

# COURAGE UNDER FIRE

When the Bosnian civil war broke out, **Svetlana Broz** searched for the humanity behind the horrific headlines. She found stories of people who risked their lives to help victims of the war—and who inspired others to follow their example.

WHEN WAR BROKE OUT IN YUGOSLAVIA in the early 1990s, the daily conversations in its capital city, Belgrade, spoke only of evil. The city where I had grown up, where I had completed my medical studies, and which I loved as a cosmopolitan, open city had turned into a beehive, in which every individual bee was storing up reserves of hatred. Even among my former friends, discussions focused only on the question of whose contribution to the destruction was greatest. Media coverage—in Belgrade and around the world—reduced the war to a black-and-white issue of good vs. bad. I was surrounded by hostility, blame, and fear.

Refusing to believe that nothing human existed amidst all the madness of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I searched for the humanity behind the headlines. I started going to the war zones in January 1993—initially as a cardiologist determined to help at least one person lacking proper medical care because of the war.

But while providing care for the people of three major ethno-national backgrounds—distinguished as Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosniaks, and Eastern Orthodox Christian Serbs by nationalist politicians—I felt their need to open their souls and talk as human beings, without being judged about their roles in the war. The short, spontaneous stories they told me in the cardiology ward were surprisingly nuanced and refined compared to Belgrade's and the world's much more simplistic pictures of the Bosnian war zone.

I was told stories of individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina who had the courage to stand up to crimes being committed against the innocent, even when they had no weapons to help them. These people served as genuine examples of the goodness, compassion, humanity, and civil courage that continued to exist in these times of evil. They broke free from the identity of the bystander, that person who chooses to look away, to ignore, and to silently accept the suffering of others. Instead, these human beings provided compelling examples of upstanders, people who stick to their moral convictions and norms, and demonstrate great civil courage through their acts, even in a situation as horrific as the Bosnian war. My book *Good People in an Evil Time* is a collection of 90 first-hand testimonies from people who survived the war, illustrating the ways in which anonymous people were upstanders.

Some people may dismiss these stories, believing that wartime examples of violent behavior reveal far more about human nature. I disagree. We must pay careful attention to these stories, because they hold up a mirror and require us to reflect on our own acts and behavior. They clearly demonstrate the possibility of choice, even in the most trying circumstances. When shared, these stories can therefore encourage more people to stand up and speak out against evil, and to act in accordance with their moral norms. The hundreds of interviews I've conducted, and the reactions

from the tens of thousands of people with whom I have shared these stories, have repeatedly confirmed this idea. Indeed, I've found that discussing upstanders' actions can have the very real and enduring effect of inspiring others to follow their example.

## Uncovering the upstanders

Though it can be difficult to offer a precise definition of an upstander, we can usually identify an example of one when we hear it. Consider the story a Serb woman from the Croatian town of Novska shared with me. In October of 1991, she and her husband fled to the region of Baranja, on the border between Croatia and Serbia, where they lived as refugees. Assuming that it would be safer for him, they sent their 15-year-old son to live with an aunt in the Bosnian town of Zenica. Then they realized that the war was about to break out in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

The woman set out for Zenica, determined to bring her son back. She hitchhiked to within 60 miles of the town, but no buses or taxis would go any further.

Desperate, I sat down on the sidewalk and burst into tears. A stranger came over, a middle-aged man, and asked, "What's wrong, ma'am? May I be of help in some way?" I told him the reason for my journey, looking up with hope.

"Well, I have to say, ma'am, that you really are asking the impossible!



Mikkel Ostergaard/Panos Pictures

Women and children are reunited with their families after being imprisoned by Serb authorities during the Bosnian civil war.

There are barricades up every few miles from here to Zenica and there are armed men at every checkpoint. That is why no one dares to drive you.” And he walked slowly away, his head bowed.

For at least half an hour I was sitting there, sobbing miserably, not knowing what to do. Just then a car pulled up in front of me and at the wheel was that same stranger, calling, “Ma’am, get in. I’ll do what I can to help you. I’ll try to get us over special transport roads that run through the woods. Maybe they don’t have barricades up in there yet.”

Early that evening we arrived at my sister’s house. Overjoyed, I held my son close and we talked non-stop in the car while the stranger drove without saying a word. Intoxicated by the delight of being reunited with my son, I was startled when the man said, “Ma’am, this is as far as I can go. The Serbian barricades are just beyond the next curve in the road. You’ll have to do that part on foot.” On my way out of the car I thanked him, and asked what I owed him. “Nothing, ma’am. Your happiness and your son’s are all the payment I need.”

It was only much later that I put two and two together and realized that the stranger had had to stop before the barricades because he was not a Serb.

