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issue is not whether to act. “One of the challenges is to make sense of what’s actually going on,” says UBC business professor Karl Aquino, who studies moral decisions and bystander behaviour. “The initial hesitancy is often in just understanding the situation.” Later accounts of the Genovese attack concluded that many people weren’t witnesses at all. The two (not three, as first reported) attacks took place out of their line of vision. Even what they could see was confusing. She was kneeling and the man was kneeling. A neighbour yelled out of the window and the man

action. More recent studies show that people can also be coached to intervene when they see someone is being bullied, assaulted on a date, or beaten by a partner. If they get training on how to interpret what they’re seeing and how to intervene without putting themselves in danger, they’re more likely to step forward. “We can be influenced into action,” says Aquino.

And finally, a novel Canadian study about who is more likely to show bravery indicates there’s a general attitude to life that prompts some to act. In most ways, they’re pretty much like everyone else. But



**WE IMAGINE WE COULD BE HEROIC  
WHEN THE TIME COMES. NOT EVERY-  
ONE LEAPS INTO DANGER, EVEN WHEN  
THAT DANGER IS RELATIVELY SMALL**

went away. Genovese stood up and continued slowly down the street. (Her attacker came and stabbed her again in a stairwell out of view.) Someone did call the police, although people in that neighbourhood generally didn’t bother—the area had a loud bar, and police had demonstrated they had little interest in the mayhem it was causing.

Context matters as well. Dozens of bystander-effect experiments have shown that people are more likely to intervene if victims and witnesses share a social-identity group—if they’re familiar in some way. Bystanders are also propelled to act by their own self-image. If they see themselves as helping, caring, moral people, they’ll move into

in one area of personality testing, they display a difference: they have an unusual belief that they have the power to transform bad events into good ones. It’s happened in their lives already and they’re optimistic it can happen again.

“When they’re faced with negative situations, they have learned to look at that negative and see an opportunity for something else,” says Jeremy Frimer, a University of Winnipeg psychology professor who worked with UBC prof Larry Walker on his 10-year study of the phenomenon, outlined in a 2010 academic paper. Their silver-lining approach is the opposite of what a lot of people do—a way of thinking called contamination in the

psychology world (and “whining” in the regular one), whereby something good happens, yet they transform it in their own minds into a negative. By contrast, “Heroes tended to take bad things and find something good in them.”

Raz Chan fits into many of the predictive categories. Growing up, the soft-spoken man was one of the few Chinese kids in his neighbourhood. That made him an outsider. And his family struggled. His father, whose grandfather had immigrated to Canada to work on the railroad, had some big failures: he tried to run a restaurant and that flopped; the family didn’t have money or a vacation for decades. But his father went on to start a sprout-growing business, and he now supplies half of Manitoba.

A story of triumph over adversity. The once-skinny kid (six feet, 130 pounds) went on to become an accountant, a property manager, and then the world champion in Brazilian jiu-jitsu after taking the plunge into full-time martial-arts competitions and fitness training. Along the way, he moved to Vancouver, which manages to be both a big city and, as it was on that August day, a small town.

After Chan’s intervention made the news, his friend Julie called to tell him the strangest part of the whole thing for her: she knew the woman in the car. Julie connected Chan and the driver, who came down and talked about taking some self-defence classes. Getting to know each other helped him take yet another step away from the bad, toward the good, just as he’d done immediately after his unpremeditated tackle. “That night, I took a nice walk along the ocean to calm down.” Now that he’s processed the whole incident, would he still have done it? Oh yes. **VM**



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