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## The Impassive Bystander

Someone Is Hurt, in Need of Compassion. Is It Human Instinct to Do Nothing?

By DeNeen L. Brown  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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A woman sits alone on a gray chair in a psychiatric ward in a Brooklyn hospital. When we first see her, we do not know how long she has been sitting there. Suddenly, the woman collapses on her face onto the dirty floor.

We watch through a surveillance camera as she lies there, her blue gown above her knees, her legs convulsing. We watch as a guard comes into the room, puts his hand on his hip, looks at the woman, then looks up at the television hanging from the ceiling. Then the guard walks away.

We watch as two other patients sit across the room as the woman lies there. We watch them watch her.

The video, released recently on the Internet, documents the minutes the woman twists on the floor. She stops moving at 6:07 a.m. At 6:35 a.m. a hospital staff member comes in, nudges the patient with her foot. We hope the staffer will do something. But she walks away.

In the time that passes between action and indifference, between life and death, we wait before someone finally rolls in a blue gurney and oxygen tank, puts the woman on the gurney and rolls her away. Later we learn that Esmin Elizabeth Green, 49, an immigrant from Jamaica who moved to New York to make money to send to her children back home, is dead.

The camera goes black, leaving its viewers with the question: What might you have done?

\* \* \*

Last month, the Hartford, Conn., police released a chilling video of a 78-year-old man trying to cross a street with a carton of milk. He steps off the curb just as two cars that appear to be racing swerve on the wrong side of the street. The first car swerves around the man. The second car hits him and throws him into the air like a doll, then speeds away.

What follows is even more chilling: People walk by. Nine vehicles pass him lying in the street. Some drivers slow down to look but drive away.

Again, we watch people watching him.

The man, Angel Arce Torres, lies in the street for more than a minute before a police car arrives. He remains in critical condition.

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"This is a clear indication of what we have become when you see a man laying in the street, hit by a car, and people drive around him and walk by him," Hartford Police Chief Daryl K. Roberts will tell a news conference. "At the end of the day, we have to look at ourselves and understand that our moral values have now changed. We have no regard for each other."

Police later reported receiving four 911 calls, but still, no one stooped to hold Torres's hand until help came.

\* \* \*

Now, you look on with all the brilliance of hindsight and say you would have done it differently. You would have called for help the moment the woman collapsed on the hospital floor. You would have pulled the man out of the street after the car hit him and other cars just passed him by.

Or would you?

Are you really as good as you think you are? Deep down inside, is there a hero waiting there or an apathetic little soul soaked in indifference?

\* \* \*

Sociologists and psychologists have long studied what is known as bystander behavior. They say people are often unsure how to react to such events because they have difficulty processing what they are seeing. Witnesses to tragedy, especially when events are uncertain, often look around first.

If no one else is moving, individuals have a tendency to mimic the unmoving crowd. Although we might think otherwise, most of us would not have behaved much differently from the people we see in these recent videos, experts say. Deep inside, we are herd animals, conformists. We care deeply what other people are doing and what they think of us. The classic story of conformist behavior can be found in the 1964 case of Kitty Genovese, the 28-year-old bar manager who was slain by a man who raped and stabbed her for about half an hour as neighbors in a New York neighborhood looked on. No one opened a door for her. No one ran into the street to intervene.

Later, investigators would say that no single person saw the entire attack and some people misinterpreted the screams, but the case still prompted sociologists to study how the slaying could have happened on a populated street. The case produced a term -- the "bystander effect" -- to explain why people do not act when others clearly appear to be suffering in front of them.

"The larger question about the culture of indifference has a lot to do with bystander behavior," says H. Wesley Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, in Geneva, N.Y. "The bystander phenomenon is generated by the perception that other people are not doing anything about it, therefore I shouldn't either."

After the event is over and comes to greater public light, "people think everybody is mean and cruel-hearted and doesn't care," Perkins says. "But much of the bystander phenomenon happens because people are looking on and thinking, if they don't see someone else coming to the person's aid, then the person must not be in trouble."

But it's different when the bystander is a solitary witness: "They are more likely to come to another person's aid than if there are other people around and nobody is doing anything."

Most of us do the right thing only when others are doing the right thing. Real heroes are the ones who break out of the group norm. The predominant cultural impulse is for people to transfer responsibility.

People think: "If something happens, I am not really responsible for it," says Paul Ragat Loeb, a lecturer on ethics and author of "Soul of a Citizen."

Loeb gives an example of people who worked in a factory processing plutonium for nuclear weapons. He talked to the workers. "I said, 'Do you think it is a good thing?' They said: 'It's not my responsibility. I could be making light bulbs. I could be working in a coal plant.' What it was about was a separation of individual actions from potentially enormous consequences. They said: 'It doesn't really matter. It is the same thing as making light bulbs.' I said: 'No. It isn't the same thing.' "

There is another significant cultural view: that others will take care of it. *Hey, I just gotta take care of me.*

"We hope people do the right thing," Loeb says. "We hope someone takes care of the poor. We hope someone is going to take care of that woman [in the psychiatric hospital]. 'But I am not her relative. I'm not the doctor assigned to her case.' I would argue the medical personnel who encountered her had an obvious responsibility to do something. I would hope if I were sitting in that room, I would have gone up to the desk and said, 'This woman is convulsing. You need to call someone to take care of her.' . . .

"I spend my entire life trying to understand engagement and denial," Loeb says. "A sentiment a lot of people share is: It's not going to make any difference."

Lawyer Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, sued Kings County Hospital Center, where the woman died on the waiting room floor. She was appalled about the indifference of the hospital staff.

The lawsuit describes the hospital as "a chamber of filth, decay, indifference and danger." A place where people suffering are regularly ignored.

"This isn't about one rogue employee not doing his or her job, but we see one person after the other observing a woman . . . on the floor and doing absolutely nothing over a period of nearly an hour," Lieberman says. "You don't see one person after another failing to respond to a situation like this without wondering about the culture. The first question is: Is there a culture of indifference? The conclusion is inescapable that there is a culture of indifference."

After the video went public, six hospital employees were fired. A statement from the hospital's president said: "We are all shocked and distressed by this situation. What our investigation so far determined violates the basic principles of the compassionate healthcare practiced every day here at Kings County and across our public hospital system."

Back to the video: At 5:32 a.m., according to the time register, Esmin Elizabeth Green falls off her chair. What we don't see is that she falls right below an observation window.

"The professional staff can see what is going on," Lieberman points out.

Green also appears to be caught under a chair. She tries again and again to get up.

By the lawyer's count, at least four staffers -- including a doctor -- did nothing but watch.

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