

Beautiful Souls Study Guide

Beautiful Souls by Eyal Press

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Summary

Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times is a sociological examination by Eyal Press of average people who find themselves in difficult situations, and make important moral choices that set them at odds with people and events around them. Press begins his book by describing how, during the massacre of Jews at the town of Jozefow, Poland, a handful of German troops refused to participate in the bloodshed while everyone else did. Press wonders about what set such men apart from the others. He goes on to explain that his book will be about four such individuals who made moral choices, and that he will examine why such individuals made their choices, and what consequences they had.

Press first presents the case of Paul Gruninger, commander of the state police in the Swiss town of St. Gallen. Gruninger was a family man, a Christian, a military veteran, and a conservative. As a part of the state police, he was required to uphold the laws of Switzerland, including turning away Jewish refugees fleeing from Hitler. Gruninger refused to obey the law, instead granting “special permission” for Jewish refugees who sought him out to stay in Switzerland indefinitely. For his efforts, Gruninger was thrown out of his job, and spent the last 30 years of his life unable to find steady employment, while his family was initially shunned. Gruninger never regretted breaking the law, saying he did what he knew to be right, having personally looked into the eyes of the people he was supposed to send away. Likewise, the world changed and became inconsistent with Gruninger’s own beliefs, so he refused to go along with the world.

Press next presents the case of Aleksander Jevtic, a Serb national caught up in the midst of the Balkan War of 1999 in which Croats and Serbs battled one another over Croatian independence. Jevtic, who lived in the multiethnic city of Vukovar, was rounded up by Serb troops along with many other Croats. Jevtic, who knew the Serb officer in charge, was given the responsibility of separating Serbs from Croats so Serbs were not tortured and killed. Jevtic identified as many Croats as Serbs as he could, saving many lives by doing so. Jevtic explains to Press that he did so because he was raised to love and respect others, but also because he was independent-minded and did not care about belonging to groups or what they thought of him. Jevtic reveals to Press that his wife, Wendy, is a Croat – and that she initially hid him during the early days of the war.

Press then presents the case of Avner Wishnitzer, an Israeli veteran and liberal Zionist who believes the Israeli efforts in Gaza and the West Bank are nothing more than unjust occupation, and so refused orders to serve in those areas after learning of the attempts of some Israelis to run Palestinians off their land. Even when Palestinians launched terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in 2003, and even when this caused the loss of liberal support for Palestine, Avner stood his ground and refused to serve in territories he considers to be unjustly occupied. Avner even signed a public letter to his effect, and upon refusing to withdraw his name, was thrown out of the service. Avner explains to Press that in his own case, his personal perspective on things changed, as the nation’s policy remained the same. Avner does not regret his stand, even though it has cost him nearly everything in his life.



Press finally presents the case of Leyla Wydler, an El Salvadorian immigrant to America who, as a single mother, fought and struggled to become a six-figure salaried financial advisor at Stanford Group Company. Leyla quickly began to wonder how investments made into Stanford International Bank were generating constant, high returns, and she felt pressured to sell CDs in the bank. Her coworkers called her crazy for choosing to ask questions rather than just collecting easy paychecks. But believing first in human values and American ideals, Leyla refused to sell CDs until she had straight answers. She was fired. Leyla leaked information about the company to the U.S. Senate, regulatory agencies and organizations, and the papers. Eventually, Stanford was exposed as a Ponzi scheme. Leyla does not regret her choice, and would rather be moral than wealthy.

As Press concludes his book, he explains that he hopes highlighting the moral stands of some will encourage other moral stands to take place, and that those who make moral stands should not always expect glory or praise.



Prologue – 1. Disobeying the Law

Summary

In the Prologue, during World War II, outside of the town of Jozefow, Poland, on July 7, 1942, the German Order Police arrived to bring the village's 1,800 Jewish inhabitants to the marketplace. There, strong Jewish men were separated and sent away to work camps, while the rest were taken to the woods, forced to lie down, and shot to death. The commander of the Germans, Major Wilhelm Trapp, had previously given his soldiers the choice to participate or refrain. Only about a dozen men refused to join in the murders. How such ordinary men could choose to refuse conforming to dangerous situations, and why, is what Eyal Press explains his book will be about. Press goes on to say that such thoughts are intriguing to readers, who always wonder how they would behave in similar situations. Press explains that even in democratic societies, there can be backlashes against good people, and that perspective and situation often determines how one will act. Press goes on to posit a number of questions, asking what it takes to resist, how one can know it is justified, how one can avoid becoming a zealot, and what defiance achieves overall. To resist, Press explains, is a choice.

Disobeying the Law

I. Underhanded Practices – 14-year-old Jew Erich Billig, having escaped from the Nazis in Vienna during Kristallnacht thanks to help from his mother, slipped across the border from Austria into Switzerland in November, 1938. Erich's brother had previously escaped to Zurich, while their father had been taken to a concentration camp. Erich was captured by Swiss guards and sent back to Austria as part of a policy created by Heinrich Rothmund, head of the Federal Police for Foreigners. Rothmund, who expressed sympathies for the Jews, also considered the dangerous political situation and his anti-Semitic tendencies, such as worrying that Switzerland may become too Jewish, and so turned away non-Aryan people. The next night, Erich was aided by two Swiss guides, who successfully sneaked Erich into the country. In St. Gallen, Erich met and was aided by Sidney Dreifuss, head of a Jewish relief agency. Dreifuss introduced Erich to Paul Gruninger, commander of the state police in St. Gallen, who helped Jews.

Gruninger was 47, from a middle-class background, was a World War I veteran, a teacher, a husband, a father, a conservative, a church-going man, and ultimately got in trouble before for granting Jewish refugees "special permission" to remain in Switzerland indefinitely. Under Rothmund's demands, investigator Gustav Struder looked into "special permissions." Gruninger was found guilty of underhanded practices and fired. Many Swiss guards say the punishment was justified, for Gruninger broke the law. Gruninger died in 1972, having spent the last 30 years of his life trying to find steady employment.

In the present time, seeking to understand Gruninger, Eyal Press meets with his daughter, Ruth Rudoner, who explains that her family was normal, like all other families.



Press explains that those who helped Jews during the Holocaust were either acting out of humanity or ideology. Research reveals that Gruninger demanded nothing of the Jews he helped.

II. Mechanisms of Denial – Polish sociologist and husband of a Holocaust survivor, Zygmunt Bauman, publishes a book in 1989 called *Modernity and the Holocaust*, which seeks to explain how a nation of family-centered people who were kind to their neighbors could participate in mass murder. Bureaucracy, localizing of tasks, instrumental rationality, the prodding of an authority figure, and the accepting of responsibility by others, helped make it possible. This also helped to prevent personal experiences from influencing people, such as the experience of Italian Giorgio Perlasca, who, while in Budapest, witnessed the beating of a Jewish boy and dedicated his life to rescuing Jews thereafter. Speaking to Ruth in the present, Press notes that Gruninger had very personal experiences with the Jews that his superiors did not have. While his superiors could craft policies, Gruninger had to deal with them firsthand and in person.

