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Zimbardo promotes heroism around the world

By Paula E. Hartman-Stein

Akron, Ohio – With strains of Santana’s, “You’ve got to change your evil ways,” setting the stage for his talk, Philip Zimbardo, Ph.D., professor emeritus from Stanford and former APA President, recently wowed a crowd of 1,100 here, explaining why some people are evil doers and others heroes.

Wearing a superhero T shirt under his dress shirt, 82-year-old Zimbardo said, “My personal journey has been from creating evil to encouraging heroism. I went from being under the influence of Darth Vader to the Z man.”

Six years ago Zimbardo formed a San Francisco-based non-profit, The Heroic Imagination Project, an educational program designed for high school, colleges and professional organizations based on the premise that ordinary people are capable of taking extraordinary action.

Using learning modules that incorporate videos, the teachers act as coaches and students answer questions and practice positive behavior in dyads. The lessons teach how to engage in courageous conversations, confront bullying behavior and overcome the bystander effect of doing nothing to help others.

Currently the non-profit has programs in Hungary, Poland, Italy, the UK, Bali and Flint, Michigan.

Zimbardo is best known for his 1971 Stanford prison study in which college students assigned the role of prison guards abused their fellow students who played the prisoners. His research showed that under certain circumstances, law abiding, responsible adults can morph into mean-spirited monsters.

A movie, *The Stanford Prison Experiment* written by Tim Talbott, was released in July. Zimbardo said the film is 90 percent accurate.

According to Zimbardo, evil is the intentional use of power to harm people through sexism, racism, name calling, physical harm, torture and killing. “Most evil is done with systems. We’ve ignored the broader level of evil, such as fraud, corruption and indifference to climate change.”

He identified extreme societal evils such as slave labor, sex trafficking, poverty, war and genocide. He said the mind control used by the Chinese government to promote smoking in schools because the government owns the tobacco monopoly results in the death of a million Chinese men each year.

Zimbardo said as a child he pondered why some people become evil. Growing up in the Bronx, New York, he observed that some of his friends veered toward the dark side, choosing a life of crime while others kept to a straight path of socially acceptable behavior. “I wanted to know about the line that separates good people from bad. Could it be that the line between them was permeable, not fixed?”

Evidence from social psychology research suggests that choices of action are not totally dependent upon the personality traits of the individual. “The legal, political, cultural system has a major effect,” he said.

In his book, *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo examines the impact of an individual’s behavior and what enables a small percentage of people to resist enormous group pressure.

Zimbardo said every psychology text is missing two words: hero and heroism. In the positive psychology literature, compassion and empathy are considered private virtues and heroism is a civic virtue. "Compassion must be transformed into heroic action to combat evil. Feeling compassion is a first step but it must be linked to action."

Zimbardo's definition of hero is someone who acts on behalf of others in need or defends a moral cause. "It is action you take when you are aware there are consequences to you, you can get hurt, lose your job or a friendship."

The Heroic Imagination project seeks to transform people, teach skills, provide knowledge, tools and strategies to encourage people to make a personal plan to become every day heroes. Not only in extreme situations of physical danger can a person be heroic but also in everyday life. Zimbardo encourages courageous conversations in which people speak up against racist and sexist remarks.

He cited examples of many heroes throughout history such as those involved in the American civil rights movement, those who opposed Nazi cruelty and those who have taken risks to save others' lives.

Zimbardo also included his fiancée in 1971 among the list of everyday heroes. After she observed the behavior of the student guards, she challenged his allowing the abuse to go on. She was ready to give up their relationship. Zimbardo shut down the experiment the next day. "I realized I had become the guards' superintendent. With that challenge, I've given up evil. From then on, I only promote goodness."

His fiancée became his wife of 44 years.

Zimbardo said the mind has an infinite capacity to make people kind or cruel, caring or indifferent, destructive or creative. He encouraged the audience to dare to be different.

The occasion for the sold-out 90-minute talk for the community was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Cummings' Center for the History of Psychology located at the University of Akron.