**Article # 3: The Psychology of Evil: What makes people go wrong?**

**By Phillip Zimbardo, April 2008, TED Talks transcript**

…A few years ago -- I am sure all of you were shocked, as I was, with the revelation of American soldiers abusing prisoners in a strange place in a controversial war, Abu Ghraib in Iraq. And these were men and women who were putting prisoners through unbelievable humiliation. I was shocked, but I wasn't surprised, because I had seen those same visual parallels when I was the prison superintendent of the [Stanford Prison Study](http://genius.com/4132551).

**The Stanford Prison Study**

…I did this study with my graduate students, especially Craig Haney -- and it also began work with an ad. We had a cheap, little ad, but we wanted college students for a study of prison life. 75 people volunteered, took personality tests. We did interviews. Picked two dozen: the most normal, the most healthy. Randomly assigned them to be prisoner and guard. …

And secondly, we know there's no difference between the boys who will be guards and those who will be prisoners. To the prisoners, we said, "Wait at home. The study will begin Sunday." We didn't tell them that the city police were going to come and do realistic arrests.

Student: “A police car pulls up in front, and a cop comes to the front door, and knocks, and says he's looking for me. So they, right there, you know, they took me out the door, they put my hands against the car. It was a real cop car, it was a real policeman, and there were real neighbors in the street, who didn't know that this was an experiment. And there was cameras all around and neighbors all around. They put me in the car, then they drove me around Palo Alto. They took me to the basement of the police station. Then they put me in a cell. I was the first one to be picked up, so they put me in a cell, which was just like a room with a door with bars on it. You could tell it wasn't a real jail. They locked me in there, in this degrading little outfit. They were taking this experiment too seriously.”

Here are the prisoners, who are going to be dehumanized, they'll become numbers. Here are the guards with the symbols of power and anonymity. Guards get prisoners to clean the toilet bowls out with their bare hands, to do other humiliating tasks. They strip them naked. They sexually taunt them. … The stress reaction was so extreme that normal kids we picked because they were healthy had breakdowns within 36 hours. The study ended after six days, because it was out of control. Five kids had emotional breakdowns.

Does it make a difference if warriors go to battle changing their appearance or not? If they're anonymous, how do they treat their victims? In some cultures, they go to war without changing their appearance. In others, they paint themselves like "Lord of the Flies." In some, they wear masks. In many, soldiers are anonymous in uniform. So this anthropologist, John Watson, found 23 cultures that had two bits of data. Do they change their appearance? 15. Do they kill, torture, mutilate? 13. If they don't change their appearance, only one of eight kills, tortures or mutilates. The key is in the red zone. If they change their appearance, 12 of 13 -- that's 90 percent -- kill, torture, mutilate. And that's the power of anonymity.

So what are the seven social processes that grease the slippery slope of evil? Mindlessly taking the first small step. Dehumanization of others. De-individuation of self. Diffusion of personal responsibility. Blind obedience to authority. Uncritical conformity to group norms. Passive tolerance of evil through inaction, or indifference.

And it happens when you're in a new or unfamiliar situation. Your habitual response patterns don't work. Your personality and morality are disengaged. "Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing more difficult than understanding him," Dostoyevsky. Understanding is not excusing. Psychology is not excuse-ology.

So social and psychological research reveals how ordinary, good people can be transformed. …"Psychologists have attempted to understand how and why individuals and groups who usually act humanely can sometimes act otherwise in certain circumstances." That's the Lucifer effect. And he goes on to say, "The landmark Stanford study provides a cautionary tale for all military operations." If you give people power without oversight, it's a prescription for abuse. They knew that, and let it happen.