

## **A PSYCHOLOGY OF LIBERATION IN AN ERA OF FEAR AND TERROR**

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It is with some humility and considerable pride that I accept this honor from Webster University to award me its honorary degree on this day as part of your commencement festivities. Aware of both your tradition of excellence in educating generations of young scholars and your mission of reaching out across national boundaries to bring the highest quality of learning to men and women who represent the finest qualities of their many, diverse nations, I am delighted to be given this opportunity to share some of my ideas with the administration, faculty, students, their families, and honored guests.

The basic theme of my presentation is discovering new ways to liberate people from the self-imposed prisons of mind that limit their freedoms and reduce their human potential for greatness. A secondary theme is finding ways to inspire the “Heroic Imagination” in our young people, thereby enabling them to accept a new self-definition as “ordinary heroes- in- waiting” for the right situation in which to take an extraordinary heroic action in the service of others or a higher moral principle. My talk is also about my fascination with the human mind’s infinite capacity to make us be kind or cruel, to be caring or selfish, to act creatively or destructively, to make some of us into villains while others emerge as heroes. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton set the platform for such a view of the nobility and facility of the human mind by reminding us that, “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, or Hell of Heaven.”

I have spent much of the past 50 years of my life as a social psychologist-researcher and teacher, developing programs of research that demonstrate the vulnerability of most people when caught up in the vortex of powerful social situations. I try to create controlled conditions in laboratory settings that allow me to test causal hypotheses about the nature of human nature. Because I am passionate about understanding the dynamics of human nature in its many facets, my research domains have been quite varied. I have studied: mind control, time perspective, shyness, madness, prisons, torture, and other evils. These were some of the topics that were taught in the intensive course I have just completed in which 20 Webster students explored the dynamics of human nature

with me. Incidentally, they represented 12 different national identities.

In general, I have shown that social conditions can exert powerful influences over the way we feel, think and act, even though we are not aware of their subtle and pervasive impact on us. My research has shown how most rational people can behave irrationally, sane people can act crazy, and good people can do bad things—sometimes, under specified social conditions.

My research on the psychology of evil has centered on the processes of deindividuation-- feeling anonymous--and dehumanization--treating others as “Enemies” with less than human attributes. My most well known research is the Stanford Prison Experiment that demonstrated how easy it is for ordinary people to behave in evil ways toward others when deindividuation and dehumanization were combined in a realistic prison setting. Normal, healthy college students were randomly assigned to play the roles of prisoner or guard in a mock prison scheduled to last 2 weeks. However, I was forced to end the study a week earlier because it had gotten out of control. Nearly half the volunteer prisoners began having "emotional breakdowns" after being brutalized repeatedly by other students acting as guards. These young men given unlimited power in their new guard role abused both that power and their prisoners by behaving sadistically, taking delight in creating ways to humiliate and degrade "their prisoners.”

Having total power over others without moral constraints or supervision by higher authorities can transform good people into perpetrators of evil, as we have seen in the abuses by American soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison-- which reveals remarkable parallels with my Stanford Prison.

I have also been responsible for one line of research that did just the opposite of the Stanford Prison Experiment -it helped to *liberate* people from psychological prisons. One Self-Imposed Silent Prison is Shyness. Mine was the first systematic investigation of shyness in adults. Prior to 1972 when my students and I began a systematic investigation of the causes, correlates, and consequences of shyness, researchers had studied only shyness in children. Once we understood the dynamics of shyness, we created a Shyness Clinic in our community that has been treating shy adolescents and adults for the past 30 years. It is the first of its kind anywhere and has become a model emulated in other cities and countries. We teach shy people ways to minimize the inhibiting

impact that social anxiety creates in their lives, and we go further in empowering them to embrace and love others by strengthening their resolve to become vital links in the Human Connection.

I have been privileged to be able to explore the darker sides of human nature in order to find ways of shedding new light on them and to develop remedial interventions to alter those undesirable states. It has become part of my agenda to act as an agent for social change in promoting the psychology of liberation. In recent years, I have been devoting more of my intellectual energy and academic credibility to discovering new ways in which I can help to liberate people from various prisons of the mind and of the spirit that diminish human dignity, reduce personal autonomy, and curtail freedoms of expression and association. What are some psychological prisons in our minds and in our midst?

