



Extraordinary Ordinary Virtue

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On the day after New Year's, as most of the world now knows, Wesley Autrey, a construction worker and a Navy veteran, was waiting for the train with his two daughters at the 137th Street Station in New York.

Then, a man collapsed on the platform and began convulsing. After Autrey helped him get up, the man collapsed again and fell onto the tracks. With the lights of the Broadway Local visible down the tunnel, Autrey had to make what he later called a "split decision"—a decision that inspired a nation and taught us a powerful lesson about what it means to be human.

Autrey jumped onto the tracks, risking his own life, to save the stricken stranger. After visiting the man in the hospital, Autrey, who denied that he had done anything "spectacular," went to work.

While Autrey didn't think that his actions were spectacular, other people did. At a time when most of the news is disheartening, Autrey's actions inspired millions of people. Americans have become jaundiced and skeptical. We need heroes every now and then, a role model—and that's what Autrey has become.

Not only did he inspire us, but he also helps remind us of some important truths about being human.

One of these is that materialism can never provide a satisfactory, much less complete, account of human nature. While neo-Darwinism offers a superficial explanation for human evil, it can't begin to account for human goodness, such as Autrey's actions.

What we Christians call “altruism,” Neo-Darwinists call “enlightened” selfishness. Thus, a Neo-Darwinist would say that parents care for their children and siblings as a way of ensuring that their “selfish genes” get passed on to the next generation.

Even if this were true, it says nothing about why a man jumps in front of an incoming train for a total stranger, as Autrey did. For that, you need the capacity for self-sacrifice, an utterly un-Darwinian trait.

Autrey’s actions also reminded of what true virtue looks like. As Scott Carson, a philosophy professor at Miami of Ohio, pointed out, people like Autrey nearly always deny that what they did was “spectacular.”

This is more than modesty; it’s what C. S. Lewis meant when he wrote that virtue is “precognitive.” A soldier in a foxhole who jumps on a grenade doesn’t ponder the issues; he acts on instinct: that instinct being the product of believing the right things and living that way—what philosophers call “habituation,” or character. As Autrey himself acknowledged after the fact, his actions seemed a bit foolish. But, happily for the stricken man, virtue always doesn’t work in rational ways.

Autrey’s story reminded me of the great Christian leader of the Czech revolution in 1989, Father Václav Maly. When I met him in 1990 in Prague and told him what a hero he was to me, he stopped and said, “Oh, no, Chuck. I was just doing my duty.”

Few of us will ever have to demonstrate what Carson calls “the extraordinary virtue of ordinary people” in such spectacular ways. But all of us can aspire to live in a way that will make our “split-second decisions” just as virtuous and praiseworthy.



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