



Do You Have Role Models? Why We Need Them to Promote Well-Being

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Life often throws at us challenges and obstacles that can feel insurmountable. This can lead us to think that we have no power to change things. The result is inaction and continued suffering.

One way to overcome the feeling of powerlessness is to keep an eye out for positive role models – individuals whose behaviour we respect and would like to emulate. According to social learning theory, much of what we learn about how to act comes from observing the behaviour of others.¹ Positive role models, whether parents, teachers, bosses, peers, or even strangers, can teach us moral behaviour and inspire us to behave in more ethical and productive ways, for ourselves and for others.

Today, unfortunately, much attention is given to those whose behaviour is highly questionable and damaging to emotional wellbeing.² It sometimes feels as if negative role models are more common than positive ones.

However, if we look closely, we can find many individuals who can provide us with some ethical direction and motivation. Looking out for these sources of guidance can help us muster the courage we need to tackle our own problems. Cultivating this courage is especially important when we start to feel as if our own circumstances are too difficult to handle. Having an example to follow can be very helpful.

Over the summer, I spent some time reading Leon Uris' *QBVII*, a book published in 1970. It got me thinking about courage and heroism under extremely challenging situations.

QBVII is about a court case between a Polish-British doctor (Adam Kelno) and an American writer (Abraham Cady). During the Second World War, Kelno was captured by the Nazis in Poland and was taken to Jadwiga, an extermination camp. There, Kelno served as one of the camp's doctors. After the war, Kelno made his way to Britain, served overseas in Borneo (then a British colony, today part of Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia), earned a knighthood for his work, and returned to London to continue practicing as a doctor. Just as Kelno appears to have his life back on track, he receives word that Cady has published a book

¹ Michael Brown & Linda Trevino, "Do Role Models Matter? An Investigation of Role Modeling as an Antecedent of Perceived Ethical Leadership," *Journal of Business Ethics* Vol. 122 No. 4 (July 2014), pp. 588-589.

² Susan Krauss Whitbourne, "We All Need Role Models to Motivate and Inspire Us," *Psychology Today* (November 19, 2013). Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201311/we-all-need-role-models-motivate-and-inspire-us>

stating that while at Jadwiga, Kelno worked with the Nazis to conduct brutal experiments on Jewish inmates. Kelno sues Cady for libel, and the two go to court.

In court, Kelno defends himself saying not only was he not complicit in the Nazi experiments but that his work saved lives and met the highest of medical standards, even under very difficult conditions. Any wrongdoing he did commit, he and lawyers argued, were due to the severe duress he was under. If he didn't obey orders, the Nazis would send him to the gas chambers.

The merits of Kelno's defense depended on the accuracy of his accounts of his behaviour as well as the larger question of what we can reasonably expect of someone living under horribly repressive conditions. In his closing statement, Kelno's lawyer emphasizes this point:

We keep returning to a thought of how we in England can really re-create in our minds the nightmare of Jadwiga Concentration Camp. We heard some of the horror, but can we really relate to it? Can we really understand how this would affect the mind of an ordinary man....you or I? How would we have stood up in Jadwiga?³

How we answer this question depends in part on the extent to which we believe that our environment determines our behaviour. If we see our environment as posing obstacles that we can't overcome, then we may be doomed to behave in ways that are unethical and damaging to our mental health.

But if we believe that we have some power, some ability to make a choice, even in the face of significant challenges, then new possibilities open up.

During the trial, Cady's lawyer argued that Kelno did have a choice about whether to follow the Nazi orders or resist. How did they know? They pointed out that other doctors at Jadwiga refused to participate in the Nazi experiments, risking their own lives in the process. If these doctors disobeyed Nazi orders, why didn't Kelno? As Cady's lawyer put it:

I agree that Jadwiga Concentration Camp was as awful as things had ever come to. Yet, members of the jury, the inhumanity of man to man is as old as man itself. Just because one is in Jadwiga or anyplace else where people are inhumane, that does not give him leave to discard his morality, his religion, his philosophy, or all of those things that make him a decent member of the human race.⁴

It's a thought provoking statement. It makes me think about those individuals who have stepped up in one way or another to promote change in their own lives and for others when so much stood in their way.

Think about Glenn Loury, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in a working class neighbourhood in the south side of Chicago, an area that has been described as one of the most violent in the US. In fact, through the 1960s, when Loury was a teenager, the number

³ Leon Uris, *QB VII* (Bantam Books, 1970), p. 416

⁴ Uris, *QB VII*, p. 419.

of homicides in the city nearly doubled.⁵ Loury describes his childhood environment as quite challenging: “there was a lot of stuff going on that I don’t know that anyone could really credit as productive or helpful to the wellbeing of the micro-society of which I was a part.” Despite all of this, Loury was able to excel at school and became the first African-American Professor of Economics to receive tenure at Harvard.

