

Anne Frank and the Decline of Heroism

by [Douglas W. Texter](#) (September 2019)



Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Jordan B. Chadrow

Every year, I watch on Facebook as my high-school classmate, John, helps to celebrate the life of Anne Frank. John is the assistant director of Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. Each year, he gives a series of lectures to high-school students and others about the life of the Jewish girl who hid from the Germans in Holland.

From what I can tell, John's lectures score a direct hit with

his target audience. Everybody desires to know about the secret suffering of the girl from Amsterdam. Anne Frank has become a heroine for American i-gens and millennials. Indeed, there exists practically no American today who has not heard of Anne Frank. Several generations of high-school students, including Gen-Xers like John and me, have read the *Diary*.

While I'm watching John give his lectures, I'm also teaching English at a small community college in Roswell, NM. Occasionally, I teach a Principles of Student Success class. In this course, which functions as kind of an academic self-help seminar, we talk about finding meaning. One of the writers who appears constantly in success literature is Viktor Frankl, who survived several years in Auschwitz.

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While I have nothing but compassion and empathy for both Frank and Frankl, that these two figures have become so seminal in American culture indicates that our definition of heroism has changed. A hero is no longer someone who takes action; rather, a hero simply suffers, almost passively.

If you ask most Americans today to identify a war hero, about the only name that pops up is that of the late Senator John McCain, whom we celebrate because of his endurance of imprisonment in Hanoi. Interestingly, McCain is not lauded for his activities before capture: dropping bombs on people. We

rarely talk about that part of his career.

Frank, Frankl, and McCain: heroes of our age. Our definition of heroism is changing and maybe not for the better. In this essay, I'm going to introduce you to names you've probably never heard of, people who represent an older version of heroism, which mandated taking risks in the face of overwhelming odds, making choices, and engaging in principled action, no matter the consequences. Then, I'm going to meditate for a bit on the way in which this change in the characteristics of heroism has had an impact on three key areas of American culture: personal finance, political action, and personal health.

While you may be familiar with Frank, Frankl, and McCain, you may not have heard of Bram van der Stok, Mordechai Anielewicz and Marak Edelman, Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubis, and Sophie Scholl.

That these six names may cause you to draw a blank speaks volumes about what we regard as heroic today.

The first hero, van der Stok, was, like John McCain, a pilot and a prisoner of war. If you've seen the movie *The Great Escape*, you'll know part of van der Stok's story. In 1944, approximately seventy-five Allied officers tunneled their way out of Luft Stalag III. Of the seventy-five, fifty were recaptured and summarily shot to death in a field by the Gestapo. Twenty-three were recaptured and sent to solitary confinement. Three made it out of Occupied Europe. Of those three, van der Stok, who was a Dutch national serving as an

RAF pilot, returned to England and resumed combat duties. An ace, van der Stok provided air cover during Operation Overlord (the invasion of Europe) and shot down V1 rockets. After the war, he attended medical school, became an OB/GYN, and practiced in the United States. Incredibly brave, he went toe-to-toe with German aces, escaped the most secure prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany, helped to stop the rocket attacks on London, and presumably delivered and kept healthy thousands of American babies.

But not many have heard of him.

Why? I think part of the reason for van der Stok's relative obscurity is that American culture has more-or-less stopped respecting accomplishment. We live in an age in which discussion of one's personal suffering takes the place of real achievement. What we are becomes more important than what we do.

Ontology trumps action.

When everybody receives an award for just showing up, actually recognizing outstanding achievement is pointless. Indeed, clear over-achievers like van der Stok make the rest of us look bad. Anne Frank and Viktor Frankl aren't threatening to us because they simply suffered. How would we feel about Anne if she had taken out the eyes of a German soldier with a pair of scissors? Would his search for meaning have been the same if Frankl had slowly poisoned a few of his German guards?

If Viktor Frankl represents one reaction to the death camps, passive endurance, Mordechai Anielewicz and Marak Edelman stand for something very different: resistance. In April 1943, the two men led an armed revolt against the SS in the Warsaw Ghetto, a holding area and staging ground for the transportation of Jews to Treblinka. That Anielewicz and Edelman, armed with little more than handguns and chutzpah, were able to hold off a major German combat unit for almost a



month stands as nothing short of a miracle. The contemporary equivalent would be the members of the Ladies Home Garden Club taking up pitchforks against US Delta Forces. Edelman, who survived the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto, said that

the motivation for the uprising stemmed from the desire of the Warsaw Jews to pick the time and place of their own deaths. I would assume that part of the motivation on the part of Anielewicz and Edelman also involved making their own deaths not come cheaply to the Germans. They would have to pay.

