

of the code regularly at work. Ethics codes and experience-based training typically complement one another: Codes provide a standard to strive for, and training gives people tools they need to meet that standard.

Heroes also draw on the examples that early role models set for them. Christoph von Toggenburg, who bicycled thousands of miles across rough terrain in Europe and Asia to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for leprosy victims, says his selfless approach to life started with his parents. Both doctors, they encouraged him to help the less fortunate from the time he was 6 years old. So when he did his cycling project in his mid-20s, going to great lengths for others was already second nature. Many Holocaust-era rescuers have also reported that family members set a selfless example for them to follow.

Other times, our difficult life experiences may help us identify with others' vulnerabilities in ways that awaken our generosity. Tuff showed Hill that she understood his despair and was able to persuade him to halt his deadly mission. "Don't feel bad, baby," she said to him, according to the tape of her 911 call. "My husband just left me after 33 years. . . . I've got a son that's multiple disabled." She told Hill that if she could recover from tough times, so could he.

Science confirms the power of past difficulties to transform our outlook toward others. A study by psychologists Johanna Vollhardt and Ervin Staub found that people who'd suffered interpersonal violence or endured a natural disaster were significantly more likely to want to donate to Asian tsunami relief efforts.

How much of a role does personality play? Not necessarily a defining one. University of Winnipeg psychologist Jeremy Frimer reported that people who'd gotten a national Canadian award for bravery had personalities that were similar to those of people who hadn't gotten awards. And despite their unselfish actions, heroes don't always have spotless backgrounds — sometimes far from it. Much has been made of Martin Luther King Jr.'s marital infidelity, Mahatma Gandhi's racist remarks and Charles Ramsey's reported history of domestic violence. But these heroes' missteps don't detract from their selfless acts. In a way, it's reassuring that even heroes aren't perfect. Seeing their flaws gives the rest of us hope that regardless of our shortfalls, we, too, can do important work to benefit those around us.

Establishing good rapport with people does count, though. The more we believe we have things in common with others, the more motivated we may be to pitch in when they're in need. Psychologists Piercarlo Valdesolo and David DeSteno found that experimental study subjects who'd been tapping their hands in time with partners spent more time helping the partners later when they had to carry out a complex, tedious task. And Kristen Monroe, a political scientist at the University of California at Irvine, reported that those who rescued people who were persecuted during World War II were more inclined to feel close to all their fellow humans — not just those belonging to a particular race, religion or group. They saw humanity almost as a large extended family, and that outlook helped compel them to act when they saw people in distress.

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Perhaps this mind-set helps explain why the people we consider heroes often reject the label: They see their selfless acts as part of their duty to other human beings. When CNN's Anderson Cooper asked Ramsey if he felt like a hero, he said: "No. No, no,