Moral Courage in Arizona

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In the wake of the Arizona shootings, we're learning a lot about criminal pathology from scrutinizing the suspect, Jared Loughner. But we're learning even more about moral courage by looking at how ordinary individuals behaved that morning. We'll never know all of the brave acts that unfolded during the few seconds of carnage in Tucson, as husbands shielded wives, parents covered children, and bystanders pulled others to the ground. But we do know about four people who put themselves at risk that day and saved lives:

- Roger Salzgeber, a 61-year-old businessman, tackled Loughner as he stopped to reload his Glock semiautomatic pistol.
- Bill Badger, a 74-year-old retired U.S. Army colonel, came to Salzgeber's aid and wrestled Loughner to the ground.
- Patricia Maisch, 61, grabbed a full magazine of 9-millimeter ammunition away from Loughner as he lay on the ground trying to reload.
- Daniel Hernandez, a 20-year-old intern in Rep. Gabrielle Gifford's office, ran straight toward the shots and helped keep her alive until medical help arrived.

These four people don't fit anyone's pop-culture picture of "hero." From humanity's earliest sagas we've learned to think of the hero as a dashing young man possessed of great physical strength, with an iron will and a determination to do battle against the forces of evil. But three of these people were over 60, and one was a woman. Only one, Col. Badger, had any military training. And none of them thought of themselves as particularly courageous.

That last point is not surprising. In soliciting personal examples of courage from individuals around the world for my book *Moral Courage*, I found that hardly any of my interviewees realized during the experience that they were being courageous. Even in retrospect, they had a hard time seeing that what they did exemplified "the courage to be moral." These four are no different. Asked by various interviewers about their experiences, they didn't identify themselves as heroes. "I don't wear the hat of 'hero' real well," noted Salzgeber. Badger said, "I don't consider myself a hero." And when Hernandez denied that he was a hero, it took president Barack Obama to insist, before a cheering audience, that "we have decided that you are a hero, because you ran through the chaos to minister to your boss and tended to her wounds and helped keep her alive."

Looking in from outside, it's easy to see these acts as expressions of courage. Each of these people recognized the risk. They weren't blithely unaware of what was happening, or too stunned to see a deadly force at work. Each endured the danger of death, and faced up to it instantly and almost without a second thought.

But was this merely physical or animal courage? No, there was something more at work. Each of them, in their own ways, were acting for the sake of principle. There was a moral component in play that compelled them to act against their own self-interest for the sake of something larger. Asked why they did it, they pointed to a sense of duty. "I did what anybody would do," said Badger. Salzgeber said it was "what I had to do." And Hernandez, who had learned first aid in nurse's training, said that when he heard the shots, "I immediately knew that if there was a target, [Rep. Giffords] would likely be it," and that he "just tuned everything out and started going into critical thinking mode … to get whomever's still alive some help" until emergency medical services arrived.

These are powerful descriptions of a moral impulse, but they leave unanswered one of the largest questions in moral philosophy: Why be moral? Why act in accord with this impulse? Why not abandon all imagery of heroism in favor of the popular modern counter-image, which argues that humanity's fundamental instinct is for self-preservation? After all, our research on moral courage also has turned up numerous "inhibitors" that would work against moral courage. They range from ambiguity *(Were those really gunshots or just firecrackers?)* to bystander apathy *(Nobody else is tackling the shooter, so maybe I shouldn't),* and from a fear of exposure that dreads being out front to the over-reflection that rationalizes away the urge to act. Why, then, did moral courage arise in these individuals when they had so many handy excuses not to act?

I'm not convinced that the courage of these heroes stemmed merely from "a momentary lapse of reason," as Salzgeber wryly quipped, or from what Maisch called "pure adrenaline." Nor, I suspect, is it enough to say, as Badger did, that "my military background made me react." Such comments aren't surprising. They arise from that same self-effacing humility that doesn't see itself as courageous, but they don't do justice to what was really happening.

I suspect, instead, that what was at work was nothing less than the fundamental goodness of humanity. Yes, fear and self-preservation are mighty influences on humanity, but so is goodness, expressed in such ethical values as the responsibility to something beyond oneself, the respect for the lives of others, and the fairness and compassion that can well up into a vehement rejection of random violence.

Which is why, in the end, Tucson stands as an emblem of a kind of courage that is less physical than moral. Arizona and the Old West may have been built on the bravery of physically gutsy gunslingers. In 2011, their heirs exemplified the moral courage that conquers violence with values — and saves lives. Lying just below the surface of our lives, disguised by the faces of good people leading ordinary lives, moral courage is no rarified element. It's not something our forebears had but we've lost. Tucson proves it's still here, ready to flash into heroism just when it's most needed.