Humanitarian Acts: What Can Bystanders Do?

This lesson presents stories about ordinary people who, during the American Civil War, acted to protect the life or human dignity of people they did not know or ordinarily would not be inclined to help or protect. The stories are drawn from real-life situations that occurred during the war and focus on people who cared for the wounded on the battlefield, regardless of whether they were fighting for the Union or the Confederacy. The stories explore the concept of impartiality (non-discrimination in providing care to the wounded), which underpins humanitarian assistance.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the effect a bystander can have on the actions of others
- To be aware of examples of bystanders acting to protect life or human dignity

PREPARATION

Select the stories you will use for your group and the sequence in which you will use them.

Plan to devote at least two sessions to this lesson if you are exploring both stories. This will give you time to employ a number of pedagogical approaches—such as brainstorming, role playing, small-group discussion, analysis and presentation, and use of local stories and news items—to illustrate how one develops the courage to act. That, in turn, will enable your students to receive the full impact of the experiences and actions of bystanders.

TIME

Two 45-minute sessions
The Lesson

1. BRAINSTORMING
To introduce the subject, have students discuss the following question:

What does it take to do something dangerous or unpopular to help someone whose life or human dignity is at risk?

2. DEFINE “Bystander”
Introduce the term “bystander” and work toward a student-generated definition of the term. It may be defined as “someone aware of an incident, without being involved, where the life or human dignity of others is in danger.” A bystander may, however, decide to intervene. Ask students for personal examples of bystander moments from their own lives (more time will be spent exploring this later in the lesson).

3. EXPLORE THE STORIES
(Additional time may be needed depending on the stories chosen and the pedagogical approaches used.)

Possible approaches
- Students divide into small groups. Each group reads and discusses a different story, then tells others about it.
- Students dramatize a story. Each person in the story is assigned to several different students so they can examine the person’s motivation.
- Read a story aloud to the group and identify “decision points” in the narrative so the group can discuss what they think the people involved should do next. Some possible decision points have been identified and are indicated by the following symbol: 🟢

Questions for reporting and discussing stories
- When and where did the events in the story take place?
- How was someone’s life or human dignity at risk in this situation?
- What obstacles did potential rescuers face? What were they risking?
- Who were the bystanders and what choices did they make? Why?
- What pressures and risks were involved?
- What were the immediate results of the bystanders’ actions? What results occurred later?

STUDENT RESOURCES
Present the stories “Civil War Hospital Treats Blue and Gray” and “Angel of the Battlefield.”
4. **CLOSE (AFTER THE FINAL STORY SESSION)**  15 minutes

Remind students that such acts take place locally and around the world, though they are not always reported.

**Ask students to do the following:**
- Summarize the situations in the stories they have explored; and
- Review the obstacles the bystanders had to overcome, the risks they took, and the impact they had in attempting to protect others.

**Possible question**
- Do you have any examples from your school, your neighborhood or your family in which a bystander did something to protect someone’s life or human dignity?

---

**KEY IDEAS:**
- Ordinary people can, in times of violence, act to protect the life or human dignity of people they may not know or usually would not be inclined to help or protect.
- Bystanders often act despite possible personal risk or loss.
- Ordinary people everywhere have confronted inhumane behavior to protect others who are at risk.
About the Stories

THE STORIES
Two real-life stories from the American Civil War are included. In each story, someone’s life or human dignity is under threat as a consequence of the conflict.

The bystander in each story is an ordinary person who—

- may have put his or her life or well-being in danger; and
- protects the life or human dignity of someone he or she may not know or ordinarily would not be inclined to help or protect.

You may use one or both of these stories or substitute similar stories of your own.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES
Below are some suggestions to help students experience and analyze the stories.

- Begin by asking students to think of experiences from their lives that may connect with the setting of the story (for example, emergency situations they encountered). Ask them to share the thoughts and feelings they may have had in those situations and the reasons for those thoughts and feelings.
- Present the story you chose. Help students envision the battlefield as it must have appeared to bystanders at the time.
- Before discussing each story, have students write down what they believe the person at risk in the story was thinking as the situation developed. Ask students what surprises them about each story, and why.
- Next, lead a discussion of students’ responses to the story. Help them focus on the danger in the situations and the threat to human dignity. Then have them write down what the rescuer may have been thinking. What risks or pressures did each person face? What might have caused each person to act?
Possible questions

- What obstacles did the rescuer face?
- What decisions do you think each person made?
- What do you think was going through the heads of those involved?
- What effect did the humanitarian act have?
- Did the behavior of one bystander affect the behavior of others? How?
- What chain of consequences might develop when bystanders behave in an inhumane way (for instance, when they steal from dying soldiers or ignore pleas for help)?

