

Viewpoints

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OTHERS SAY: TOM PALAIMA

Regular Contributor

'Tank Man' embodies courage in short supply

On June 5, 1989, we witnessed one of the bravest acts in modern history. We saw the man who acted bravely. We have not seen him since. Have you ever wondered why even small acts of personal moral courage like his are so rare?

I have all year while teaching my Undergraduate Studies class on ethics and leadership and my mythology class at the University of Texas at Austin. In mythology this past week, we discussed Euripides' "Medea," Jules Dassin's film "A Dream of Passions" that is based on "Medea," and the Andrea Yates case. We pondered what led fictional and real women, who were good mothers and had strong religious values, to kill their own children. Factors included abandonment, social isolation, skewed religious beliefs and narcissistic men lacking in empathy for their children and the women who loved them.

At nearly every step in Euripides' play, Dassin's film and Andrea Yates' marriage, the persons involved and others who looked on could have prevented bad things from happening.

Why don't we act when we see things going wrong with others where we live and work, in our country, in our world?

I think we delude ourselves into thinking things are not that bad, that we can suspend our values and get back to them later, that we are acting no differently than everyone else, that the little we can do will make little difference. We speak in euphemisms and generalities. We downsize and outsource while we are firing people. We say we are reducing Social Security benefits and raising co-payments in health plans, not making it harder for many retirees to pay for food and shelter and many parents to afford health care for their children. We say we are waging war to bring peace.

Fortunately, we do have role models who let us know we can do better. In my class, we discussed Martin Luther King's last speech "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" (April 3, 1968). King was killed the next day. He was in Memphis tending to those who were weak and in need, striking sanitation workers.

A remark by King is often cited, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." King was murdered in large part because he was living that motto fearlessly.

We also have role models who are more like us. In the early '60s, Bob Zellner was a

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student at Huntington College in Montgomery, Ala. He began attending black civil rights meetings. The Ku Klux Klan burned crosses on his campus.

He explains his awakening: "I grew up in Alabama. Many people don't realize that ... apartheid was the system in the South. Everything was segregated. It was just the way things were. You didn't think about it. Sometimes when you're inside a system, you can't see it very well. But children are not born racists. They are taught to have racial attitudes."

Zellner then explains how he was instructed by the owner of the country store where he worked, a kindly and good man, that if other white people were in the store, you don't say "yes, ma'am" and "no, sir" to a colored person. Zellner could not and would not accept that he should disrespect an elder because of skin color. He knew it was wrong and he acted. He joined in peaceful civil rights demonstrations. He was beaten and almost blinded in McComb, Miss., by locals who had been taught hateful racial attitudes.

In his last speech, King thanked God that he lived in the troubled times of the 1960s because "we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them."

Common individuals can act when problems don't force everyone to. Marshall Laughead, a freshman in the UTeach program, talked to me with glowing enthusiasm about "Tank Man," the solitary Chinese man whose very name and fate are still unknown. On June 5, 1989, he stood with two shopping bags in front of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square. He showed the world that we can even stop giant mechanized monsters of war by taking a few steps in the right direction and standing our ground. His picture is worth 750 words.

Palaima is professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin. tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.