

Chapter 1

What Is Ordinary Greatness?

Yes, I saw the violinist, but nothing about him struck me as much of anything.

—RESPONSE FROM A PASSERBY WHO HESITATED ONLY BRIEFLY
IN FRONT OF VIOLINIST JOSHUA BELL PERFORMING IN THE
METRO STATION, AS QUOTED IN GENE WEINGARTEN’S “PEARLS
BEFORE BREAKFAST,” *WASHINGTON POST*, APRIL 7, 2007¹

It was not the musician, the music he selected, or the instrument he played that prevented people passing through Washington, D.C.’s L’Enfant Plaza from recognizing greatness. Instead, the common surroundings, coupled with the perceived tyranny of their schedules, seemed to keep people on their original “track” without stopping to appreciate what was right in front of them. Joshua Bell’s impromptu concert was not a destination or an event for which they had planned and saved. He appeared as they were transiting through a Metro station, and because of that, his performance was somehow seen as background noise and dismissed.

Inspired by the Joshua Bell story, and intrigued by the way this phenomenon of ordinary greatness overlooked could be applied to

a broader perspective (and especially its impact in the workplace), we set out to determine a definition of ordinary greatness. We first looked to stories of modern heroes, people who were catapulted into prominence—because at one point in time, their greatness was not recognized either.

The Case for Authority

The fateful day when this movie-mad child got close to his Hollywood dream came in the summer of 1965, when 17-year-old Steven, visiting his cousins in Canoga Park, took the studio tour of Universal Pictures. “The tram wasn’t stopping at the sound stages,” Steven says. “So during a bathroom break I snuck away and wandered over there, just watching. I met a man who asked what I was doing, and I told him my story. Instead of calling the guards to throw me off the lot, he talked with me for about an hour. His name was Chuck Silvers, head of the editorial department. He said he’d like to see some of my little films, and so he gave me a pass to get on the lot the next day. I showed him about four of my 8-mm films. He was very impressed. Then he said, “I don’t have the authority to write you any more passes, but good luck to you.”

The next day a young man wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase strode past the gate guard, waved and heaved a silent sigh. He had made it! “It was my father’s briefcase,” Spielberg says. “There was nothing in it but a sandwich and two candy bars. So every day that summer I went in my suit and hung out with directors and writers and editors and dubbers. I found an office that wasn’t being used, and became a squatter. I went to a camera store, bought some plastic name titles and put my name in the building directory: Steven Spielberg, Room 23C.”²

Spielberg’s call to ordinary greatness was asserting itself; his mindset of authority so convinced the people he encountered at the studio that no one ever questioned his right to be there! As a matter of fact, he worked there for weeks before he was finally offered a job.

In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds—his youth, inexperience, and anonymity—he rose to the occasion by refusing to be defeated. Though it would be years before it was recognized, Spielberg instinctively knew that he had greatness in him. His air of authority allowed him to be accepted.

Do we question people whom we instinctively perceive to have authority, even though a title or formal designation might be lacking? No; rarely, if ever, do we challenge them. Instead, we respond to their attitude of being in charge almost automatically. It might be a characteristic, a hallmark of greatness to come, yet we seldom recognize it for what it is.

A Harbinger of the Future

Early in his life, one of the character traits of Sir Winston Churchill was his belief in himself. From age 22 to 26 he served in the military, first as a member of the cavalry and then as an officer in the infantry. While he fought in several wars during this time period, coming under heavy fire at the front line, he escaped injury. What was most interesting about his experiences in combat, though, was his outlook. After one battle, he wrote his mother: “I was under fire all day and rode through the charge. You know my luck in these things. I was about the only officer whose clothes, saddlery or horse was uninjured . . . I never felt the slightest nervousness.”

His “luck in these things” he interpreted as Divine Providence. He wrote, “I shall believe I am to be preserved for future things.” And later, “These are anxious days, but when one is quite sure that one is fulfilling one’s place in the scheme of world affairs, one may await events with entire composure.”³

Is it possible that those who will someday demonstrate greatness are better at interpreting their destiny? Is this ability to be sure about one’s purpose in life a characteristic of ordinary individuals who respond to extraordinary circumstances with courage, who rescue people from burning buildings, and who save comrades from war’s peril? Perhaps if each of us could hear the inner voice of ordinary greatness, it might be easier to recognize it in others.

A Desire to Help

Every day people perform acts of ordinary greatness that we fail to recognize. The Little League coach who unfailingly gives the worst players a chance at bat; the couple who adopt a child with grave physical problems; the healthcare worker who spearheads an annual drive to collect books for an inner city school . . . there are countless examples of ordinary and overlooked heroes among us. But these acts are propelled into our consciousness by the circumstances.

In 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 went down in Washington, D.C.'s icy Potomac River in the midst of a snowstorm. A federal employee on his way home from work watched incredulously as the plane clipped a bridge and plunged into the water. Lenny Skutnik could have stood by, waiting for rescue workers to save as many as they could, yet he swam out to rescue a drowning stranger.

The water was 29 degrees that day. As Skutnik watched a crash victim fail again and again to grasp a rescue basket from a helicopter, he went into the river and swam 30 yards to rescue her. Later he would say, "It was just too much to take. When she let go that last time . . . it was like a bolt of lightening or something hit me—"You've got to go get her."

