**We Are All Bystanders**

By Dacher Keltner, Jason Marsh

But we don’t have to be. **Dacher Keltner** and **Jason Marsh** explain why we sometimes shackle our moral instincts, and how we can set them free.

For more than 40 years, Peggy Kirihara has felt guilty about Stewart.

Peggy liked Stewart. They went to high school together. Their fathers were friends, both farmers in California’s Central Valley, and Peggy would always say “hi” when she passed Stewart in the hall.

Yet every day when Stewart boarded their school bus, a couple of boys would tease him mercilessly. And every day, Peggy would just sit in her seat, silent.

“I was dying inside for him,” she said. “There were enough of us on the bus who were feeling awful—we could have done something. But none of us said anything.”

Peggy still can’t explain why she didn’t stick up for Stewart. She had known his tormenters since they were all little kids, and she didn’t find them threatening. She thinks if she had spoken up on his behalf, other kids might have chimed in to make the teasing stop.

But perhaps most surprising—and distressing—to Peggy is that she considers herself an assertive and moral person, yet those convictions aren’t backed up by her conduct on the bus.

“I think I would say something now, but I don’t know for sure,” she said. “Maybe if I saw someone being beaten up and killed, I’d just stand there. That still worries me.”

Many of us share Peggy’s concern. We’ve all found ourselves in similar situations: the times we’ve seen someone harassed on the street and didn’t intervene; when we’ve driven past a car stranded by the side of the road, assuming another driver would pull over to help; even when we’ve noticed litter on the sidewalk and left it for someone else to pick up. We witness a problem, consider some kind of positive action, then respond by doing… nothing. Something holds us back. We remain bystanders.

Why don’t we help in these situations? Why do we sometimes put our moral instincts in shackles? These are questions that haunt all of us, and they apply well beyond the fleeting scenarios described above. Every day we serve as bystanders to the world around us—not just to people in need on the street but to larger social, political, and environmental problems that concern us, but which we feel powerless to address on our own. Indeed, the bystander phenomenon pervades the history of the past century.

“The bystander is a modern archetype, from the Holocaust to the genocide in Rwanda to the current environmental crisis,” says [Charles Garfield](http://www.shanti.org/cgbio/bio.html), a clinical professor of psychology at the [University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine](http://medschool2.ucsf.edu/) who is writing a book about the psychological differences between bystanders and people who display “moral courage.”

“Why,” asked Garfield, “do some people respond to these crises while others don’t?”

In the shadow of these crises, researchers have spent the past few decades trying to answer Garfield’s question. Their findings reveal a valuable story about human nature: Often, only subtle differences separate the bystanders from the morally courageous people of the world. Most of us, it seems, have the potential to fall into either category. It is the slight, seemingly insignificant details in a situation that can push us one way or the other.

Researchers have identified some of the invisible forces that restrain us from acting on our own moral instincts while also suggesting how we might fight back against these unseen inhibitors of altruism. Taken together, these results offer a scientific understanding for what spurs us to everyday altruism and lifetimes of activism, and what induces us to remain bystanders…

*http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we\_are\_all\_bystanders/*