In the summer of 1971, I created a research project focusing on the psychological effects of prison life on both prisoners and prison guards.

My research team and I reproduced a prison environment in a Stanford University basement. We tried to re-create essential features of American prisons in our jail setting. We advertised for volunteers and assembled a group of 24 healthy, intelligent male college students from all over the nation. A flip of the coin randomly determined which 12 would be guards and which 12 would be prisoners.

I took the role of Prison Superintendent, one assistant was the Warden, and two others were Lieutenants. Prisoners lived in this jail 24/7, while guards worked 8-hr shifts in what was to be a 2-week intense simulation, where everything and everyone were under observation. The simple premise was to understand what happens when you put only good people in a bad situation—who or what dominates the other.

In short order, the students disappeared into their roles as Prisoners or Guards. Ordinary guys slipped into doing extraordinarily bad things to other guys, who were actually students just like them in different costumes.

Other healthy guys soon got sick mentally, unable to cope with the learned helplessness imposed on them in that unique, unfamiliar setting. They did not offer comfort to their buddies as they broke down, nor did those who adopted a “good guard” persona ever do anything to limit the sadistic excesses of the cruel guards heading their shifts.

It was a vivid demonstration of how a hostile situation can overwhelm our natural disposition toward kindness and compassion, of the ease with which a person who is given authority can then abuse that power. After the fifth prisoner had an emotional breakdown in just 5 days, the study was terminated prematurely—it had spun out of control.

This dramatic research has become known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, and it is the subject of a new film directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez, written by Tim Talbott. I was happy
to consult with the filmmakers on the production of *The Stanford Prison Experiment* and pleased about how well they captured the essence of this demonstration of situational power.

The physical prison and the roles, the rules, and the costumes soon combined to become a psychological prison for the minds of everyone caught in its grip. By day 2, nobody thought of it as an “experiment” but a prison where the only way out was by parole board approval. It really was a descent into hell, hour by hour, day by day, shift by shift. And it happened very quickly. There is nothing in the movie that stretches reality; the Stanford County Jail it depicts is the same Stanford County Jail that I experienced.

What is special about this movie is the way it enables viewers to look through the observation window as if they are part of the prison staff watching this remarkable drama slowly unfold and simultaneously experience the experiment objectively.

The audience witnesses the gradual character transformations taking place, including the flourishing of sadistic and evil traits. What readers of *The Lucifer Effect* (Zimbardo, 2007) can only imagine, viewers experience more intensely, as these young students become the characters implied by their assigned roles.

The power of that situation captivated not only the experiment participants but the research staff and me as well. The movie tracks the emotional changes in the lead character—me—as initial compassion and intellectual curiosity get distilled and submerged.

In my adopted role of Prison Superintendent, I soon became insensitive to obvious prisoner suffering, failing to limit guard abuses. My girlfriend (now my wife) was the only person who saw the situation for what it had become, when she visited the jail on the fifth night.

She said to me, “I know you from other situations. I know you’re a caring, loving person. I don’t recognize who you have become here, but realize that these boys are suffering and YOU are responsible for it.”

So how do we guard against these powerful situations? Such prisons of the mind are everywhere: in mental hospitals, jails, summer camps, high schools, businesses, and more. Can people learn how to recognize when authority oversteps its bounds and cultivate the tools to resist and push back? I know they can.

I have channeled my 50 years of experience as a psychologist and researcher into creating the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP), a nonprofit established 6 years ago. HIP teaches ordinary people how to stand up, speak out, and take effective action during challenging situations.

I believe that almost anyone can become an Everyday Hero by doing daily deeds of social goodness in his or her new role as *hero-in-training*. By learning the skills, strategies, and knowledge of wise and effective social action that channels the private virtue of compassion into this civic virtue of heroism, youth and elders can change their world (Zimbardo, Breckenridge, & Moghaddam, 2013).

Our social psychological lessons in “Understanding Human Nature” are creating a revolution in education in many high schools, colleges, and businesses in America, Hungary, Poland, Italy, and the United Kingdom.
References