There were several people that day who also performed feats of heroism: a helicopter pilot who endangered his own life while rescuing others; a medic who climbed out to help a victim too weak to save herself; two bystanders who went into the water to assist people; and one of the plane's passengers, who drowned after passing the lifeline numerous times to others.

The publicity-shy Skutnik was never at ease with the accolades for his bravery. "I wasn't a hero," he protests. "I was just someone who helped another human being. We're surrounded by heroes. What made this different was that it was caught on film and went all over the world."⁴ Yes, we are surrounded by ordinary greatness, embodied in heroes who make a profound difference in others' lives. We seldom see this greatness for what it is, though, unless—as in Skutnik's case—it visits us in our homes on the nightly news.

Could you have done what these people did? They were common, everyday people who performed great acts, driven to help others

despite the peril to themselves. They might never have been recognized were it not for the circumstances that flung them into heroism, situations they responded to as if they were predestined for them.

Hardwired to Rescue

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign law professor David Hyman conducted a four-year study about the willingness of average Americans to help others in need. Wondering whether U.S. law should require citizens to help each other in times of emergency, he made an interesting discovery: Rescues outnumber non-rescues 740 to 1 each year.⁵ “This study shows you don’t need laws to get people to rescue one another. They seem to do it themselves,” Hyman said. “Americans are much better than the law expects them to be. . . . [The study suggests that] people are hard-wired to rescue. It’s an instinctive response. People see someone else in peril and they will jump in, almost regardless of risk.”⁶

Definition of Ordinary Greatness

Our definition of ordinary greatness evolved over the course of writing this book. Finally, we settled on “superior and often unrecognized characteristics, qualities, skills, or effort found in a person who may be otherwise undistinguished; sometimes discovered in a response to unexpected circumstances.” Perhaps the easiest way to describe ordinary greatness is that it is most often uncelebrated, sometimes possesses an element of nobility, and is rarely on display. In fact, when we celebrate true ordinary greatness (see Exhibit 1.1), it is because it has managed to transcend its invisibility.

People who exhibit ordinary greatness elect to put forth an abundance of personal effort when they find themselves in extraordinary, demanding, or special circumstances with the opportunity to make a difference. They do so without reservation, answering a call that comes from deep within. The desire to be in the spotlight is never a factor. They demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, persistence in the face of great odds, and a determination to live the values they hold most dear.

Ordinary Greatness

Superior and often unrecognized characteristics, qualities, skills, or effort found in someone who may be otherwise undistinguished; sometimes discovered in response to unexpected circumstances.

Exhibit 1.1 Ordinary greatness defined

Former prisoner of war Bob Blair says he had an “epiphany—to get volunteers to help him grow nutritious food for the needy.” According to ABC News, the organization that named Blair one of their “Persons of the Year,” Blair noticed there were an awful lot of people, hundreds of thousands of people, who are “food insecure, meaning they don’t know where their next meal is coming from.” Between June and December 2008, Blair estimated he had harvested about 35 tons of vegetables with the help of 3,100 volunteers.⁷

Ron Clark, a teacher who “never wanted to teach; all I wanted was a life filled with adventure,” also embodies such determination. After teaching fifth grade in Belhaven, North Carolina for five years, he saw a television program about a school in East Harlem, New York that was having trouble attracting good teachers. He immediately packed up his car, drove to New York, stayed at the YMCA, and searched out a school like the one he had seen on television. “When I started teaching there (New York City’s P.S. 83, in Spanish Harlem), people at the school said it was the worst class they had seen in 30 years,” Ron recalls. “There were so many discipline problems in the classroom I couldn’t get the kids’ attention. They didn’t respect me, they didn’t respect each other, nor [did they respect] the other teachers.” Ron recognized the way adults take things for granted when dealing with kids. “We’re constantly telling them to behave or be respectful, but we’re not taking the time to show them what we expect,” Ron states. He came up with a list of 55 rules for his classroom—how to give a firm handshake, how to go on an interview, how to use proper etiquette, and how to be humble and not arrogant, among others. By making his expectations clear and investing himself in the lives of his students, Ron not only taught unforgettable life lessons, he lived them. Have high expectations from others, but higher ones for yourself. Invest yourself in the potential you know is there, and find a way to relate to other people.⁸

The common theme we found that transcended all the interviews and behaviors people shared was this: Ordinary greatness knows no boundaries. The limitations of age, education, talent, and culture do not apply. These individuals are the generous humanitarians we never hear about; they are the great leaders who stay in the background; they are the unrecognized employees who quietly carry an organization to success; and they are the brave individuals who respond to a disaster behind the scenes. Ordinary greatness is everywhere, in the most common of circumstances, waiting to inspire and motivate us—the key is to recognize it!

In the words of American poet Walt Whitman, “Can each see signs of the best by a look in the looking glass? Is there nothing greater or more? Does all sit there with you?”⁹

We often overlook the ordinary greatness that is right before us.

- How do you define ordinary greatness?
- What are the clues that lead you to discover ordinary greatness?
- Have you passed by greatness only to discover it later?