Encourage a discussion about what it took for each person to step in and protect another person at risk.

Invite students to find parallels to the story in their own lives. Have any of them had a similar experience? What do they remember thinking or feeling? Were any of them in a position to help a vulnerable person? What did they consider doing? What did they actually do?

Research stories from your local community, family history or religion to find accounts of bystanders who acted to protect the life or human dignity of someone they did not know or typically would not have been inclined to help or protect. What made them act? What was the result? Illustrate and put together a book or exhibit of all the stories you collect.

SOURCES:

“Civil War Hospital Treats Blue and Gray”

“Angel of the Battlefield”
Extension Activities

“CIVIL WAR HOSPITAL TREATS BLUE AND GRAY”
1. Rewrite the story of the Civil War Bethesda Church Hospital from the point of view of a wounded soldier or the surgeon treating the wounded soldiers.
2. Using Internet and library sources, research and prepare a report on medicines used in Civil War field hospitals.
3. Draw your interpretation of the people and activities in and around the Bethesda Church Hospital.
4. Find Civil War songs—military marching songs, ballads, or love songs—and discuss how the lyrics or musical tunes might relate to the activities around the Bethesda Church Hospital.

“ANGELOF THE BATTLEFIELD”
1. Discuss how the work of Clara Barton might be considered from the following perspectives:
   ● Former students in combat situations
   ● Military medical personnel in battlefield situations
   ● Civilians receiving an appeal to supply bandages or other necessities
   ● Members of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and military medical services for the wounded
   ● Government legislators being asked to authorize new expenditures for relief efforts and missing person assistance
2. Dilemmas to consider:
   ➔ How might you have reacted to seeing the bodies on the battlefield at Turners’ Gap?
   ➔ How might you have reacted if the person you were trying to help died in your arms from a bullet that had pierced your clothing?
   ➔ If your request to help wounded soldiers in the battlefield was turned down because it was considered an inappropriate request coming from a woman, what next steps might you take?
   ➔ How might you respond to an appeal for help from “enemy soldiers”?


Civil War Hospital Treats Blue and Gray

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

From April 1861 to April 1865, the United States was rocked by warfare and strife after 11 Southern states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. Led by President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee, the Confederates fought against the United States’ free and four “border” states over the right of individual states to secede from the United States and the legitimacy of the institution of slavery.

The war pitted brother against brother, father against son, and neighbor against neighbor. Tennessee, in particular, was a land of divided loyalties during the Civil War. Tennessee held two statewide referenda on the question of which side to support in the war. Both times the overall vote favored joining the Confederacy, although most of eastern Tennessee remained strongly pro-Union. More than 120,000 Tennessee men eventually joined the Confederate Army, and 54,000 enlisted in the Union Army.

Tennessee was engulfed by four years of warfare, affecting both civilians and soldiers. Suffering severe hardships, citizens were often forced from their homes by soldiers on both sides. Food was in short supply, especially when troops took livestock and vegetables. Lawlessness was rampant, farms were burned, and normal daily life ceased. Women were left to run farms and homes in the absence of husbands who were fighting and slaves who left to join the Union Army. Children had to take on many adult responsibilities.

EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE STORY

The Tennessee town of Morristown became a focal point of carnage due to the Confederate garrison stationed there. From October 28 to November 13, 1864, Morristown was engulfed in a “battle between brothers” when Union forces that had taken control of nearby Knoxville were given the task of capturing neighboring Confederate-held areas. On the morning of October 23, Union troops under the command of General Avan C. Gillem approached Morristown. Confederate defenders under Colonel James G. Rose prepared to meet the advancing enemy. Cannonball fire fell on the town, damaging homes and businesses throughout the day. The Confederate defenders fell back, eventually retreating 35 miles east until they were able to regroup and return to drive the Union forces from Morristown on November 12-13 in a rout that became known as “Gillem’s Stampede.” Roughly 1,700 Confederate soldiers and 2,800 Union soldiers fought in the Battle of Morristown.