III. Choices and Beliefs – Paul's letter of defense to the Swiss government in 1939 indicated that he could not turn away Jews after seeing firsthand their suffering and pain. In 1942, Rothmund, after having finally witnessed firsthand the struggles of Jewish refugees, temporarily turned a blind eye himself to their arrival in Switzerland. These situational factors bear heavily on the individual, Press explains, and can be the most powerful influence. Yet, this influence can be overcome, such as in the case of Adolf Eichmann, who admitted to suppressing his concerns for Jewish children by reminding himself of his loyalty to the Nazi Party and the German state. The German troops at Jozefow did the same in some cases, willing themselves to see the Jews as a dehumanized minority group, while in other cases, buying the anti-Semitic indoctrination and propaganda they had been sold. Gruninger himself, thanks to his conservatism, faith, and patriotic belief in the Swiss asylum tradition, did not fold to pressure.

IV. Correcting Mistakes – Press reveals that Gruninger was not alone. A friend and government colleague, Valentin Keel, a former trade unionist, quietly backed Gruninger but would not publicly defend Gruninger against their superiors. When more than one person is able to stand in defiance, Press explains, it is easier for the other. Alone against his superiors, Keel cracked.

In the present, speaking to Ruth, Press learns that Gruninger's activities resulted in a loss of financial support at college, causing her to drop out, causing her friends to become distant, and causing businesses to refuse to hire anyone in their family. Press reveals an interview with Swiss Parliament member Paul Rechsteiner, who had previously undertaken a campaign to rehabilitate Gruninger's reputation. It, and other attempts, received strong opposition because of guilt, needing to excuse national behavior, and refusing to tarnish Switzerland's reputation as asylum friendly. Not until 1995 was Gruninger restored. Press also interviews Erich Billig, who credits his life to Gruninger. Erich reveals he did not have the courage to go and thank Gruninger, and Erich notes that his mother was killed at Auschwitz.



Analysis

Eyal Press begins his examination of ordinary people making moral choices in difficult situations with the 12 German troops who refused to participate in the killings at Jozefow, while every other member of their unit participated. The twelve soldiers were ordinary German citizens, and found themselves swept up into an extraordinary set of circumstances that they refused to have anything to do with. Press crafts an example of one of the major themes that will come to perforate his book – that it is usually ordinary people who are tasked with extraordinary choices. And so Press wonders how some ordinary people, like the 12 Germans, can refuse to participate in butchery despite the situation in which they find themselves, and how identical Germans willingly participate in the butchery.

Press then presents the case of Paul Gruninger, who refused to follow Swiss laws which prevented Jews from fleeing into Switzerland. Gruninger, Press reveals, was indeed a very average man: a husband, a father, a veteran, a Christian, a conservative, and a kind person. While the local state police commanders in towns all around Gruninger's town – men much like Gruninger – refused to allow Jews sanctuary, Gruninger ensured they received special passes which allowed them to stay. Like the 12 German troops, Gruninger's actions can be explained in a number of ways.

Among these are situational factors. Gruninger did not have a hand in making the laws, but had a hand in carrying them out and upholding them. Therefore, he saw firsthand their impact on people while those who made the laws never had to uphold them. Gruninger's own life – ranging from his love of family to his Christian conservatism – gave him a sense of humanity which he saw reflected in the eyes of the refugees who came to him for help. Thirdly, Gruninger was at least nominally supported by an associate, though the associate later failed to speak in Gruninger's defense. For a man like Gruninger, his moral convictions never changed, and his faith in his country never changed, even though his country did. While his country may have abandoned its asylum-friendly status, Gruninger did not. The same is true of the 12 German soldiers: they stood together in a moral way against a country's policies that had left them behind.

Gruninger's actions – and the actions of the 12 German troops – also further another one of Press's thematic arguments, in that a person's individual morality must always be seen in light of decisions. Gruninger's morality did not conform to what was expected by the law, so his decision to ignore the law to help Jews was a question of moral behavior, rather than legal absolutism. Yet, at the same time, Gruninger's decision had not only consequences for those he saved, but for himself and his family as well. Making a moral stand does not necessarily mean victory celebrations, fame, and glory at the end when everything is said and done. Indeed, those who make moral choices often have very difficult lives after the fact. Gruninger's family was initially shunned for his actions; and Gruninger himself spent the last 30 years of his life unable to find steady employment. Still, Gruninger never had any regrets.

Vocabulary

refrain, sanctimonious, zealotry, Kristallnacht, burnished, metastasize, anti-Semitic, presaged, impeccable, virulent, exuberant, pervasive, sadistic, indoctrination, fervent, antifascist, irreverent



2. Defying the Group

Summary

November, 1991 - Croats and Serbs battled one another as the Croats vied for independence from Yugoslavia. Several hundred Croat prisoners were herded from the multiethnic city of Vukovar after it had fallen to ruthless Serbian attacks. The prisoners were taken to detention facilities near Stajicevo, Serbia. Because Croats and Serbs are nearly indistinguishable from one another, Serbian troops had a difficult time telling Croat prisoners apart from Serb citizens who remained in Vukovar after the fighting began. A Serb officer, seeing a former Serb friend and soldier among the prisoners, Aleksander Jevtic, gave Jevtic the task of identifying the Serbs from the Croats since he had lived among them in Vukovar. Jevtic went on to identify as many Croats as Serbs as he could in order to save their lives, calling them by traditional Serb names.

Years later, Press speaks to an Americanized man named Predrag "Fred" Matic, a Croat who was a friend of Jevtic's, and who was saved by, and is still amazed by, Jevtic's courage. Fred explains that Croats not lucky enough to be saved by Jevtic were beaten, tortured, and even murdered. Press then references a 1992 essay by Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic, "Overcome by Nationhood," which notes that in a place with many tribes and communities, refusing to embrace a community or a tribe means standing alone. One can either succumb voluntarily to nationalism, or be sucked into it.

I. Fears of the Imagination – Press reveals that many Croats and Serbs hated one another with equal passion. Those who avoided being sucked into such hatred, Press explains directly to the reader in reference to Drakulic's essay, must have had tremendous courage and independent minds to be willing to stand alone. Press wonders how Jevtic could have done this, and arranges to meet and interview him.

Jevtic dresses very much like an American, and drives a BMW. He is a father, friendly, a sports fan, a high school dropout, and comes from a working class background. Jevtic recalls how he knew the violence that originally broke out in Borovo Selo in 1991 would ultimately lead to even worse trouble. Jevtic explains that his own Serbian mother had been thrown in a concentration camp during World War II, and that his Serbian grandparents were killed in the same camp operated by pro-Nazi Croats.

Jevtic explains that hostilities between Serbs and Croats owed much to World War II experiences, but he never bought into such common hatred because he was raised by his parents to love and respect others. Likewise, Jevtic reveals he was taught never to view himself as a victim of the present or the past. Press then recounts the story of Washington Post reporter Peter Maas, who witnessed a scene of barbarity in the war, where a Serb sought to kill a Muslim coffee drinker with a rifle, just because the man was there. Only the man's wife throwing herself on her husband saved them both, while Maas and his fellow reporters remained silent and watched without intervening. Press explains that Maas faced only bad choices, and Maas himself expresses regret about



not intervening because, at the time, it was the “prudent thing to do” (61). Such a person who faced a similar choice, Press reveals, was Drazen Erdemovic, who was ordered to kill Muslim refugees at Srebrenica, or be killed himself. Erdemovic could only kill or be killed.