Shyness is a cruel prison. We each contribute to the growing epidemic of shyness in the United States and many other countries (as a consequence of the socially isolating impact of many new technologies) by failing to do one simple thing -- helping to make others feel "special." We can do that by criticizing less while complimenting and praising others more often. We need to substitute greater cooperation for competition, and being more openly accepting of others. We can also help our children train daily for "social fitness" just as they might do in athletic training to be more physically fit.

One must wonder if the murders of students and teacher's at Virginia Tech University a short while ago, could have been prevented had anyone stepped forth to give counsel, guidance and friendship to that lonely, alienated, and shy young man, who without that social comfort was transformed instead into a mass murderer. And there are many more such sad, angry young men with weapons ready to explode unless we acknowledge that their problem is our problem, that they too are children of the modern world.

Beyond shyness, Shame is a humbling prison. As a child growing up in poverty in the ghetto known as the South Bronx in New York City, I was often shamed by social workers, clinic doctors, and others who made evident that me and my kind of poor people were a burden on their society. I still remember the sadness and anger I felt when being told that "beggars can't be choosers," so I was forced to accept the ugly clothes they were handing out without any complaints. Shame is

one consequence of prejudice and discrimination. To combat that evil, we must find new ways to encourage tolerance for diversity, and to celebrate differences among us as contributing to the beautiful composite that is the mosaic of human nature.

Time Traps create unrecognized prisons. Those people who focus excessively on memories of negative past experiences are more likely to get depressed, and become more angry and violence-prone. When a nation or groups within a culture collectively share such a past-negative time perspective, the threat of centuries' old revenge and blood feud is ever present, as we have seen in genocidal wars in many nations in our own times. It is time now to create a New Time that involves the youth of all nations in developing captivating future-oriented strategies to combat those old-fashioned myths and outmoded revenge scenarios.

However, there is another aspect of time perspective that creates a unique prison for many young people everywhere, that is being totally present-oriented -- with a focus on either hedonism or present fatalism. To be trapped in the present-hedonistic prison creates an illusion of freedom to do whatever gives one pleasure without concern for future costs and consequences. Those who live by the rule of Present-Hedonism are at risk for all addictive behaviors, which start with pleasure and end in disaster. Others who are present-fatalists take no actions that will give them pleasure or improve their usually low social-economic status because they have internalized the belief that *fate* controls their destiny. This fatalistic view confines many families to prisons of poverty and suppresses motivation to make changes in their lives of quiet desperation. The ideal time perspective that I advocate is learning to develop a balanced blend of a moderate level of Future orientation with a Positive Past orientation adding a dash of present-hedonism on the side. A positive past orientation gives us *roots* that connect us to our culture, tradition, and family. A future orientation gives us *wings* to soar to new destinations that enable us to discover new opportunities. A present-hedonist orientation gives us *energy* to convert problems into challenges, to take risks and seek new modes of being. Realizing that ideal should be the quest of individuals and of nations that enable such a healthy temporal combination to flourish.

### **Never Trade Freedom for Security-- Even in the War on Terrorism**

In many of these psychological prisons, we exchange our personal freedoms for promises of

security, and for simple solutions to complex issues. That trade-off is filled with dangerous illusions. Right now in many nations, especially in the United States of America, national leaders are proposing that same trade-off in response to the threat of global terrorism. They promise to make the homeland safe and guarantee security in return for citizens sacrificing some of their hard-won basic freedoms. The more freedom we surrender to buy the illusion of security, the more we are doing the terrorists' work for them since their threat alone is sufficient to induce democracies to ask citizens to trade some freedoms for a promise of security. In his classic work, Erich Fromm warned us decades ago that dictators are always eager to stage such trades—and they should be avoided or challenged by freedom-loving people everywhere.