As this example of human goodness illustrates, the upstander actively confronts the choice of whether to defy immorality or keep quiet and accept things the way they are. As Hannah Arendt has powerfully said about humanity: “It is always possible to say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” and upstanders are exactly those who want to make decisions about when to say “no” to evil. The driver

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in this story was willing to sacrifice his life when he said “no” to the unjust boundaries drawn along constructed ethnic lines and chose to recognize the love of a mother for her son.

The civil courage that characterizes the upstander is, in the words of the founder and first president of Oxford University’s Templeton College, Uwe Kitzinger, “the courage of the non-conformist.” It is the courage that risks social disapproval, the capacity to resist by thinking critically

with one’s own mind, and the will to be an active participant in life, not a passive bystander.

Regardless of their differences in age, gender, literacy, religious affiliation, ethnic identity, or wartime roles, upstanders share the bravery to risk their lives rather than commit or be complicit in a crime. When so many other people choose to compromise their morals in order to survive, the upstander’s actions suggest that we must not allow ourselves to be debased by circumstance: To retain our dignity, we must sometimes refuse to live life at any cost.

This idea resonates powerfully in a story told to me by a factory manager from Central Bosnia. Croatian soldiers and paramilitary units had brought the man, his family, and his neighbors—all Muslim by nationality—to a makeshift prison camp.

After several days they took 40 of the prisoners, including my wife, our two five-year-old twin boys, and myself, and lined us up in a row. Then they brought over a civilian, a man who was Croatian like they were, but who was also my closest friend. They ordered him to choose a dozen of us from the lines and to decide how we would be killed. I was horrified—he knew all of us so well. Without a second thought he turned to the armed murderers and said, “You should be ashamed of yourselves! These people are innocent. Release them. Let them



Svetlana Broz (left) speaks with students in a seminar near Sarajevo. She lectures to thousands of students every year about the importance of civil courage.

go home.” Then he turned to us and, looking right into our eyes, said, “I’m so sorry. This is all I can do. I know they will kill me tonight. I wish all of you the best.” His soldiers dragged him off somewhere, and took us back to the prison camp.

My best friend was right. The criminal soldiers, his own kind, killed him that night. We were luckier. After several months, we were saved through an exchange of prisoners.

The motivations of upstanders like this one are not easy to determine, especially because we often only learn of their actions through the stories told by others. There is no road map that allows others simply to follow their traces. Their reasons to act righteously are often personal and may depend on circumstance. What motives upstanders generally have in common is a question not for a cardiologist like myself, but for psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists to debate.

But we do not need to pin down general, abstract motivations to understand the function of these stories. These stories stir our souls. They reach out and make us contemplate our own values and actions. They also represent an axis around which it is possible to build a healthy future after the atrocities have ceased, giving them enormous social, cultural, and religious value. The effects of an upstander’s behavior can extend well beyond a single heroic act and across geographical boundaries, as

the people who benefit from such acts try to emulate them. And as they tell their own story, the effects grow.

## Education toward civil courage

A few years ago at a conference I attended, I heard Sami Adwan, a Palestinian psychologist, explain why he had chosen to dedicate his life to work for peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and Jews. As a young man he was held in an Israeli military prison, where he shared a cell with several other prisoners. The commanding officer had ordered the prison’s soldiers not to give them any water. For three days, the prisoners suffered. On the fourth day a soldier came into the cell, and after checking that none of his superiors were watching, he pulled out a canteen and gave it to the prisoners without a word. Several days later, the commanding officer beat Adwan for refusing to sign a document written in a language he didn’t understand. After several blows he could hear the voice of that same soldier with the canteen: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for hitting this man just because he wouldn’t sign something he couldn’t read? I would never sign if I were in his place.” That soldier gave Adwan hope, and changed his life.

All wars, everywhere in the world, contain such examples of brave souls who have said “no” in the face of a totalitarian regime, of nationalist doctrine, ethnic cleansing, annihilation, and persecution.

And as the incidence of the upstander is universal, so too is its significance. The actions of these real, often anonymous people make others realize that they too have choices in life. One needn’t benefit directly from an upstander’s actions to be inspired to follow in his footsteps. Sometimes, just hearing his story is enough.

Since October of 2005, I have worked with more than 18,000 students from the Western Balkans, who have heard me lecture on kindness, morality, and civil courage. Many of them come to my lectures convinced that they cannot change anything, that they are not important as individuals, and that they are without influence over the society in which they live. They feel completely on the margins of their worlds. They only dream about finishing their education and moving out of their country; indeed, 75 percent of the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina want to leave their homeland. But upon hearing stories of upstanders, and discussing these courageous acts with me, they seem to awake from a deep sleep. Suddenly, they want to become actively involved in the events around them. Loudly and clearly, they show that they are able to recognize negative authorities, and they often confront them.

