the minds of his people. It is incredible to even imagine that his words in letters, and later from podiums, could lead to the

peaceful overthrow of a massive dictatorship. It foreshadowed by many years the fall of the Berlin Wall and the final demise of Soviet totalitarianism over much of Eastern Europe.

From Thoughts, to Words, to Actions, to Social Change

But how do mere words change reality? They must reflect the personal virtues of integrity, compassion, and wisdom that all people respect and seek to emulate. Next, the words must embody a commitment to action, and the willingness to risk the consequences of a thoughtful decision to act on behalf of others in need, or in defense of a moral cause or social/political principle. Putting words into action is akin to socially- engaged compassion. That also entails suspending our usual egocentric preoccupation while replacing it with the desire for socio-centrism, a genuine concern about making the Human Connection with others in our life space. In sum, when words reflect considered thoughts based on vital core values, they spark the "heroic imagination" within each of us. Such an orientation is a mind set that when internalized becomes the source of powerful personal and societal transformations. It is the antithesis to the "hostile imagination" that fuels a psychology of enmity. It is what every nation's propaganda machine works to instill in its people, to hate a given enemy enough to suffer war and death of its soldiers to oppose that evil demon.

While much research in social psychology, some of which I have contributed to, reveals the strong influences of the social context in dominating individual behavior for the worse, we should also be aware that good people can transform bad or even evil situations for the better. Through imaginative involvement and political activism individuals can make heavens of hell. By their collective, selfless actions people can even transform dictatorships into democracies -- one enduring lesson of Czechoslovakia's "Velvet Revolution."

Heroic Networks and Challenges to Traditional Hero Conceptions

Nelson Mandela has since reminded us of the wisdom of Gandhi's non-violent movement that underscored the power of creating *networks* of individuals who refuse to be oppressed by colonial governments, and who are willing to stand up to and speak out against national policies based on racist ideologies. In the end, goodness triumphs over perpetrators of evil. Václav Havel has provided another creative model of national liberation from oppression. Again, recall the motto of the Velvet Revolution that overthrew years of tyranny: "Truth and Love Must Prevail Over

Lies and Hatred." That same view was evident in the heroic whistle-blowing of American Daniel Ellsberg, whom Nixon's then Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, termed "The Most Dangerous Man in America." Ellsberg risked a long prison term as a state traitor for revealing top-level secret documents-- the Pentagon Papers-- to the media. Those annual reports by U.S. generals to each current President all concluded that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable, yet there was no good exit strategy. Nevertheless, all the Presidents continued to pursue the failed war persuading the public that it was indeed winnable. Ellsberg's bold and brave action hastened the end to the Vietnam War, and also indirectly led to the demise of President Richard Nixon, forced to resign over his complicity in attempts to discredit Ellsberg.

Heroes come in many forms, young and old, male and female, who are mostly ordinary, everyday people whose *acts* of heroism qualify as extra-ordinary. The defining qualities of heroism are: Intentional action in service to others in need, or to humanity by defending a moral cause, aware of potential risks and personal costs. So first, we must democratize the notion of heroism away from older views of the select few, who seem not to walk on mortal soil, and to be blessed with inborn super qualities. Anyone can be a hero at any time an opportunity arises to stand up for what is right and just, and to speak out against injustice, corruption, and other evils. Heroism can be learned, can be taught, can be modeled, and can be a quality of being to which we all should aspire.

Next, we must defuse the notion of the "solo hero," such as a military warrior who risks his or her life in battle to save comrades, to embrace the greater value of "heroic networks." When ordinary people band together to oppose systemic evil of any kind, they become communal heroes. They would be relatively impotent if acting alone. In contrast to "reactive heroes" who act spontaneously in response to an emergency, such as saving a person drowning, most whistle-blowers are "pro-active heroes" who identify a wrong needing to be righted, and typically engage other like-minded people to assist in the investigation or to form a political action committee. Christians who aided Jews during the Holocaust were successful when banding in such networks that could move the children and families from place to place. One outstanding example of such heroism is seen in the mission of Polish social worker, Irena Sendler, who worked tirelessly to save Jewish children in the Warsaw ghetto from extermination. Through devious means she arranged for children to be escorted out of this sure death camp to safety. The network that Sendler had created of 20 other Polish citizens, who risked their death to save innocent lives of strangers, saved the lives of at least 2,500 children. Since that time

those children have had children and grandchildren, so the gain to life over death numbers more than ten thousand by now!

