

DECISIONS

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[Assignment: In a short essay, write a thoughtful response to the concept we recently read about: which is the real person--the way she appears to others or the way she sees herself?]

(1) People with incredible inner strength may be extraordinary, but even average people can, when tested, show unsuspected reserves of inner strength. Such an idea is illustrated in two essays--one written by Brent Staples and the other by Bruno Bettelheim. In both we see how when ordinary people are placed in extreme situations, they will draw on these inner reserves and even rise above their own predispositions, if necessary, to survive.

(2) "Average" is perhaps the most fitting word to describe Brent Staples. Yet he found himself in an extraordinary situation when, as a twenty-two year old graduate student working towards an advanced degree in journalism, he had just begun his career as a reporter. There was nothing different about him, nothing unusual, except that he was a man, and black, and liked walking in an affluent section of Chicago late at night. And, therefore, he was perceived as a potential rapist. Bruno Bettelheim was a quiet, thoughtful Jewish man. He probably had a wife and children. The point is that there was nothing out-of-the-ordinary about him, except that he was Jewish and living in Germany at the time of the Holocaust. To be a Jew in Germany was crime enough; therefore, he was placed in a concentration camp.

(3) Even the most nondescript people find themselves in extremely difficult situations. While Staples was on assignment as a reporter, he walked into a jewelry store to waste some time before his story was due. Instead of the manager greeting him with the usual polite "Hello, Can I help you?" she quietly excused herself and returned with an enormous Doberman Pinscher. She may not have accused him directly but her behavior was reason enough for Staples to leave the store. On an ordinary, quiet evening, he was just walking down the street. Staples, a tall, well-built black man, noticed a female walking in front of him look back nervously. In fact, she was soon running down the street, as though she expected him to try to attack her. After all, he was a Negro. Staples couldn't defend himself as he watched his "victim" run away, needlessly frightened. Just as Staples did not ask to be threatened by a dog or insulted by a woman, Bruno Bettelheim did not ask to be placed in a concentration camp. However, there he was, his life being threatened every day, and his hands were frostbitten. The time had come to decide whether or not to ask the SS officer for treatment for his hands. He reflected upon the fact that all of his peers were in the same situation and they had all been turned away by the officer. He realized how

humiliating it was to beg another man for help, especially after knowing how many had tried before him and failed.

(4) Faced with difficult situations like this, people are forced to make difficult choices. Ordinary people, in life threatening situations must make extraordinary decisions whose consequences will have grave implications. Staples stood outside the store, baffled. He could do one of two things. He could either return to the store and stand up to the obvious racism and try to fight it. Or he could suppress the rage he felt and simply try to lead a peaceful life. He knew that the latter would be the better choice, though his inner self told him to voice his frustrations and opinions. He kept his emotions suppressed, knowing that society would react much more positively to a calm, rational black man, rather than to an enraged one. Instead of loudly protesting, he began to move about the street with care, making sure not to create a threatening impression. Oftentimes, he questioned if he had the inner strength and the patience he would need in order to live with discrimination and prejudice while maintaining some sort of pride. That night, he suppressed his rage and channeled his defiance into his whistling of Vivaldi, knowing that within himself he had won.

(5) In a different context, Bruno Bettelheim was also called upon to practice great self-control in order to survive. Nervously, he watched his Jewish brothers go before him, pleading with the SS officer to allow them to have treatment for their frostbitten limbs. He recorded each action the officer made. When a Jew was in pain, the officer was happy, for that was the type of behavior the officer expected. Finally, it was Bettelheim's turn to speak. Instead of giving what the officer thought was the typical "Jewish" response--the begging for mercy--Bettelheim simply stated what he needed and waited. Although he was in extreme pain, and although he was thoroughly disgusted by the officer, he suppressed his feelings and simply waited for the response. The officer, surprised at this different approach, allowed him to receive treatment. Bettelheim's self-control had worked.

(6) In both instances, these men were called to control strongly held convictions and strongly felt emotions. In a sense, they were forced to behave in a way that violated their sense of self. They were forced to compromise. To let go of convictions, to rise above strongly felt emotions, is not the mark of a weak person. Such an action requires strength and courage.