



'Million Mask March' protests, Budapest, 2014

Ordinary Heroes

History ought to consist only of the anecdotes of the little people who were caught up in it.

Louis de Bernieres

WHEN KEVIN BRIGGS WAS FIRST stationed on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge as a Highway Patrol officer in 1996, he'd had no training whatsoever on dealing with the frequent suicide jumpers that have made the bridge the world's most popular site for people to take their own lives.

Left to his own devices, he gradually learned which techniques worked and which hindered his attempts to persuade people contemplating jumping off the bridge to pause and step back from the precipice.

During his two decades as the unofficial 'Guardian of the Golden Gate Bridge,' Briggs estimates that he prevented over 200 people from committing suicide.

Briggs retired from the Highway Patrol in 2013, and now works—not surprisingly—as a volunteer in the field of suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

Although he achieved a degree of fame due to his association with the world's most famous bridge, achieving notoriety was, Briggs says, the furthest thing from his mind.

In fact, most people in similar situations deliberately avoid publicity. Which begs the question: What is it that motivates a typically self-centered, self-absorbed person to step outside of their comfort zone in order to help a stranger, even if it might involve considerable personal risk to themselves?

Few people actively seek out opportunities to become heroes; instead, they unexpectedly find themselves in a situation that requires them to choose between making either a safe but selfish or a courageous, selfless decision.

In most cases, moreover, that decision is made instinctively and unconsciously, challenging the common assumption that selfishness and self-preservation is the evolutionary priority of the human species, and altruism is merely an aberration.

Similarly, the idea that great turning points in history require the heroic actions of an individual, whether a Napoleon, a Churchill, or a Rosa Parks—the so-called ‘Great Man’ theory of history—was long ago relegated to the ‘dustbin of history’ itself.

While a strong, charismatic leader can certainly help inspire others to action, wars, revolutions, and other monumental changes require the participation of thousands of people collectively deciding to unite in order to undertake extraordinary action.

Similarly, the spirit of an era is arguably not best reflected in its leaders—or perhaps even in its heroes—but moreso in the everyday life and concerns of what we too often condescendingly call ‘ordinary’ people.

Granted, the opportunity to take heroic action in the manner that Kevin Briggs repeatedly did is rare, unless you are a fireman, policeman, soldier, or engaged in other professions which entail daily risk. But there is a less dangerous, equally commendable path to personal heroism.

The fact is, to be a hero to anyone else, a person must first become a hero to *himself*. This effort has nothing to do with ego, arrogance, or self-centeredness (much less conventional notions of success, wealth, or power), and everything to do with a person’s *character*—his or her degree of integrity, honesty, authenticity, and compassion.

Buddhists approach the idea of heroism from a very different direction than most people might—not as anything extraordinary, but as a potential that lies within all of us.

Whether or not we act heroically when faced with a morally challenging decision depends a lot on our deep-seated values, values which cause us to act automatically, without hesitation or need for deliberation.

Without regular, practiced cultivation of mindfulness and intention, however, these qualities lie dormant within us. It is only when we meet life with a serene, unclouded state of mind that they can shine forth.

To engage in a heroic act, done without any expectation of acknowledgement or reward, one must understand deeply that he or she is bound to others in a way that mere altruism or even compassion cannot explain. (Altruism can disguise a selfish—if perhaps unconscious—intent, and compassion, while an admirable human trait, doesn’t necessarily always lead to heroism.)

What is required for true heroism toward others to emerge is the deep understanding that there really are no *others*. Seen in this light, heroism doesn’t always involve great physical risk or self-sacrifice: Overcoming our own negative, limiting internal beliefs and conditioning can be as daunting a task as confronting any external demons. The risk is not to our person, but to something far more frightening to our fragile ego: the very idea of *being* an isolated, independent person.

A man who is aware of his true nature never allows fear to dictate his behavior, but faces it steadfastly, knowing how to move beyond it. The embodiment of fearlessness and self-confidence, he may be said to have conquered the world by conquering himself.

They may not wear medals or have holidays named after them, but even so, we are surrounded by ‘ordinary heroes.’ Living a conscious, compassionate life is the greatest act of heroism a person can achieve, the true ‘hero’s journey’ of ancient myths. ■