If Anielewicz and Edelman met the German threat when it arrived at their doorstep, another pair, Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubis, brought the fight to the perpetrators. The extermination of the European Jews was largely planned by Reinhard Heydrich, the architect of the Final Solution. The Reich Protector of Bohemia, Heydrich chaired the Wansee Conference in January of 1942. At this meeting, Heydrich and his murderous cronies outlined the ways in which people like Anne Frank and Viktor Frankl would be transported to and, in the case of Frank, exterminated at the death camps. In June, the British and the Czech government-in-exile decided to assassinate Heydrich in Prague. Resistance fighters Gabčík and

Kubis, who were in England, returned to Prague and shot Heydrich as he was traveling to work by motorcar. Eventually Gabčík and Kubis, who hid in the basement of a church, were found and killed by German troops in a shoot-out. Taking about about fifteen German soldiers with them to the next world, these two men paid a very high price to kill someone who was as about as close to the textbook definition of evil is it's possible to get. Yet, despite an act of bravery that resulted in their own deaths, neither of these two Czechs is well known, or known at all, in the United States.

Also mostly unknown in the United States is Sophie Scholl. In 1942, the twenty-one-year-old Scholl and her brother Hans organized an anti-Nazi movement at the University of Munich: The White Rose. The Gestapo soon learned about the activists and charged Scholl, who had been distributing leaflets, with high treason. At her trial in 1943, Scholl delivered a passionate speech in the defense of liberty and freedom. She was sentenced to death and beheaded that afternoon. Her last words were stunning: "Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go. What does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?" Scholl knew that the real reason for taking heroic action involves inspiring others to be their best.

All of these people took heroic stands and engaged in dramatic actions to defend their own beliefs, escape bondage, or destroy evil. Most of them died horrifically for what they believed in, and they went down swinging, either actually or metaphorically.

Why don't we celebrate them as we do Frankl, Frank, and McCain?

A lot has changed in the United States since the 1940s. Taken together, these transformations have destroyed most traditional concepts of heroism and tend to celebrate the victim as hero. It's almost as if Nietzsche's concept of slave morality has become a template for heroism today.

The first change is the rise of what sociologist Frank Furedi has called therapy culture. According to Furedi, therapy culture encourages us to think of ourselves as helpless and vulnerable. Our feelings are more important than our actions. Recognizing and celebrating one's own vulnerability has become the quintessential act of heroes. We live in an age in which people celebrate their dysfunction on *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*. Thus, Frank and Frankl fit the definition of the vulnerable and passive hero.

Second, masculinity, especially that of the alpha variety, has come under heavy attack. To face the Waffen SS with little more than flyswatters takes a kind of alpha quality that most people would have to work very hard to access.

Third, there's a kind of odd egalitarianism at work. Frank and Frankl resemble us: they're basically "every people": normal, middle-class folks caught in bad situations and hoping that events will take a turn for the better. They did for Frankl, not for Frank. The six heroes I mentioned were different from us. They faced horrific situations as well. But instead of hunkering down and waiting it out, these people stood, reached down inside of themselves, turned, and fought in the best ways they knew how. They confronted the evil in their lives, even when that confrontation resulted in their own deaths.

We want our heroes to have our problems and our feelings. And I'm sure that all the people I mentioned felt terror and anger. But they overcame their feelings to do what they saw as right, no matter the cost. I don't think we want our heroes to become a yardstick against which to measure our own passivity. These kinds of heroes stand as a rebuke to us. They took action stemming from their values. They didn't just feel. They acted. Their very lives invite us to be better than we are, to be our most daring, our least risk averse.