People Overcoming Great Challenges

Loury would go on to experience more challenges in life, including a public scandal, professional and marital difficulties, and a drug addiction. As he describes it:

I found myself in a hole, with drug addiction, cocaine, and it almost destroyed my life and I had to go into rehab. I lost about a year in halfway houses, you know, in-patient rehab, and my marriage barely held together...⁶

Despite all of this, he persevered and worked to get his life back on track. Today, he is a prominent economics professor at Brown University and a popular public intellectual.⁷

Or think about Michaylee White. In 2008, the collapse of the US housing market and the ensuing financial crisis turned her family’s life upside down. Rather than diving into the depths of despair, she had the courage to try to adopt a different perspective. She described this perspective in an interview with the CBC:

It’s curious to think that the economy was the thing that caused my family to lose so much control. We lost three jobs and one house. I made six moves and attended three high schools, all in just two years. And still, all that my family had been through, the hardest thing of all was losing the time together and our connection to each other. Everyday I remind myself that only I am capable of removing the sadness that life brings and that I need to find happiness rather than waiting around for it.

Or think about Deborah and David Cooper, who lost their son Eli to suicide in 2010. After years of therapy and hard work, they decided to channel their energy towards promoting positive change for others. They are currently working to establish Eli’s Place - Canada’s first residential treatment centre for those struggling with mental illness.⁸ In a recent interview on the State of Mind Podcast with Mike Stroh, Deborah described their path forward in the following way:

Almost a year after his first suicide attempt, [Eli] did take his own life on July 2nd, 2010. And that changed our lives forever and sent us on a new journey...I know it’s

⁵ Kyle Bente et al., “39,000 Homicides: Retracing 60 Years of Murder in Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune* (January 9, 2018). Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-history-of-chicago-homicides-htmlstory.html>

⁶ All quotes are from Glenn Loury’s discussion with Robert Wright at Bloggingheads.tv (September 6, 2019). Available at: <https://bloggingheads.tv/videos/57277>

⁷ For an overview of Glenn Loury’s scholarly work, visit here: https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Economics/Faculty/Glenn_Loury/louryhomepage/

⁸ For more information about Eli’s Place, visit here: <http://www.elisplace.org>

a story of such profound loss and why do people want to listen. We at this point really see it as a story of recovery and hope, and this is what we want to transmit because through all the loss and the grief, and that's a whole journey on its own, we have found a way to memorialize Eli by trying to do something to make things better for others.⁹

Community Heroes

In addition to those who experience significant trauma in their lives and work through it, there are also those who courageously tackle major social problems.

Think about the work of the founders of the Holistic Life Foundation in Baltimore, Ali and Atman Smith, and Andres Gonzalez. After graduating from the University of Maryland, they returned home to find their neighbourhood in disarray. As one of the founders describes it:

What these kids experience...it's like a war zone out there. The environment in general with crime, drugs and just violence, it's like all these kids are experiencing PTSD. This is the war zone. It's not like they are going somewhere to war then coming back here and they feel like that. They're in the midst of it. They are living in it.¹⁰

Instead of either moving to a different city or succumbing, the three organized to make change. They formed a non-profit that teaches youth how to use mindfulness, meditation and yoga to better themselves and contribute to their community. Their mission is to empower individuals to take more control over their lives and to "teach teachers" in order to facilitate transformative change in their community and beyond.¹¹

Environmental Leadership

Or think about those who take action to tackle climate change, the news about which can lead to a strong sense of despair and hopelessness. In her recent book, *Shut it Down: Stories from a Fierce, Loving Resistance*, Lisa Fithian describes the courage that she and others have had in protesting human rights abuse and environmental degradation around the world, while facing threats of imprisonment and violence.¹² What is notable about her story is the way in which she thinks about the societal problems that can cause so many of us to turn away. In a recent interview, Fithian describes her perspective:

we can't let that pain destabilize us. So, again, what I've been learning is that when we are feeling afraid, when we are feeling we can't take it anymore, the most important thing to do is actually reach in and to take action and to do something, because that's where we begin to get a sense of our power, that we can make a

⁹ "Navigating the Loss of a Child," *State of Mind Podcast*. Available at:

<https://startswithme.ca/mentalhealthpodcast/navigating-the-loss-of-a-child/>

¹⁰ "Breathing Love Into Communities," *TEDxCharlottesville* (December 29, 2014). Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBj7MUJzvZc>

¹¹ For more information about the Holistic Life Foundation, visit here: <https://hlfinc.org>

¹² For more information about the book, visit here: <https://www.chelseagreen.com/product/shut-it-down/>

difference. And if history has shown us anything, it's like, unless we actually organize, we aren't going to make changes.¹³

What is particularly fascinating and inspirational about these individuals is that they defy something that psychology professor Paul Slovic and his colleagues refer to as “psychic numbing” – the cognitive phenomenon of turning away from severe problems that appear to be too big or complex to deal with, resulting in inaction.¹⁴ Rather than allowing a problem to numb them, these individuals engaged with it head-on and are better off for doing so.

These individuals, even the fictitious doctors in Jadwiga refusing Nazi orders, can offer us much inspiration. They serve as a sharp reminder that we can choose to not let our difficult circumstances get in the way of doing what needs to be done to help ourselves and to become a positive contribution to the lives of others.

We may live in difficult times, but with some effort we can find a few powerful positive role models that can help us find the path forward.

Thanks for reading and see you again in two weeks.

¹³ “Shut it Down: Veteran Organizer Lisa Fithian Offers a Guide to Resistance in an Era of Climate Crisis.” *Democracy Now* (September 6, 2019). Available at:

https://www.democracynow.org/2019/9/6/lisa_fithian_activism_shut_it_down

¹⁴ Paul Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act:’ Psychic Numbing And Genocide,” *Judgement and Decision Making* Vol. 2 No. 2 (April 2007), pp. 79-95