II. Moral Sentiments – Press notes that Jevtic, like Erdemovic, had essentially the same situation: help or be killed. Press wonders what it was that made Jevtic act differently. The emotions and sympathy of firsthand experiences certainly makes a difference. This is true of Gruninger, Rothmund (for a short time), and Jevtic. Jevtic himself explains he followed an instinct, on the spot, looking into the eyes of the people around him. Press explains that many in modern academia and science try to explain this as hardwiring in the brain, but Press is not convinced. He draws on Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to explain that feeling pity and compassion involves conscious effort, because even good people can be led astray to do bad things, and that moral sentiments can be changed into immoral sentiments. Such a shift could lead a Serb with a rifle to view a Muslim drinking coffee as “filth” rather than a “brother.” Press then relates a story that reveals a moral conscious effort is sometimes required. He explains how a young Serbian man named Srdjan Aleksic rushed to help a Muslim friend being harassed by a Serb soldier. Srdjan, for his efforts was later beaten into a coma by fellow Serbs, and died in a hospital a few days later at the age of 26.

III. Standing Alone – The men who murdered Srdjan, Press explains, were themselves motivated by a need for fellowship with their tribe. Man is a creature terrified to be alone and alienated; Man seeks to belong to a community. Speaking with a former Croat prisoner named Zoran Sangut who was saved by Jevtic, Sangut reveals he personally wrote to the President of Croatia to request honors for Jevtic. Sangut believes that no such honors have been given because Jevtic is a Serb living in Croatia where many still view Serbs as enemies. Jevtic also faces hatred among his fellow Serbs, for having helped Croats during the war. Jevtic, however, is not bothered by this at all. This sort of social discomfort, however, is a motivation for others to go along with the group.

IV. Solidarity – Press reads a novel called *The Speaking Cure* by David Homel, in which a psychologist fields calls at a mental health clinic established for the use of soldiers dealing with the aftermath of war. The novel reveals that violence done to others by Serbian soldiers during the war is also done to themselves. Press speaks with a Serbian war veteran named Darko Ivanov. Darko explains he went to war to save Yugoslavia, and fought in the battle for Vukovar. Darko explains he suffered from seizures from epilepsy during that time. Press later returns to visit Jevtic, and learns that Jevtic’s wife, Wendy, is a Croat. Wendy, it is revealed, first protected her then-boyfriend Jevtic by hiding him in her apartment. It is also revealed that one of the men that Jevtic later saved was a Croat neighbor of Wendy’s, who discovered Jevtic in hiding and did not hand Jevtic over to the authorities. Press notes in the closing of his chapter that, in the end, Jevtic was, indeed, honored for his heroism by the Serbian government.



Analysis

Press here presents the case of Aleksander Jevtic, who saved the lives of dozens of Croats by identifying them as Serb citizens to the Serb troops waiting by to torture and kill them. Jevtic was, in keeping with Press's theme, a simple, average man caught in extraordinary circumstances and forced to make a decisive, split-second moral choice – something which he did effortlessly, even though his life hung in the balance. The Serb soldiers standing by, however, were not necessarily unlike Jevtic. They were average people caught up in extraordinarily difficult times, but their choice was distinct from Jevtic's. Press wonders how a man like Jevtic could refuse to participate in butchery, and notes that to do so, one must be very independently-minded.

Press explains that oftentimes, people go along with the flow and join in even despicable acts because conforming and acceptance among others is easier than making oneself a target, or because one knows that making any sort of choice will have a bad ending. Such is the case of the reporter Maas contrasted with the case of Srdjan, the latter of whom chose to help a targeted civilian – and was killed himself for intervening. In the case of the comrades of the 12 German troops, state ideology, racism, and the desire to belong compelled them to participate in the murder of the Jews at Jozefow. Likewise, the multiethnic Yugoslavia, in which people fiercely opposed one another and found protection and acceptance in their own groups, chose to forgo morality in order to have safety in numbers and safety in the loyalty of acceptance. This is clearly the case of the Serbian soldiers.

Apart from being independently minded, other situational factors affected Jevtic's stand. As Press learns from interviewing Jevtic, Jevtic was raised by a Holocaust surviving mother to love and respect others, regardless. While everyone else was caught up in who to hate, Jevtic regarded the people around him as people. Additionally, two Croats had previously shown Jevtic incredible kindness – his Croat girlfriend (later his wife), in hiding him, and her Croat neighbor, in keeping the secret. Jevtic explains he didn't think twice about saving other Croats, just as other Croats did not think twice about saving him.

Drawing on both his experiences with other Croatians, and with his upbringing, Jevtic's morality is a sound and firm thing. It is why Jevtic does not hesitate even a second to begin saving the lives of Croats while risking his own. This further underscores Press's argument that morality must weigh against all decisions being made. Jevtic did the moral thing automatically, because that is simply who he was. Likewise, Jevtic's moral choice was vitally important because it was a choice that did not just affect him, but affected many others – such as in the case of Gruninger. Both Gruninger and Jevtic had to look the potential victims of torture and bloodshed in the eyes, and had to deal with them in person on a firsthand basis. This only further underscored their humanity to Gruninger and Jevtic.

Press once again stresses another thematic argument, in that those who do the right thing will not always be rewarded or even receive fair treatment. This is certainly the



case with Gruninger, and is initially the case with Jevtic. While Gruninger's rehabilitation came long after he had died, acknowledgment of Jevtic's daring moral act comes during his lifetime. He is honored for the stand he made, but beyond this, Jevtic still largely stands alone. Apart from his family, grateful Croats, and open-minded Serbs, most Croats dislike Jevtic because he is a Serb, while most Serbs dislike Jevtic because they believe he is a traitor. Jevtic, drawing on strength from his moral upbringing and his family, as well as supreme confidence in who he is as a person, is not bothered by this at all. As he explains to Press, he would do it again.

Vocabulary

indiscriminate, fatalism, evocative, homogenization, congenital, emblazoned, enmity, fratricidal, subversive, impelled, accosted, authoritarianism, demilitarize, reconciliation, cenotaphs



3. The Rules of Conscience

Summary

In July, 1846, reclusive writer and amateur botanist Henry David Thoreau was arrested in Concord, Massachusetts, for failure to pay the poll tax for the past several years. Thoreau was released the next day after his aunt paid bail. Thoreau later explained to an audience at the Concord Lyceum that he felt it was just not to pay a tax to a country that tolerated slavery and had engaged in war with Mexico. Press notes that Thoreau, while he refused to pay a poll tax because of slavery, did not say in his speech that slavery must be ended. This is later noted by writer Hannah Arendt, who used the event to distinguish between a “good man” and a “good citizen,” wherein a good man is preoccupied with his own moral purity, and a good citizen will become involved in the world of politics and try to change things. A good man lives up only to his own expectations, while a good citizen can see politics as an expression of morality. Press explains that Thoreau brings interesting questions to light. These include how someone who believes he is right can actually be judged to be right or how he can actually be judged in general; what others do if they don’t agree with his principles; whether one’s personal set of convictions justify breaking the law validates another doing the same for different reasons; and what stops a good man from being emulated by a dangerous fanatic.

I. Beautiful Souls – Avner Wishnitzer was raised at Kvutzat Shiller, a kibbutz in central Israel. Locals were proud both of their leftism and their service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Avner was ultimately invited to compete to join Sayeret Matkal, “the Unit,” the most elite commando group in the Israeli military. Avner served until 1998, then returned to the orchards of the kibbutz to work his way through university at Tel Aviv. Avner, through his sister, learned of a place where some Israelis were harassing Palestinians in order to drive them off their land near the village of Susiya. Avner joined a group of Israelis who wanted to bring blankets and other supplies to the Palestinians, but were blocked by members of the Israeli police force who told them that to proceed would be to break the law. Avner not only ventured forth, but did so numerous other times.