I don't think it's a coincidence that in the last 40 years or so, heroism in Anglo-American pop culture has moved into one of two realms. The first is that of the comic book hero born on another planet or of a billionaire family. Superman and Batman are heroes, but we can never be like them. We're from Earth, not Krypton. Our parents were janitors, not magnates. We couldn't afford to rent the Batmobile for an hour. In Great Britain, James Bond (at least the version played by Daniel Craig), seems to do what he does because he's slightly psychotic, and he's also a former Royal Navy Commander and Cambridge graduate. Most folks haven't gone to the Oxbridge schools or the Ivies. Note that in Christopher Nolan movies, Bruce Wayne went to Princeton. Thus, Superman isn't from this world, and Bond and Batman are of the elite classes. These three can be as heroic as they want to, but they don't serve as models for us. They're too different.

The second location for heroism is the realm of the mercenary. Think of the characters played by Sylvester Stallone or Jason Statham. Certainly not physical cowards, these kinds of heroes may have personal loyalties, but what they don't possess is loyalty to any values that direct their actions. Could any of

the characters played by these two or, say, Bruce Willis cite political values in the way Sophie Scholl did?

I don't think so.

Thus, while we do have action heroes, none of them can really serve as role models for own lives. I think this non-relatability of even our fictional heroes is one of the reasons why Frank, Frankl, and McCain, to some extent, have become our heroes. They're like us.

Their kind of heroism—that of passive suffering—has begun to taint American culture. It's made us more taciturn than we should be. How many of us have the get up and go of van der Stok, the audacity of Edelman, or the personal fortitude of Scholl? They were like us, too, except in one vital way: they didn't just endure; they acted.

Heroes should give us something to take into our own world. I'm not sure that Frank and Frankl really do. Their lives in captivity were tragedies, to be sure. But what can we do with this tragedy? Frankl might argue that we can learn to see the bright side and not allow ourselves to be changed negatively by the bad situations in which we find ourselves. Frankl's view has become, in our age, positive psychology. As Barbara Ehrenreich in *Bright-sided* has noted, positive psychology has become a kind of pseudo religion, one preaching political quietism. We can always hope that the world will improve.

But hope is cheap. Action and courage are dear.

I'm going to conclude by examining the way in which the glorification of this new kind of passive heroism has had a deleterious effect on three aspects American society: personal finance, political participation, and personal health.

Today, it is commonplace to talk about the rapaciousness of the US economy. And it is rapacious. Wages have been stagnant for decades. The cost of healthcare has skyrocketed as has the price of a college education. Wall Street extracts the cream from the milk of our investments; 401ks have replaced defined benefit plans; the average credit card balance is over \$9000. US Social Security is scheduled for an implosion around 2035, and the average retirement savings is about fifty grand. Most US citizens can't meet a financial challenge costing as little as four hundred dollars. As Chris Hedges suggests in the pages of *Truthdig*, an oligarchy that threatens to become a kleptocracy seems to have a lock on the economy.

In addition, the left in this country, in the thrall of Michel Foucault, seems to enjoy totalizing the wonkiness of the economy. There is no escape, no gap in the wire through which one can climb, no tunnel through which one can crawl to freedom. One must resign oneself to poverty and despair, ready to be preyed upon by the likes of Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk or Warren Buffet, who loom in the distance dressed in the equivalent of SS uniforms.

Short of a socialist revolution, the left proclaims that there is no hope, no chance for a sane resistance. All politicians are completely corrupt all the time. The banks will cheat you. The market will tank you. The employers will swindle you. All

that's left to do is to make use of the transgendered bathrooms before you're inevitably selected for elimination.

So many Americans seem to resign themselves to being economic Anne Franks or Viktor Frankls, waiting for the knock on the door or the truck to pull down the street, with the clatter of hobnailed boots on the cobblestones.

Instead of resigning ourselves to destruction, we need more financial Bram van der Stoks in the world. Was he in an absolutely terrible situation? Of course he was. Did he simply try to survive another day? No, he got to work: forging passports, faking German uniforms, digging tunnels, and running like hell once he got out. Did he go into therapy or onto *Oprah* once he reached the white cliffs of Dover? No, he jumped back in a Spitfire and shot down more Germans.

Van der Stok is a model that we should emulate. For most people, the US economy functions as a giant storm cloud on the horizon. But you can build a shelter by surviving on forty to sixty percent of your take-home income, banking as much as possible, and living far under your means. Vacations? Nope. iPhones? Not if you want to break out of your prison. You can take on side gigs. You can burn your credit cards. In short, if you're careful, you can tunnel your way out and make it to the economic equivalent of the English Channel.