One hospital set up by the Confederate forces was at Bethesda Presbyterian Church. Still standing today, the church has not changed since the 1860s and still shows damage from a cannonball that struck the brick exterior, frightening the wounded and caregivers alike. Doctors, nurses and assistants performed operations and amputations at the makeshift hospital, nursing many to recovery but losing others who are buried in the cemetery alongside the church. The hospital was captured and recaptured during the course of the battle. Despite the changing allegiances and divided loyalties of the local townspeople, medical volunteers treated both Confederate and Union wounded throughout the conflict.
Angel of the Battlefield

BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

From April 1861 to April 1865, the United States was rocked by warfare and strife when 11 Southern states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. Led by President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee, the Confederates fought against the United States' free states and four “border” states over the right of individual states to secede from the United States and the legitimacy of the institution of slavery.

The Battle of Antietam, on September 17, 1862, was a turning point in the war. Also called the Battle of Sharpsburg, the encounter took place near Antietam Creek in the small town of Sharpsburg, Maryland. Maryland was one of the four “border states” that had legalized slavery but had not seceded from the Union. Maryland’s allegiance was critical, as it surrounded Washington, D.C., on three sides. Loyalties among the citizens of the state were split throughout the war.

A few weeks before the Battle of Antietam, Confederate and Union forces clashed in fierce battles in Virginia. The armies then moved north and commenced fighting in Maryland at the Battle of South Mountain, near Harpers Ferry, on September 14.

The medical services for the Union Army were not organized into any system (a problem that would not be addressed until later in the war). Women sometimes traveled with troops to care for family members by doing laundry, cooking meals, mending clothes, and providing nursing services. Some women even joined the fighting. It wasn't at all usual during Civil War times, however, for a woman to deliberately and aggressively solicit material aid and then ask to deliver it in person by tending to the injured and dying on the battlefield.

EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE STORY

Lee led his army of 55,000 troops into Maryland on September 3, 1862. Maryland was a strategic location for several reasons. Food supplies were running low, and Maryland’s agricultural resources could replenish Confederate supplies. If the Southern forces could win a major battle north of the Union’s border, this could result in international recognition of the Confederacy and lead to military and financial aid from Great Britain and France, two countries that relied on the import of cotton.

Major Gen. George B. McClellan led his Union army of 75,000 troops into Maryland to intercept Lee’s men. The two armies met at Antietam on September 17 in a brutal 12-hour battle that has become known as the single bloodiest day in U.S. military history. The ferocious fighting, which included artillery assaults from more than 500 cannons, resulted in almost 23,000 dead, wounded, missing, or captured soldiers. The next day, both armies collected their wounded and buried their dead. That night, Lee and his army retreated to Virginia, ending his first invasion of the North.
Civil War Hospital Treats Blue and Gray

The following is a dramatization of the story of Mary Reese, a volunteer in a makeshift Confederate hospital in the Bethesda Presbyterian Church in Eastern Tennessee.

I used to think my life was rather boring—the most excitement I ever got was the sermons in church on Sunday. It is now October, and though the weather grows colder, this very uncivil war continues to rage hot in our divided town. Our humble brick church closed its doors and opened them to quite a different congregation that began to flood our town in search of salvation.

I knew I could not sit idly by as boys and men were dragged into this building made for worship, only to pray for their pain to stop. Mother told me I would be of more use at home. Maybe she was right—as a teenager, what skills did I have to offer? Despite the strong urging of my family, I set off for the church and was not bored again for a long time.

While the surgeon works day and night cutting, stitching, and even amputating, it is my job to keep the iron stove stoked, wash wounds and change bandages, write letters home for the wounded who cannot, and offer any comfort or relief I can to the dozens of soldiers scattered among the wooden pews. I expected to see horrible wounds and burns of the flesh. I wasn’t prepared for soldiers in grave need of care wearing the uniform of those some call “enemy thieves.”

I am called upon again and again to care for all. Today, a Union artilleryman fell under my care, scarred and wounded by the “bloodiest battle he’d ever been in.” His brothers had joined the Confederate Army, and he knew not of their whereabouts. He calls me his “Little Angel” and says that if he lives through this war he’ll return to marry me. Judging by the number of graves in the cemetery outside, the chance of that is slim.

