He showed the world that we can even stop giant mechanized monsters of war by taking a few steps in the right direction.

On June 5, 1989, we witnessed one of the bravest acts in modern history. We saw the man who acted bravely. We have 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 course on leadership and my mythology class at the University of Texas at Austin. In my mythology this past week, we discussed Euripides’ “Medea,” Jules Dassin’s film “A Dream of Passion” 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’s 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 sustain 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 waging war to bring peace. We have prevented bad things from happening.

A remark by King is often cited, “Our lives begin to end when we become silent about things that matter.”

A Common individual can act when problems don’t force everyone, Marshall Laughead, a freshman in the UTeach program, talked to me with a wistful look in his eye about “Tank Man,” the solitary Chinese man whose very name and fate are still unknown. 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.

By taking a few steps in the right direction and standing our ground.

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