Of course, it's easier to just be a victim. By doing so, you get cheap sympathy. You get your ten minutes on a talk show. But, in the end, you get taken away by the stormtroopers of the economy. To tunnel your way out, to confront your

situation head on takes dedication, discipline, self-sacrifice, and a never-die attitude.

But it's possible to achieve a positive outcome, and the people who do are worthy of our respect.

If you think I'm a complete do-it-your-selfer, you would be incorrect. I believe that grassroots political action can help with our financial and other social problems. But very few people take real political action these days. Yes, people march in parades. But those steps lead almost nowhere. Having marched in a few rallies myself when I was younger, I've long since recognized that they're nothing but stunts, and that they accomplish precious little. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom, the conservative Cornell philosophy professor, noted that he wasn't against political action *per se*, but he knew that political work doesn't involve getting stoned and laid and hanging out with the members of drum circles. Real political action takes time. One must write letters, form groups that lobby, try to find sponsors of legislation. This work, painfully slow, takes dedication and commitment; it's the equivalent of Edelman standing up to the SS. But what passes for popular action in this country is usually just grandstanding: dramatic but ineffective. It's passive, becoming another kind of entertainment, a kind of bakhtinian spectacle.

If the cult of passivity and victimhood has ruined us financially and politically, it's destroying us physically as well. While smoking in the United States is being slowly extinguished, most of us sit around in terrible shape. Diabetes type II kills more Americans every year than died in the Korean and Vietnam Wars combined.

In the face of rapidly increasing waistlines, our culture has done something very strange. It has now turned what is really a result of one of the seven deadly sins into a diversity issue. Huge body size is now something to be celebrated. Obesity is just another kind of difference. If you suggest that someone who weighs four hundred pounds is not particularly attractive and might benefit from some time spent on a stationary bicycle, you can be found guilty of fat-shaming, which is now seen as the moral and political equivalent of baiting Jews. The trouble, of course, with this false equivalence is that this new kind of difference is fatal. We're eating ourselves to death as a culture.

Instead of rolling ourselves off the couch and waddling to the gym for an hour a day, we say that it's not our fault, that it's bad genetics. It's the culture. We look good. Really? After resigning ourselves to our fate, we wait for the trip to the intensive care unit when our hearts stop. We've transformed a condition that (in almost all cases) is linked to eating and exercise choices into to a state of being. We are fat. Since we can't do anything about it, let's just say we're beautiful.

Instead of engaging in this passivity, we need to have the audacity of Gabcík and Kubis. Obviously, we're not talking about parachuting behind enemy lines and assassinating the Reich protector for Bohemia, but we are discussing having the qualities of underground fighters in order to wage war in this new battle of the bulge: dedication, concentration, a willingness to make oneself uncomfortable, and a commitment to cause that lasts longer than ten minutes. To win a war and keep the subsequent peace requires dedication, commitment, and

the taking of action.

We live in age of being taking the place of doing. Our heroes don't do anything. They just suffer, and they go on talk television to tell us how noble they are.

You might think I'm reducing the greatness of some very brave people by saying that we should apply the lessons of Nazi fighters to personal finance, political protests and personal fitness.

Not at all.

There are two reasons why I'm not. First, the popularizers of Frankl and Frank have had no qualms about suggesting that these two figures' passivity and suffering should be models for all of us. Hope is not a strategy for much of anything. Being passive doesn't help us. But passivity certainly helps the credit card companies, the purveyors of junk candidates for office, and the makers of junk food that can send us to an early grave while it gives its makers an early retirement. Passivity and suffering are bad for our bodies, our country, and our wallets. Frank and Frankl are the perfect heroes for late capitalism: don't do anything; just have hope.

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How well did that attitude work for Anne Frank? For Viktor Frankl, luck played as much of a role as hope did.

Second, heroes like Sophie Scholl and Bram van der Stok faced unbelievably bad circumstances: political oppression and physical confinement. Most of us, I hope, will never face these kinds of miserable odds. But the examples of these two along with those of Anielewicz and Edelman and Gabčík and Kubis serve to rally us to action.

I'll see you in Dover.

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