Let me add for contrast, a 9 year-old Chinese boy, a reactive hero, who saved lives by his quick response to an emergency. A massive earthquake just prior to the Beijing Olympics destroyed Lin Hao's classroom in Szechuan province. As he was escaping the devastated classroom, Lin noticed two students struggling under the debris. He raced back to save their lives. When asked why he had taken such a risk, he answered assuredly: "I was the Hall Monitor, it was *my job* to look after my classmates." That is a dutiful hero in action.

Psychology of Liberation and the Heroic Imagination

The time has come for us all to help create and enjoy a new 'psychology of liberation.' It is a compassionate call to arms in opposing all those forces both within and without each individual that diminish the potential for human perfection. It is an invitation to join in a global community that supports those forces that will strengthen the bonds of the human condition -- starting with justice, peace, and love. In the end, I believe that each of us has the ability to make a difference in improving the human condition -- through acts of kindness, generosity of spirit, and a vision that always seeks to make others feel special, worthwhile, understood and embraced as our kin, especially when they are not of our kind.

What inner quality heroes such as, Ghandi, Václav Havel, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Daniel Ellsberg, Irena Sendler, and others have that sets them apart from their non-hero acting peers, was the "*power of the heroic imagination.*" It is a unique mindset that must be internalized and utilized to crystallize beliefs and values into social, political action. Such a belief system enables any of us when faced with situational forces that make us feel powerless to rise above and beyond those limitations and gain strength to act wisely and nobly as effective everyday heroes. This heroic imagination gains action force through strengthening our sense of moral courage. The formula for heroism is: Heroic Imagination plus Moral Courage equals the willingness and ability to stand up to evil in all its many forms, challenging injustice, inhumanity, indifference, and corruption.

Recently, I have been able to found and preside over a new San Francisco based, non-profit organization, **The Heroic Imagination Project**, or **HIP**. Its revolutionary mission is to sow the seeds of everyday heroes around the earth, starting with youngsters as our ambassadors of heroic deeds, while virally spreading our messages and strategies via the World Wide Web to their elders, parents, educators, politicians,

and ordinary citizens. Our goal is to encourage each of those people to start their personal hero journey one good deed at a time, while learning how to be effective change agents able to cope with and remediate problems in their families, schools, workplaces, communities, and nations. In addition to our Education Initiative, we are promoting new Research on heroism (currently there is very little), Corporate Initiatives of building corporate cultures of integrity, and Public Engagement Initiatives where we are developing programs of: Eco Heroes, Disability Heroes, Health Heroes, Tech Heroes, Anti-Bullying programs, and much more.

Think big, but start now by doing small, constructive daily social and political actions that in concert are the stuff of Everyday Heroism. Please visit us at: **WWW.HeroicImagination.Org** and take the Hero Pledge and Challenge.

About the author:

Philip G. Zimbardo is Professor Emeritus at Stanford University and one of the leading figures of contemporary psychology. Having received his B.A. in 1954 from Brooklyn College, he completed both his MSc and PhD at Yale University in Social Psychology. Professor Zimbardo taught at Yale, New York and Columbia universities before moving to Stanford University in 1968. His distinguished career spans many decades and many research topics including: prisons, time, shyness, madness, violence/evil, persuasion, hypnosis, dissonance, teaching, political psychology, terrorism, and others. One of his best known studies is the famous Stanford Prison Experiment, 1971, exploring the impact of an extreme social context on the behaviour of normal individuals. He has authored more than 200 articles and chapters as well as numerous textbooks. Professor Zimbardo held two times the position of President of the Western Psychological Association, and is also past president of the American Psychological Association. He is leading the Heroic Imagination Project, and was involved in establishing the Shyness Clinic and Institute. Professor Zimbardo is a strong believer in the practical value of psychology, a strong media figure and advocate of the power to change for the better. Among his recent books: *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007); *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time That Will Change Your Life* (2008) (with J. Boyd).

Address for correspondence: Philip Zimbardo, Department of Psychology, Building 420, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2130

Email: zim@stanford.edu