

— The roots of evil – Ch. 1

Transcription of the interview with Philip Zimbardo¹

1. The Lucifer Effect

I wrote a book in 2007 called The Lucifer Effect. The subtitle is: Understanding How Good People Can Turn Evil. And in the book I summarize in great detail, which I had never done before, my Stanford prison experiment which I did way back in August 1971. But then I also present in great detail my experience with Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq working as part of the defense team with Chip Frederick.

And then also, I expand to say let's look at evil around the world. So I summarize all the evil in psychological research.

I had chapters on evil around the world about Rwanda and Bosnia. And right now there are more conflicts around the world than ever before.

Evil is taking action using your power to destroy other people, or to destroy a religion, or destroy a way of thinking or living and it's always done to have more personal power or national power or religious power.

So I should mention about Stanley Milgram, Stanley Milgram is a little Jewish boy, we were in the same class in high school, in James Monroe High School in the Bronx and we sat next to each other and he was brilliant. And this was 1948, '49, '50. And it's not that far from the second World War. And he used to say, «I wonder if it could ever happen that me and my family could be in a concentration camp». I said, «No, Stanley, we're not that kind of people». He said, «I bet they said the same thing then, we're not that kind of people». And then he said 16 years old said, «How do you know what you would do until you're in that situation?».

¹ Prof. Philip Zimbardo, Psychologist, professor emeritus at Stanford University.

"When you're not in that situation you're a good person, I would never do that. Now you're in that situation and look, you're doing it"

The reason I did the Stanford prison experiment is I imagine that it's relatively rare that you're in a situation where somebody says do something bad. That usually you have a job. You're a used car salesman and the boss says, «Get the best price for this car. Don't tell them it was in an accident». Or you're selling some property that you know could be on a earthquake... So that's evil, you've got to sell somebody a bad car.

Or you're a policeman and your job is to keep law and order and you happen to be in an area of a ghetto area where immigrants or blacks, Hispanics. And the people in there would say, «We want you to protect us». And so you're going to be too ready to punish at jail migrants or immigrants. So for me, it said typically we play a role in life. We are the role we play. I'm a teacher, you're a business.

So I said what happens if we put people in roles that everybody knows are roles about power. If you are God, your job is to demonstrate to the prisoners you have power and they have none.

"Your job is to maintain law and order and see nobody escape. That's all we tell the guards"

And what you know from the study is within one day, the guards are no harming the prisoners, abusing them in infinitely creatively evil ways. And as you know, recently, there was a movie, a Hollywood movie made about it which is about 90% accurate. I was a consultant on the movie and so almost all of it is accurate.

The only thing they changed was the way the study ended is my wife, Christina Maslach, who we started dating. We just moved in together in San Francisco not far from here. When she come down halfway through and saw what was happening, she started to cry, got really upset and said, «It's terrible what you are doing to those boys. They're not prisoners, they're boys, students, and you're allowing them to suffer and I don't understand. You have a reputation, you love students, students love you. These are students». And then I had a big argument. I said, «You're a woman, you're too soft». No, really. Then she said, «Stop. If this is the real you, I don't want to continue my relationship with you».

Essentially, that's the heroic thing to say, I'm willing to give up a romantic hopefully lifetime relationship if you continue to engage in this evil, if you continue this. And at that point, I said, «Oh, my God. You're right». So in the real world, I said, «Okay, I'm going to end this study tomorrow».

So The Lucifer Effect is really all about is a round-about way of saying how easy it is for ordinary people to be seduced by power. And sometimes it's a minimal power. I mean, as I said, early in my biography, as a child growing up in the South Bronx ghetto, there would be men, always men, never women who would seduce kids to do evil things for money, to take a packet from here to there, you get \$10. \$10 then was like a \$100 now. Or to break into a store at night to steal or girls to sell your body.

And some of my friends did it and I and others didn't. So as a child so I was thinking what's the difference between people giving into temptation and temptation is all about having... so this is money power. Now, if you're middle class, you don't do things for money as a kid. You get an allowance. You have a job. You'll whine, «Mama, I want a bike, I want to have those shoes», and you get it. If you're poor, none of that works.

So again, one of the reasons poor people are overrepresented in prison is that many of them have no legitimate way of having access to money which you need in extreme for survival or you need just to have good things in your life.

Do you think the participants had lost all awareness of being part of an experiment?

Everybody was aware at some level. So everybody is aware it's an experiment. If you're a guard, you come in to Stanford University. You walk down a flight of steps so the guards work eight-hour shifts. Obviously, the prisoners live there. So if you're a guard and you leave, there's a dressing room in guards quart. So get dressed, put on the uniform, you work eight hours. You leave, you walk out. So the guards always knew it was not a real prison. It was a basement in the psychology building. The prisoners, once you're there, you lose that connection because there's no windows, there's no clocks. Your whole life is a little prison cell or a corridor.

But after the first day, no one used the word experiment meaning it was a prison run by psychologists.

You come down and it's, «Okay, you're going to be a guard. You're going to be a prisoner». You put on your uniform, you put on the makeup. You step on the stage and you perform.

“So you're performing and the audience is in your mind”

On the first day, nothing happened. Nobody wanted to be a guard.

But once you put them in the uniform and suddenly they've had... and the goggles. I mean, the idea and the civil reflective goggles. You become dehumanized, they can't see you. And pretty soon you became a guard.

At any time, if somebody says I quit the experiment, the experiment to me had to release them. That's why I said, I quit the experiment. No one said that. They said, «I want to see a doctor». «I want to see a lawyer». «I want my mother».

“«I quit the experiment». No one said that”

And then over time, the guards began to enjoy their unlimited power because almost always it was guards and prisoners. It was very rare that I or my graduate students went on the yard because essentially, we're looking at what's happening behind the scenes.

And what about you? During the experiment, did your personality or your behavior change?

Oh, yeah, of course.

The biggest mistake I made was to be the principal investigator and the superintendent of the Stanford Prison Jail.

And the problem was that I began to live in the experiment meaning at night I would sleep on a couch in my office upstairs so I never left. So I'd sleep and then in the middle of the night the assistants would come and say, «Somebody is having a nervous breakdown». I'll go down, talk to them, bring them to student health. And so I'm living in this environment.

I just underestimated what it means to have an experiment that doesn't stop.

Over time, I became the superintendent of their prison which was a really big mistake.

Now, I think if Christina had not intervened, I would have ended it on Sunday only because it started on Sunday, end it... So psychologically it would be a week. So I'd say I'm doing a good thing, I'm not going the second week. But I'm so glad it when I did.

[to be continued]