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Subject: **The Lucifer Effect**, by Philip Zimbardo and **On Hitler's Mountain**, by Irmgard A. Hunt

The two-line tattoo discovered across the back of Pfc. Stoner says it all. In Gothic type, beneath a grinning red skull flanked by two grim reapers, it read: "What if I'm not the hero/What if I'm the bad guy". Stoner was undergoing a physical examination after his beating by fellow soldiers for ratting them out in the still-unfolding American Kill Team civilian murders in Afghanistan.

The murders could have been an example right out of **The Lucifer Effect**: the anonymity that comes with the uniform; the dehumanization of the object; the passive tolerance afforded by the fellow soldiers and the higher-ups. Morality then disengages. There had been talk about throwing candy from the back of a Stryker vehicle and shooting the children as they tried to gather it up.

Lucifer Effect: (every) man has infinite capacity for good/evil; the barrier between the two states is permeable; character transformation is situational. Episodes like this usually evoke the same response: it's the work of a few bad apples in the barrel. Maybe the issue is neither the apples nor the barrel but rather the barrel-maker. That is author Zimbardo's hypothesis. Look to the system itself, with its unchecked power, to understand the transformation.

Chapters two through nine detail the so-called Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). Ordinary college students, randomly assigned to the role of prisoner or guard, are transformed into – become – the real thing. It's an extraordinary phenomenon to behold. "Guards" drunk with power quickly morph into over-reaching, sadistic, abusive personalities. Squint and you can see Abu Graib.

There is some sweet, sweet irony in this. Zimbardo was called to account. A woman (later his wife) took all this in and pointed out the

obvious: hey, Zimbardo, these aren't guards and prisoners you're dealing with, they're college kids, and what you are doing through this experiment is itself nothing less than abuse in the exercise of power. Whoa. Zimbardo halted the experiment prematurely the next day.

Those who feel no need to pour over the details of the experiment in order to be convinced of its authenticity (trust me, it's compelling) can skip directly to Chapters 12-13. There described is the social dynamic underlying this transformation into our lesser angels.

A child's vulnerability, particularly heart-wrenching, was also on dramatic display in the documentary study "A Class Divided." How quickly these American grade-school children, separated into the blue- and brown-eyed specimen groups, hardened their view of themselves versus the "others" through arbitrary teacher input (google: Frontline/A Class Divided). They could have been budding Hutus and Tutsis in another time and place.

Those inclined to short-cut the entire book are invited to capture the essence of Zimbardo's message by watching his excellent half-hour TED presentation (google: TED/The Lucifer Effect).

There is, however, no short-cutting the companion discussion book, **On Hitler's Mountain**. This book is not about guards, prisoners, or even the Holocaust per se. This is the memoir of a woman who, through accident of history and geography, was raised in the literal shadows of what may be regarded as the biggest national transformation in modern Western history.

Irmgard Hunt was raised in Berchtesgaden, site of Hitler's alpine retreat, during the time of his rise and fall. What comes through in Ms. Hunt's extraordinary account is her open, honest, unflinching dedication to truth as she recounts her upbringing. The details are all there: what she saw; what she knew; how she felt; what she and others did or didn't do.

Detail matters. It transports the reader to a different time and place. We've all read in the history books about the post-Versailles humiliation, the crushing Weimar hyper-inflation, the desperate search for order that lead to a regime which ultimately ended with the parade-of-horribles. Ms. Hunt's up-close-and-personal memoir invites the reader to the uncomfortable question: what would you have done in the same circumstances? Honestly.

Zimbardo dedicates a chapter (12) to the power of conformity, invoking the words of C.S. Lewis, "the terror of being left outside." I'm not certain I would have had the courage displayed by nine-year-old Irmgard when she was faced with the prospect of turning in her anti-Hitler grandfather.

So the question is not whether we are good or bad. We're both. It's situational. Again, Pfc. Stoner: "What if I'm not the hero. What if I'm the bad guy."