Avner rejects the idea that he is a “beautiful soul,” a term used for being naïve, but is rather a liberal Zionist. Avner knows that many find it hard to sympathize with these Palestinians when Palestinian terrorists are setting off bombs in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. While Avner’s visits to wronged Palestinians awaken him and change his ideas about the world, Press explains to the reader, he is to be contrasted with men like Gruninger and Jevtic, who see the world change rather than their own ideas or beliefs.

During the 1982 Operation Peace for Galilee, 160 Israeli soldiers refused to fight because they considered the fighting unjust, the refusal being what Press terms the “spirit of Thoreau (p. 94).” Such people do not necessarily have issues with society at large, but merely parts of it, and so would rather be good men than go along with



national policies and directives. Moshe Vardi explains to Press that such a decision is not easily or lightly made, but often involves great personal and moral questioning of oneself, what consequences there may be, and wondering how others will respond. By 2003, Avner comes to consider that the IDF policy of settlement building is unjust and makes a mockery of IDF traditions that are rooted in morality.

II. Black Flags – Until World War II's aftermath, nations had long held that soldiers could not be punished for obeying orders from superiors. But the Holocaust changed everything, as following orders became a common defense among war criminals, and as the atrocities committed by the Nazis came clearly into focus. Following orders, the Nuremberg judges said, does not excuse one from moral choices. Press then wonders how one would sit in judgment of soldiers on his own side. Press then provides the account of the October 1956 massacre at Kafr Qassem, where Israeli police were told by their commander, Major Shmuel Malinki, to enforce a curfew of Arab Israelis in the town, and that all violators – even women and children – were to be shot. The curfew did not give some enough time to get home, and others did not even learn about the curfew. As a result, 49 Arab Israelis were shot and killed. The situation seems to be a case of men following orders, Press says, but in several neighboring towns of Arab Israelis, including Kafr Bara, those coming in after the curfew were escorted home, unharmed. Their local police commanders simply refused to follow the order. The officers of Kafr Qassem, Press reveals, were only given light sentences despite this. In the present day, Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in places considered occupied territory are not forced to serve there, to ensure there is no black flag issue.

III. Peace Criminals – In the present, Elyakim Haetzni, a lawyer and former member of the Israeli Knesset, encourages Israeli troops to refuse to follow orders based on Jewish law. Haetzni explains to Press in an interview that any law, order, policy, and so on, which prevents Jews from existing in the heart of Jewish territory, including the West Bank, must be disobeyed. Haetzni also cites Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr., saying unjust laws must be violated. In such situations, subjective viewpoints are very important. Press uses the analogy of abortion as an example: people either consider it an achievement or an affront to God. Moshe Vardi tells Press that breaking the law is good when it suits one's own purpose, but not the other's side. Avner tells Press that failure to act in an immoral situation is essentially consenting to the immorality. When a wave of Palestinian terror attacks in 2003 caused many on the Israeli Left to abandon their support of Palestinians, Avner held firm and refuses to fight against them.

IV. Purged – Press explains he himself would have served in the IDF had his family not immigrated to the United States from Israel. Press knows he would have had to face the same moral dilemma as many Israelis in their service in the IDF in terrible situations. For Avner's own refusal to serve, he was dismissed from service altogether. Avner reveals that he was later diagnosed with testicular cancer, but survived. The loss of his testicles compounded his discharge from the military, making him feel very unlike a man, for the IDF is a matter of manhood and family among men. In 2005, the Israelis chose to walk away from some territory in Gaza, because too many new Israeli troops refuse to serve there. Avner felt as if he has finally made a mark on the world. Likewise, those Israelis who refused to obey the orders to evacuate as a matter of religious



conviction were quietly transferred elsewhere. Nevertheless, many other Israeli troops refused to leave their military base on religious grounds, disobeying the new policies and laws of evacuation.

V. The Anxiety of Responsibility – Press explains that Susan Sontag once noted that “resistance has no value in itself” (121). It is what is being resisted, and why morally that makes the difference. Press explains to the reader that he does not find much imagination or moral content in decisions of those like Avi Bieber, one of the Israeli troops who refused to evacuate based on religious grounds. This is to contrast Avner, who essentially became a new person because of his moral awakening. Avner himself eventually comes to be not vilified for his stand, but altogether ignored. There is a cost to saying yes or no, Avner explains his mother once told him. Avner comes to believe it is all a matter of serving one’s country in one way or another.

Analysis

In this section of “Beautiful Souls,” Eyal Press examines the moral awakening of Avner Wishnitzer, and how Avner’s moral stand may be compared to a similarly-made, but positionally-opposite moral stand made by Elyakim Haetzni. As Moshe Vardi observantly tells Press, defying the law when it is in one’s own interest is always acceptable. But, as Press wonders, who is right? How does one pass moral judgment on such a stand? And what if the stand being made is wrong? While Press makes his own opinion on an example of such a case known, he does not go into details about why.

The case that Press presents is the defiance of Jewish law by the liberal Zionist Avner, and the conservative Zionist Haetzni. Avner refuses to serve in Israeli territory he considers to be occupied, such as the West Bank and Gaza. Haetzni refuses to evacuate these territories, because he believes them to rightfully belong to Israel. Avner’s arguments are primarily humanitarian in nature, while Haetzni’s are primarily religious. Press interjects himself into the debate by saying that he believes Haetzni’s arguments show little imagination and are wrong, but does not explain why on either count. It is the one part of the book into which Press truly interjects himself, because he is a native of Israel now residing in America and notes that he himself would have had to face the same choices had he remained in Israel. Interestingly enough, however, Press leaves it up to the reader to determine who is right and who is wrong when two individuals dissent from the law for different reasons.

Despite this, Press maintains that in such situations, those dissenting will likely be ordinary people. This is definitely true of Avner, who comes from a lowly background but has managed to work his way into serving with the most elite Israeli military unit there is. But even then, there are numerous other Israelis like Avner, but it is Avner who is among the few who decide that they will not serve in land they consider to be occupied, especially when some Israelis are treating local Palestinians cruelly. Even when Palestinian terrorist attacks cause most of the Israeli left to abandon their support of the Palestinians, Avner remains strong in his convictions.



Avner's stand helps to inspire others to make similar stands. As a result, Israel decided to pull out of some areas because too many Israeli troops were coming to oppose Israeli policy. Yet, at the same time, enough Israeli troops were committed to remaining that severe problems were caused. Avner is proud of the fact that Israel will be letting go of some areas, but recognizes all moral stands have consequences. Avner's own stand leads to his being drummed out of the service, after which he survived testicular cancer, both events which challenge his opinion of himself and his manhood. Avner does not regret having made his stand, and would do so all over again as he explains. But as Press has noted already, making a moral stand is not necessarily a glorious thing, as Avner has experienced far more hardships by having made a moral stand at all.

Vocabulary

good man, good citizen, suffused, kibbutz, precocious, indomitable, inured, undeviating, mitigate, resonance, black flag, imperative, tedious, apartheid, altruist

4. The Price of Raising One's Voice

Summary

On October 10, 2003, an anonymous letter was sent to the Office of Investor Education and Assistance at the Securities and Exchange Commission, which revealed a potential case of fraud that had gone on for two decades, in which unbroken and consistently high returns were made on investments, despite the risky nature of the investments – and that this being covered up by an apparent clean operation of a U.S. Broker-Dealer affiliate. The letter was sent elsewhere, including to the Wall Street Journal and the U.S. Senate. The writer remained anonymous, fearing for personal and family safety.