After one lecture, for example, students from Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina were inspired to form a movement demanding the introduction of sex education into secondary schools—an important but neglected public health issue. They

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collected signatures and sent a petition to the conservative regional minister of education, announced their actions in the media, and were ready for demonstrations if their request was not met. The decision is pending. Other students who had attended my lecture organized themselves to visit the director of a school in their city who had openly obstructed his students from participating in the event. When they were not welcomed, they decided to distribute copies of my book *Having What It Takes* to the school's students themselves during their lunch break. Examples of corruption, manipulation, and even pedophilia in schools have been named openly during my public lectures, which often have members of the media present, helping to bring these problems into the public realm. This is an encouraging development.

And even in the very peaceful Swedish city of Gothenburg, where the citizens can hardly remember the last time their country fought a war, the topic of civil courage became very important to one university student. He sent me an email in 2001 about an experience he had three days after hearing my lecture.

I was on the bus in Gothenburg and saw three enraged men physically abusing the bus driver, who wanted them to leave the bus. He was covered in blood. I was turning to see the reactions of other passengers, but all of them were looking out of

the window. I turned and looked through the window myself, but at that moment I saw your face and thought: What would you say if you could see me? What would all those who sacrificed their lives to protect someone who was unjustly persecuted do? I threw myself on those three attackers, who broke my nose with the first blow. But I managed to enable the driver to call the police on his mobile phone.

This story demonstrates the young man's courage; it also shows the impact of good education about civil courage. By learning about examples of unselfish human kindness, and of those who acted in accordance with their deepest moral beliefs, young people become aware of the possibility of choice in their own lives.

We must do more to promote these stories of goodness performed in the face of evil. Given their moral value and educational importance, stories of the upstander deserve to be archived and cherished in the form of books, museum exhibits, and other tributes in public spaces. Any place dedicated to extolling civil courage can inspire hope and help prevent future conflicts, as they offer people of all ages the chance to reflect on individual and group responsibility in the face of repressive regimes and their imposed brutalities. Stories of civil courage and kindness restore faith in humanity and remind citizens that in each of us lie seeds of goodness: Even if we have been unkind or unethical at one point, in the next moment we may find the strength to turn this around. Most of all, these stories force us to ask ourselves whether we will remain bystanders to the world around us, or whether we, too, will be upstanders for a better present and future.

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**Svetlana Broz, M.D.**, was born in Belgrade in 1955, the granddaughter of Josip Broz Tito, the leader of the former Yugoslavia. A cardiologist by profession, she is also the founder and director of the Sarajevo office of the international NGO Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide ([www.gariwo.org](http://www.gariwo.org)), which educates youth on the topic of civil courage. She is the author of the books *Good People in an Evil Time* (published in five languages, English translation by Ellen Elias-Bursa) and *Having What It Takes* (edited by Thomas Butler) and numerous articles. She is also the editor of the forthcoming *Anthology of Civil Courage*.

## The Making of an Upstander

BY JASON MARSH

In a 2002 report on "Altruism and Compassion in War," Harvard University researchers Nancy Briton and Jennifer Leaning identify some possible motivations underlying an upstander's behavior. Their report was based on thousands of hours of interviews with people living in 12 of the most war-torn regions on earth, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, and Cambodia. Here are the four main factors they uncovered. (For more on their work, please see "In Search of the Moral Voice" in the Spring 2004 issue of *Greater Good*.)

- 1. Feelings of group affiliation.** People tend to favor members of their own group over others, but Briton and Leaning found that some people were able to find common ground with people they could have easily dismissed as enemies. The trick, said Briton, is helping people in war find a "thread of similarity" with others. "They're little threads, but there are so many that are available to us."
- 2. Feelings of self-efficacy.** If people felt they had the tools to help someone, the authors found, they were more likely to act on altruistic motives that might otherwise have remained dormant. The report quotes a Palestinian ambulance driver who said that because of his professional responsibilities, he would rescue a wounded Israeli soldier, even if that soldier had killed a relative of his. It also mentions a Christian Lebanese journalist who used his press ID to rescue Muslims from danger.
- 3. A desire for reciprocity.** Combatants who performed altruistic acts often attributed their behavior to reciprocity—the idea being that they treated their enemies the same way they wanted to be treated in return. Other interview subjects explained reciprocity as a way to try to stem cycles of violence.
- 4. A desire to recapture one's moral identity.** Some people simply seemed sick and tired of violent conflict, and wanted to regain the moral identity that war had eclipsed. But how can people be reminded of their moral identities when they are stuck in the moral vacuum of war? Leaning said she believes that international NGOs play an important role. If people in warfare have lost touch with their own moral voice, she said, "Perhaps they'll have a shock of recognition when they see someone coming out of a Land Rover and holding a white flag."