In the span of just two short weeks, this hospital has been claimed by the Confederates, the Union, and the Confederates once again. But now I see no blue or gray—only the red of human blood. Each time the hospital changes hands, the surgeon reminds us that the only flag that matters is the yellow hospital banner. It is our job to heal, not to question the allegiances of the wounded.

While outside our doors the town vacillated between Confederate and Union sympathies, life inside was the same. The soldiers got better and returned to the field, or died and returned to the ground. When I look down at my patients, I no longer see the colors of their uniforms, only the faces of neighbors. I continue to bandage, wash, comfort, and pray for these wounded, clinging to our neutrality like a shield.

Questions:

- What was significant about Mary Reese’s experience during the Battle of Morristown?
- How did the concept of impartiality reveal itself?
- By treating wounded soldiers regardless of their loyalties, what impact did medical volunteers like Mary Reese have?

Bethesda Presbyterian Church (Bethesda Church Hospital) remains standing in Morristown, Tennessee. It still features the original interior from the time of the Civil War battle, including the pulpit, handmade wooden pews, and iron stoves.
Angel of the Battlefield

The following is a dramatization of the story of Clara Barton and her work on Civil War battlefields.

It was early afternoon on September 16, 1862, and I was so close to turning around before ever reaching Sharpsburg, Maryland. After a year of overcoming the most frustrating obstacles that the Union Army and government could put in my path, I convinced them to allow me to bring medical supplies to the battlefields. Brigadier Gen. Hammond issued me the first official pass to distribute aid to the sick and wounded. Having left my job at the Patent Office, I could finally help my boys—former students from Massachusetts and New Jersey—and others like them in this terrible conflict.

Now, on the eve of battle, I found myself at the very back of a massive army supply line, with little hope of reaching the battlefield in time. My fellow travelers—all men—had little sympathy for me and my ragtag wagons of medical supplies, which I had painstakingly gathered by begging from the kind and from the curmudgeonly. I waited until it was dark, then I rallied my teamsters and rode around the supply line straight through the night.

I arrived at the makeshift hospital around noon the next day. Cannons were firing away, and bullets were flying overhead. Bodies were strewn in all directions. The clattering sounds of artillery swamped me, and I was so disoriented I did not know where to begin—it was like nothing I had ever imagined. Dr. James Dunn, the surgeon in charge, was desperate for supplies. They had no bandages, rags, gauze or string left, and the soldiers were bandaged with corn leaves (which I would soon replace with linen). Soldier volunteers helped me distribute armfuls of bandages, gauze, water, and comfort. I assisted the doctor and his assistant as they operated on soldiers, removing bullets and cutting off limbs.

I grabbed a pail of water to bring to the wounded soldiers dotting the field. I tried to keep the men I found alive until someone could see to their wounds. Some of them were still boys. As I bent over one soldier to give him a drink of water, I felt a great rush of wind through one of my sleeves. When I looked at my arm, I found a bullet had pierced my sleeve. Instead of hitting me, it struck dead the young man I had been caring for. I'll never forget that moment. The fact that I had visited a hospital for wounded Confederate prisoners a few weeks ago, or that I had diverted an ox from Union supplies to give to a Confederate hospital in need of meat, would not save me from a bullet out here. In the hazy confusion of battle, I was just as likely to be shot by Union soldiers from my own side.

When darkness fell, the doctor was desperate. He had only a single candle to see 1,000 men. My four boxes of candles and lanterns soon lit up every room. As I looked out at the wounded boys sprawled across the field waiting for care, I was reminded of my first patient, my brother David, who I nursed when he fell from the rafters of our family barn. These men could all be someone’s brother. It did not matter which side they were fighting for—I would risk my life a million times over to save as many of them as I could.

Under the authority of President Lincoln, Clara Barton later led efforts to search for missing soldiers from 1865-69. Driven by her Civil War experiences and efforts in Europe to establish national aid societies, she founded the American Red Cross in 1881 and in 1882 convinced the U.S. to adopt the Geneva Convention of 1864 to protect the wounded on the battlefield.

Questions:

- What was significant about Clara Barton’s experience during the Battle of Antietam? What provisions existed for wounded soldiers?
- How did the concept of impartiality reveal itself?
- What was the long-term impact of Clara Barton’s experiences during the Civil War?