1. Suspicious Minds – In the year 2000, Leyla Wydler of Houston, Texas, went to work at the Stanford Group Company as a financial adviser for which she had been given an incredible salary. Leyla, a single mother who had long struggled and worked hard, felt as if she has finally done something to be proud of. Leyla came to note that one thing sold by Stanford – certificates of deposit (CDs) at the offshore affiliate Stanford International Bank, based in Antigua – offered fixed-rate returns of 7 and 10%. Leyla was pressured to sell more CDs, but she instead inquired into the practices of the bank, wanting to know how the bank could generate such consistent, high returns. Leyla's refusal to sell a product that did not have her trust ultimately got her fired. Leyla's situation, Press notes, presents a kind of situation that is not altogether clear, and in which many others will disagree or mock one's stepping out of line. Leyla relied on the advice of an old friend, William, who once ran an export-import business, during which time he turned down a chance to open an account with a bank that pretended to have run of an entire building, when in reality, they only had a few employees and offices.

Five years after Leyla was fired, and Charles Rawl and Mark Tidwell, two other investment brokers at Stanford, resigned because they were suspicious of practices at the company when all files relating to CDs except official documents were destroyed. Their coworkers told them they were crazy to quit such a good job over a business practice. In 2009, Leyla was finally invited to testify before the U.S. Senate Banking Committee at a field hearing in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Stanford International Bank was later exposed as a Ponzi scheme to the tune of \$7-billion.

Press meets with Leyla to ask her why she didn't go along with the flow, and instead risked her career. Leyla explains that standard practice in brokerage of due diligence is to do good research and get good answers before advising clients. Those at Stanford were too busy chasing money in commissions, and would have had to look outside themselves at the moral nature of the situation.

II. American Values – Leyla was hailed as a hero at the Banking Committee field hearing who represented the very best of America and American individualism. Born in El Salvador, Leyla experienced greater freedom as a woman in America, Press explains, which in turn helped her to make her moral choices because she did not live in



country dominated by the expectations of others. Still, Leyla recalls being shocked that such things and such corruption could occur even in the United States. She explains that it convinced her that even regulations are useless if good people do not stand up for them and expose corruption.

III. A Piece of Nothing – In his 1970 book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, economist Albert Hirschman argues that Americans are less prone to raising their voices about wrongdoing because they believe in exiting bad situations, such as the pioneers of the Old West looking for better opportunities out West. Yet, at the same time Press notes, a generation of Americans were protesting the Vietnam War and society at large rather than simply skipping out. At the same time, military analyst Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon papers, detailing America's involvement in Vietnam. In such situations, most Americans view leakers as traitors rather than heroes because the country's security, loyalty, and the lives of many people are on the line. It highlights a strange contradiction in American thought: Americans dislike troublemakers, tattletales, and naysayers, but also dislike people who go along with the flow or refuse to get involved if it doesn't impact them personally.

The leakers and whistleblowers, whether they are considered heroes or villains, often lose everything they have, including their homes and jobs. During a 2002 meeting of the Virginia Bankers Association, David Welch, chief financial officer at a small bank in Floyd, Virginia, learned about the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush, which imposed severe fines on companies for certifying improper financial statements, and prison time for employees. Welch refused to certify the statements he later received for his bank, thinking them improper, and was suspended. But because Welch was found to be unable to reasonably explain his position, Welch's suspension was upheld in court. Welch, a very conservative Republican, was disappointed in the outcome of events under a Republican administration but does not regret trying to do the right thing.

IV. No One Would Listen – In April, 2010, the Gulf Coast was hit by the worst oil spill in its history. Workers on the Deepwater Horizon, the oil rig where the spill began, later noted that they were too afraid to speak out about or worry that no one would actually listen to the concerns they had or bad practices they saw that led to the spill. It was how Leyla originally felt when she spoke out about Stanford. Leyla, Tidwell, and Rawl all confessed feeling targeted by their decisions, and feeling isolated for the stands they have made. Leyal explains she drew courage from her children, and her conversations with William. The Baton Rouge hearing, called by Republican Senators David Vitter and Richard Shelby, did its best to pursue justice on the part of investors and whistleblowers and to open an investigation, but other Republicans and Democrats, funded by Stanford, did their best to block the investigation. Still, Leyla does not regret it.

Analysis

Eyal Press continues to expand on his theme that extraordinary moral choices are typically made by ordinary people. Press presents the case of Leyla Wydler who was



fired from Stanford Group Company because she asked too many questions about SIB CDs, and because she refused to push products onto customers that she herself could not trust or verify.

Leyla is a native of El Salvador came to the United States for a better life and because she deeply believed in the American way. The moral stand that she made is difficult because she gave up a large and easy paycheck in order to protect her clients from potentially fraudulent investments. Leyla went on to expose Stanford to everyone from the U.S. Senate to the Wall Street Journal, risking her own safety and her own professional reputation as a result. Press explains that Leyla's moral stand is rooted not only in her love for America, but in her moral love and respect for people over a desire to make money. Most of her coworkers called her crazy for giving up a six-figure salary and a comfortable life for asking too many questions. Yet, Leyla recognized that her choices affect other people. She believes that people who work hard to save money to be able to invest it should not be taken advantage of by pushing them into purchasing questionable CDs. This, in combination with other situational factors – such as Leyla's upbringing, her love of American ideals, and her love and respect for others – compelled Leyla to take a moral stand. Here, her individual morality weighed heavily in her decision-making process, which Press argues is critical in making a stand.

Press also presents the case of David Welch, who made a similar stand for which he was suspended. David Welch, like Leyla, is an ordinary American who was faced with making a difficult choice, and in so doing, chose the moral path. Love of America, as well as David's conservatism and love of his fellow man prompted him to make a stand. For Leyla and David Welch, regulations are only as good as the people who stand up for them. And the people that such regulations protect must, indeed, be protected by other people. As Press has explained before, those who make moral stands will not necessarily be treated or hailed as heroes. While Leyla was declared a hero at the field hearing, she continued to face professional punishment and ridicule by others. David's suspension was not overturned, and he continued to face professional punishment and ridicule as well.

Press compares and contrasts the case of Leyla and David with members of the American military and intelligence communities who perform similar acts. He uses the release of the Pentagon Papers as an example. The leaker, Daniel Ellsberg, was largely declared a traitor for his actions exposing involvement in Vietnam. Americans prize individuality, but they also prize loyalty, Press explains. In the kinds of situations like Ellsberg's, Americans view leakers as traitors because the country's security, and the lives of countless people hang in the balance. Ellsberg can be considered a case where his personal, moral stand did more harm than good, and the case can be made that Ellsberg's personal, moral stand may not have been moral at all. As is noted in the book, Americans frown upon troublemakers, tattletales, and naysayers, but also frown on people who go along to get along, and those who refuse to become involved if it doesn't affect them personally. In other words, Americans have general ideals that they adhere to, but they take each instance of invocation of these ideals on a case-by-case basis. In this light, a leaker like Ellsberg who compromises national security and risks



the lives of Americans is a traitor, while Leyla and David, who saved the livelihoods of many fellow citizens, are heroes.

Vocabulary

tumultuous, posh, prosaic, Ponzi scheme, individualism, arbitration, litany



Epilogue

Summary

Press travels to Erie, Pennsylvania, to meet with Darrel Vandeveld, a combat veteran, devout Catholic, and senior prosecutor at the Office of Military Commissions in Guantanamo, where he sought to put away Muslim terrorists. One seemingly easy case involved a suspected terrorist named Jawad who said he was mistreated by his captors, Vandeveld explains. Vandeveld goes on to tell Press that he did not believe Jawad at first, but upon looking into mistreatment allegations and the case itself, realized the case was not strong and the mistreatment was real. Jawad's recriminating statements were found to have been made under torture and could not be used in court. Jawad was then released. Vandeveld's stand against his own country brought down harsh punishment, including orders to undergo a psychological evaluation, and he was released from active duty. Vandeveld tells Press that, though sad he cannot serve his country, he does not regret taking the stand he made.