Terrorist threats come from extreme fundamentalism within and outside our nations. They must be opposed not by nation wars, but through wise diplomatic conflict resolution, and also by reaching into the hearts and minds of potential terrorists to change their lives in constructive ways. We must give them hope for a better future through education and adequate resources to live fuller, more meaningful lives without violence. It should be the task of democratic governments to enrich the lives of their own citizens by enhancing their freedoms while promoting justice, equity, and personal dignity for all people.

### **Liberty and Truth**

Political and social revolutions begin in the *minds* of men and women who can liberate their critical thinking skills from the confines of tradition and free their spirits from the forces of external domination. I invite you to reflect with me on this theme of the Psychology of Liberation. I encourage us all to consider the ways in which we limit our own personal freedoms, in particular, the freedom of our minds to soar to new realms. We need to reflect further on how we act like prison guards by imprisoning others through prejudices, unreasonable expectations, and contingent rather than unconditional giving of our love. And further, how we limit ourselves if we persist in seeing the world in simplistic black and white dichotomies that encourage us to believe that what our side is doing is legitimate and right, and our opinions are the only correct and acceptable views, while "The Other" is Wrong, Stupid, and Evil.

Together we must work to open all the prisons of the mind to liberate the creative energies that are

stifled by such cerebral bars. Governments that make citizens feel vulnerable through excessive warnings of danger end up hijacking collective reason and communal resilience with emotional overload. We must also refashion our laws and correctional facilities to design community alternatives to physical incarceration, and more humanized treatment of all prisoners so that they will be effectively functioning citizens when they return to our society. Nelson Mandela has given us one effective model for doing so, in his long prison term in South Africa. "Truth and Love Must Prevail Over Lies and Hatred," that was the motto of Vaclav Havel's freedom fighters in Czechoslovakia's "Velvet Revolution" against the brutal domination of Soviet Communism. It is even more valid today as lies and hatred breed genocide, civil wars, and suicidal terrorism around the globe. Truth and love must bind to form understanding and compassion as the first principles in opposing the spread of new forms of tyranny.

### **Call to Arms for the Psychology of Liberation**

My Psychology of Liberation is a call to arms, but to *compassionate arms*, in opposing all those forces both within us and around us 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.

### **Inspiring the Heroic Imagination**

My new mission in life is finding ways to inspire the "Heroic Imagination" in us all, but especially in our youth. Most heroes are ordinary people, every day heroes, who only become special by acting when others are passive, or are perpetrating evil. Their action moves them away from an ego-centric focus to a socio-centric focus, on helping others or serving a higher moral cause. We don't understand what makes such ordinary people take heroic actions, but I know that by thinking of yourself as a "hero-in-waiting" for a new situation to arise where you will act heroically, increases the likelihood that when the time comes you will be heroic. The best antidote to Evil is a nation filled with young people ready to join with others on this path toward heroism.

In the end, despite difficult times, and threats to our way of life, we can make a heaven on earth even of hellish existence by committing ourselves to reaffirming what is best in human nature. Doing so joins us with the wonderfully vibrant hero of Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis, Zorba, The Greek, in the great dance of life -- as we all devote our creative energies to making love, not making war.

And so, dear graduates on this your unforgettable day, you have earned the praise of your teachers, and you have justified the faith and investments of love (and tuition money) of your parents in helping to make your life more meaningful through your years of education here at Vienna-Webster.

However, I want something more profound from each of you. I want you to use the unique training you have received at Webster University to become Citizens of the World starting out on a personal quest "to make a difference that matters" where ever you go at home and abroad. Though young, I want you to act wisely, though cynical of elders who have proven to be false or corrupted prophets, I encourage you to be optimistic about your ability to change systems to work for people not against them. And finally, though you may be usually timid and reserved, from now onward I hope that you will be ready and willing to put on the Hero's mantel to act when most others around you are passive-- acting both to help others in need and to oppose injustice and inequality where ever you find it.

It is a tall order, I know, but one that I am certain that each of YOU CAN AND WILL FULFILL SOMEDAY SOON.

Thank you.

Phil Zimbardo