Press tells readers he hopes that such stories of heroism will encourage others to make moral stands as well, no matter what the consequences might be. Press explains the stories he has presented in *Beautiful Souls* are not stories of rebels and troublemakers, but people with genuine reasons and causes to act in defiance. Moral stands may be difficult to make, and may make people uncomfortable, but they are necessary.

Analysis

Press ends his book by recounting the story of Darrel Vanderveld, a combat veteran-turned-prosecuting attorney against captured terrorists who spoke out on behalf of a wrongfully imprisoned young man – and was demoted from active duty as a result. In a case like Vanderveld's, those who oppose his moral stand are not the public at large, but his superior officers who have reputations to uphold. Vanderveld is not widely considered a traitor the way of Ellsberg, but his moral stand is still, in keeping with Press's argument, costly and without glory. Vanderveld could have easily let the case go on, but he chose instead to make a stand out of love for his fellow man and for his country. Vanderveld does not regret his moral choice, but regrets no longer being able to serve the very same country.

Press goes on to conclude that he hopes the stories he has presented will inspire others to make moral choices. Most of Press's readers will be average Americans and average global citizens, just like the people he has written about in his book, and will know that they, too, can make moral stands in their everyday lives – and should expect having to make a moral stand in a difficult and perhaps extraordinary circumstance sooner or later. Likewise, Press reminds readers that those who make moral stands are often unsung heroes who face far more difficulty for taking a stand than they would have by having chosen not to make a stand.

Vocabulary

recriminating, contextualize, passivity, acquiescence, ethical qualms



Important People

Eyal Press

Eyal Press is the author of the book *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*. Press has not only written the book, but includes himself in the book as well, from conducting interviews with those he writes about, to giving his own opinion on things, such as the debate over Israeli-Palestinian land claims. Press does his best to remain neutral in the book, allowing moral actors to speak for themselves. Press does come to make a moral judgment later in the book, however, when he says that Israelis who believe they have a religious right to remain in disputed lands are wrong and unimaginative. Press hopes his book will inspire further acts of moral conscience, and will help change the world for the better.

Paul Gruninger

Paul Gruninger was the head of state police in St. Gallen, Switzerland, and disobeyed anti-Jewish refugee laws by granting Jewish refugees special permission to remain in Switzerland during World War II. Gruninger is a kind man who is a husband, a father, a conservative, a Christian, and a military veteran who explains his moral stand as simply being the right thing to do. His seeing firsthand the Jews he was supposed to turn away also allowed him to recognize their mutual humanity, and to do all he could to keep them out of harm's way. For his moral stand, Gruninger was fired, and was unable to find steady employment for the rest of his life.

Aleksander Jevtic

Aleksander Jevtic is a Serbian national who protected the lives of countless imprisoned Croats during the Balkan War of 1991 by pretending they were all Serbs. Jevtic is a family man, and the son of a Holocaust survivor who raised Jevtic to love and respect all people. Jevtic, feeling loved and accepted by family, and relying wholly on his opinion of himself, is thus independently minded. Having been saved and protected by his Croat girlfriend (now wife, Wendy) and a Croat neighbor, Jevtic was happy to return the favor in his own way. Jevtic explains he did what he did because it was the right thing to do, and because he did not care what other people thought.

Avner Wishnitzer

Avner Wishnitzer is a liberal Israeli Zionist who opposed Israel's presence in lands disputed by Palestinians to be theirs, and signed a public letter refusing to serve in such territory. Avner, from a humble background, and a veteran member of the Israeli Defense Forces, loves the State of Israel but disapproves of its policies toward Palestinians. As a result, his moral stand encouraged others to take a moral stand, but



results in Avner being removed from service. Avner does not regret making the moral stand he has chosen, because it was not only the right thing to do, but because it has also inspired others to make a moral stand.

Leyla Wydler

Leyla Wydler, a native of El Salvador-turned-American citizen, was a financial advisor who helped expose fraudulent activity in Stanford Group Company, for which she worked. Leyla is a single mother who has overcome great obstacles to gain a job at Stanford, and though she was happy to make so much money, she values humankind over money. As a result, she would not allow investors to make risky investments, or push risky investments she was uncomfortable with, such as Stanford International Bank CDs. She was labeled as crazy for this, and fired. Leyla pursued helping to expose Stanford, which was ultimately revealed to be a Ponzi scheme. Leyla received no real reward for this, but she says she is okay because she has lived up to her moral faith, her love of America, and her love of fellow people.

David Welch

David Welch was the chief financial advisor for a small bank in Floyd, Virginia, and is a family man and a very conservative Republican who deeply believes in the ideals of America. When questionable financial statements came across his desk, Welch refused to sign off on them, and was suspended for his refusal to bow to pressure to sign them. Welch's suspension was upheld, but Welch does not regret his decision to make a moral stand in favor of his fellow Americans.

Darrell Vanderveld

Darrell Vanderveld is an American combat veteran-turned-prosecuting attorney who has devoted his life to putting away terrorists, but took a moral stand in defense of a young man wrongfully suspected of terrorism. Vanderveld was removed from active duty by his superiors, who had a reputation to uphold. Vanderveld, a family man who loves his country, does not regret the moral stand he has made, but regrets no longer being able to actively serve his country.

Daniel Ellsberg

Daniel Ellsberg is a New York Times reporter responsible for the publishing of the so-called Pentagon Papers, which detail American involvement in Vietnam. The action of publishing the leaked papers is a moral stand Ellsberg believed he must make, but the overwhelming majority of Americans consider him a traitor for this since it put national security and American lives at risk. Ellsberg's actions represent a seeming contradiction in American attitudes: they dislike troublemakers, but also dislike sheep. Yet, Ellsberg's actions also make sense of the seeming contradiction in that Americans have ideals



they aspire to, but take situations on a case-by-case basis. While Ellsberg is a traitor, someone like Leyla Wydler is a hero.

Elyakim Haetzni

Elyakim Haetzni is a former member of the Israeli Knesset and lawyer, is a deeply religious man who believes that it is morally and religiously wrong for Israel to abandon territories disputed with Palestine. As such, he disobeyed Israeli laws requiring some such territories to be abandoned, and succeeded in encouraging others to do the same. Press contends that Haetzni is wrong in his arguments and his dissent, calling Haetzni's moral reasoning unimaginative. Haetzni is held up as an example by Press as someone whose moral stand is considered wrong.

The 12 Germans

The 12 Germans, never named, who refuse to participate with the rest of their unit in the brutal massacre of Jewish citizens of Jozefow, Poland, are used by Press to set the stage for his book. Press wonders how anyone could stand up in the face of such hatred to take a moral stand when everyone else was doing it. He also explains that the stand of the 12 is important because they are average German citizens thrust into an extraordinary situation in which their moral choices mattered like never before.



Objects/Places

Special Permission papers

Special Permission papers were written and signed by Paul Gruninger, and are symbolic of the defiance of unjust laws. The Special Permission papers allowed Jewish refugees to remain in Switzerland during World War II, despite Swiss laws that forbade the taking in of Jews. Gruninger's signing of Special Permission papers saved countless Jewish lives, but resulted in his being fired from his job as head of state police in St. Gallen.

CDs

Certificates of Deposit (CDs) are time deposits of money with high rates of return sold from Stanford to investors, and symbolize Leyla Wydler's unwillingness to put money over people. Leyla refused to sell to Stanford investors because she did not trust how well the CDs were doing, and as a result, was fired. Leyla's suspicions about the CDs were later confirmed when Stanford was exposed as a Ponzi scheme.

Avner's letter

Avner's letter details his refusal to serve in territory he considered to be occupied by Israeli forces, and symbolizes his moral stand against serving in such places. Avner's letter was signed by several other Israeli soldiers as well, but the letter drew condemnation not only from their superiors, but the general public. Avner was told to withdraw his name from the letter, or he would face dismissal from the armed forces. Avner refused, and was kicked out of the Israeli military.

The Pentagon Papers

The Pentagon Papers are documents detailing America's involvement with Vietnam, and demonstrate the complex reaction of the American public to whistleblowers and moral stand-takers. The Papers were published by Daniel Ellsberg, who was himself condemned as a traitor since the act had compromised American national security, and put the lives of countless Americans in jeopardy. The Papers demonstrate that Americans dislike sheep but also dislike troublemakers, and demonstrate that, while Americans strive to live up to ideals, they take situations on a case-by-case basis. Someone like Leyla Wydler is applauded while someone like Ellsberg is condemned.



Situational factors

Situational factors are the conditional aspects surrounding the taking of a moral stand, such as a person's upbringing and background, the political climate, a person's safety, and so on. Situational factors, Press argues, are immensely important. For example, Gruninger's firsthand experience with Jewish refugees, as well as his familial and conservative Christian background, helped him take the moral stand in which he helped rather than turns away Jewish refugees.

St. Gallen

St. Gallen is a large town located in Switzerland near the Austrian border. It is where Paul Gruninger lived with his family and worked as the local head of state police. It is to St. Gallen that numerous Jewish refugees either travelled, were guided, or were sent, so that they might in turn be helped by Gruninger. Gruninger was fired for his efforts, and spent the rest of his life trying to find work, largely shunned and ignored by the Swiss residents of St. Gallen.

Vukovar

Vukovar is a multiethnic town that was largely destroyed in siege by Serbian forces as they sought to crush Croatian resistance. It is in Vukovar that Jevtic, his family, and his future wife Wendy, were born, raised, and live. Jevtic was among those rounded up in Vukovar, and sent to a Serbian detention center where he saved as many fellow citizens as possible by identifying them as Serbs. Jevtic later returned to raise his own family in Vukovar, where he is visited by Press for the book Press is writing.

Israel

Israel is the Jewish homeland and only distinctly Western nation-state in the Middle East. Israel is mostly made up of Jews, though many Christians and Muslims live there as well. The ownership of some parts of Israel, including Gaza and the West Bank, are disputed by Israelis and Palestinians. Israel is the homeland of Avner, who came to refuse to serve in places like Gaza and the West Bank. Israel is also the homeland of Eyal Press himself, before his immigration to America.

Houston

Houston, Texas, is the town to which Leyla Wydler comes to settle in with her children following her immigration to America from El Salvador. In Houston, Leyla made a life for her family while securing a job at Stanford Group Company. It was while working for Stanford in Houston that Leyla came to question the high rates of return on CDs the



company's international bank brings back. Leyla's questioning of the company, and her refusal to be pressured into selling CDs, got her fired.

Erie

Erie, Pennsylvania, is where Darrell Vanderveld lives after having been discharged from active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces for the stand he made over a man wrongfully accused of terrorism. It is to Erie that Press travels in order to meet with Vanderveld. It is in Erie that Press learns about Vanderveld's background, and it is the setting in Erie that Press uses to begin to conclude his book.



Themes

Ordinary people who are often forced to make extraordinary choices

Eyal Press argues in *Beautiful Souls* that it is ordinary people who are often forced to make extraordinary choices. Press explains early on that the people he documents in his book are average, ordinary, everyday people who more than likely will be very similar to readers. He explains that most often, it is ordinary people in difficult situations who will be faced with the task of making moral choices. To illustrate this in the prologue, he presents the 12 lone German troops who refused to participate in the Jozefow massacre – troops who were average German citizens who found themselves in a situation they wanted no part of.

Press then moves into the core of his book to present a range of ordinary men and woman faced with extraordinary situations and important moral choices. First, Press recounts the efforts of local police chief Paul Gruninger to save Jewish refugees by granting them Special Permission in defiance of Swiss laws forbidding Jews from entering Switzerland. As Press reveals, Gruninger was very much a normal human being: he was a husband, a father, a Christian, a conservative, a veteran, and sang in the church choir.

Press then recounts the story of Aleksander Jevtic, who saved Croats by identifying them as Jews during the darkest days of the war that ripped the Balkans apart. As Press explains, Jevtic was merely a Serb national living in a multiethnic city who was rounded up by Serbian troops along with numerous others. Jevtic had a simple, quiet life, had a girlfriend, and had been raised to love and respect others, even those with whom he disagreed. Jevtic happened to be in the right place at the right time, and so saved the lives of numerous Croats.

Press then relates the story of Avner Wishnitzer, a liberal Zionist and military member who refuses to serve in the West Bank and Gaza due to his belief that Israel has illegally occupied those places. Avner was raised in a kibbutz and has only one goal in life –to serve in the Israeli military to defend his country. Avner is like countless other young men and women throughout the world, including in America and Israel, who seek to devote their lives to defending their homelands.

Press finally recounts the story of Leyla Wydler, who was fired for refusing to coax investors into making risky CD investments. Leyla, an immigrant to America from El Salvador, worked her way up into an incredible job through her own effort and determination. Leyla represents the classic American story of success, a self-made person who has the same chances and opportunities as all other Americans.



Acts of moral defiance all ultimately have an effect on the world

Eyal Press argues in *Beautiful Souls* that acts of moral defiance all ultimately have an effect on the world. Press knows that many worry that individual acts of moral defiance may never be known, and even worse, may never make a difference. But Press argues that all such acts do make a difference, in large and in small ways. Such moral stands make life better, and inspire others.

Paul Gruninger's stand to grant Jews special permission to remain in Switzerland was never done with thought of reward or payment. Gruninger sought to help Jewish refugees because it was simply the right thing to do. But because of Gruninger's efforts, countless Jews survived the Holocaust, went on to have families, and went on to impact the world in various ways. Gruninger's actions, though small, mattered the world to the people that he saved.

Aleksander Jevtic, like Paul Gruninger, saved the lives of countless fellow human beings by identifying Croats as Serbs so that they might avoid being beaten and killed. Jevtic did what he did without thought of reward or fame – and as Press notes, later didn't even really care to be interviewed and highlighted in *Beautiful Souls* for his efforts. Yet, because of Jevtic's heroism, his small act meant the world to the people who survived, and to the loved ones of those people.

Avner Wishnitzer refused to serve with the Israeli military in lands he considers to be occupied. His acts of defiance, which did generate public interest, caused negative responses rather than positive responses. Avner, however, was able to inspire enough Israeli soldiers to do the same that Israel determined to withdraw troops from some of the disputed areas. However, Avner's actions also caused a string of incidents where Israeli troops felt it is their moral duty to remain in such territories. Avner's small actions ultimately came to influence national policy, and a generation of Israeli troops.

Leyla Wydler, who valued the people she worked for over the money she made from them, refused to coax them into buying products she was not confident in. Fired for her actions, Leyla is not troubled by the moral stand she made, but by the ramifications of the stand. She worries for her safety, but does not regret for a second saving her investors from being ripped off and having their hard-earned money stolen and wasted. Leyla later comes to, in part, serve as an inspiration to others to walk away from the company for which she worked as well.

Situational factors will affect a person's decision to make a moral choice

Eyal Press argues in *Beautiful Souls* that situational factors will affect a person's decision to make a moral choice. These situational factors range from a person's background and upbringing to the political climate and immediate circumstances, such



as peer pressure and danger. Yet, even similar situational factors affect people in different ways sometimes, as Press notes.

Upbringing and background are incredibly important in a person's decision to make a moral stand. For Paul Gruninger, his love of family, his conservatism, his Christianity, his devotion to his country, and his love of his fellow man compel him to save Jews. Jevtic's upbringing, where he was taught to love and respect others, as well as his having been saved and protected by Croats in the past, profoundly influenced his decision to save Croats in 1991. Wishnitzer's humble and liberal upbringing in part helped him to sympathize with impoverished Palestinians being driven from their lands. Leyla Wydler's upbringing in El Salvador, and her love of America and American ideals, helped inspire her to save the livelihoods of her investors.

Yet, these very same people were very much like others who they worked with or found themselves in opposition to. Gruninger was the only local police chief willing to defy the law to help Jews. Jevtic was one of very few Serbs similar to him willing to help Croats in dangerous times. Avner was one of tens of thousands of similar Israeli soldiers who chose to follow orders rather than disobey. And Leyla was one of hundreds of employees making incredible money who chose to value her customers over her paycheck. The 12 German soldiers presented at the beginning of the book were very much like their comrades, but they refused to massacre Jews.

For Gruninger's fellow local chiefs, fear of breaking the law, being shunned, losing their jobs, and a dicey political situation between Switzerland and Nazi Germany resulted in their choosing to obey, rather than defy the law. Jevtic's fellow Serbs, who allowed hatred and racism to cloud their judgement, and who strove above all to belong to a group in a multiethnic country so they would not be alone, chose to participate in bloodletting rather than life saving. Avner's fellow soldiers likewise wanted to belong to the military of a country of which they were genuinely convinced was right, based on previous experiences such as dealing with Palestinian terrorists. Leyla's fellow workers were more concerned about their easy paychecks and wealth than the people they were using to make their money. The other soldiers in the unit of the 12 Germans were aware of the dangerous political situation, and wanted to belong to a group rather than stand out, especially when so many others in the group were willing to commit to massacre.

Individual morality must weigh against decisions individuals make, especially on behalf of others

Eyal Press argues in *Beautiful Souls* that individual morality must weigh against decisions individuals make, especially on behalf of others. The choices that one makes will always affect those around him or her. The same is true of each of the people that Press chronicles in his book.

Paul Gruninger's decision to defy Swiss law to save Jewish refugees affected not only himself, but his family and the people that he saved. Gruninger lost his job, was shunned by most of the community, and could not find steady employment for the final



30 years of his life. Gruninger was no longer able to support his daughter at college, who then had to drop out and work to help the family. Gruninger's family at large was initially shunned by the community. The Jews that Gruninger saved went on to survive the Holocaust, made their way in the world, and made their own families.

Jevtic's decision to identify a number of Croats as Serbs in order to save them not only affected him, but also affected them as well. Jevtic's selflessness largely goes unnoticed, and when it does, Jevtic does not wish any fame or glory for himself. He has done the right thing, and this is enough for him. Still, one of the Croats saved by Jevtic was able to get the Croatian government to honor Jevtic for his heroism. However, Jevtic himself, apart from Croats who know him for his good deed, hate him because he is a Serb, and most Serbs hate him because they consider him to be a traitor.

Avner's decision to refuse to serve in Israeli lands he believed to be occupied caused him to be kicked out of the armed forces, when his entire life had been dedicated to serving in the armed forces. Though Avner suffers personally, he is glad because his act of moral defiance inspired other Israeli soldiers to do the same thing, resulting in an overall policy change wherein Israel evacuated some of the disputed lands.

For Leyla, protecting the interests and hard-earned money of her clients was more important than her own paycheck. Her refusal to goad them into purchasing CDs led to her being fired, but ensured the livelihood of her clients, and helped to expose Stanford Group Company as a Ponzi scheme.

Moral defiance and moral resistance may be necessary, but not necessarily glorious

Eyal Press argues in *Beautiful Souls* that moral defiance and moral resistance may be necessary, but not necessarily glorious. Press takes care to explain that, unlike in the movies, heroes in real life often go unsung, and are often even punished for the moral stands that they make. Press warns that moral stands are necessary to make, but that they will, indeed, have unfair consequences.

Paul Gruninger's decision to save Jews by defying the laws of Switzerland had many negative consequences for him, and for his family. Gruninger was not celebrated by his efforts, but fired from his job, shunned by the community, and found himself unable to find steady employment for the rest of his life. His daughter had to drop out of college, and she and Gruninger's wife found themselves initially shunned by the community. Not until 1995, years after Gruninger's death, was Gruninger's work and reputation rehabilitated.

Jevtic's decision to save the lives of Croats by pretending they were Serbs had no immediate effect on Jevtic's life. Indeed, any thanks or praise Jevtic received, he brushed aside. It isn't until years later that the Croatian government honored him, but even then, Jevtic had no interest in fame or glory. Jevtic does, however, live with the hatred and racism of Croats who have no idea about what he did, and who hate him

because he is a Serbian; and he must live with the hatred of many Serbians who consider him a traitor.

Avner's decision to refuse to serve with the Israeli military in areas of Israel believed to be occupied illegally resulted in his being thrown out of the military. Avner was able to encourage other Israeli troops to make similar stands, but Avner's own stand essentially costed him his identity, for his entire life had been dedicated to serving in the Israeli military.

Leyla's decision to put her clients ahead of paychecks ultimately resulted in Leyla being professionally harassed, her reputation ruined, and her being fired from the company for daring to speak out. Leyla even came to fear for the safety of herself and her family when she wrote whistleblowing letters to the papers, and to the U.S. Senate.

Styles

Structure

Eyal Press writes his book *Beautiful Souls* in the first-person omniscient perspective from his own point of view, and in which the reader is directly spoken to throughout. Press not only recounts the events and actions of the lives of the people he details in his books, but frequently references himself, and sometimes offers his personal opinion on things, such as the subject of disputed lands in Israel. Press writes in the first-person because his book is essentially a personal quest he has undertaken to determine why ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances make moral choices, no matter how difficult times may be. Press's investigation includes personal reflections and accounts of time spent with those he is interviewing, and includes his own thoughts on the Israeli land situation because he himself is an Israeli who moved to America. The very personal, first-person nature of Press's narrative brings readers in close, as though Press was relating things to them intimately, and in person. Press's direct referencing of readers (for example, in the Epilogue, he speaks about "we" as a collective group and "our" responsibilities and attitudes) also serves as a challenge to readers to morally change their lives.

Perspective

Eyal Press writes his book *Beautiful Souls* in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two major and important reasons. First, Press demonstrates with his book that tremendous acts of moral courage are usually undertaken by average, simple, and straightforward people in extraordinary times, such as the family man Gruninger, who disobeyed the laws of Switzerland to save the lives of Jewish refugees. The simple and straightforward language is reflective of the simple and straightforward people who risked their lives and livelihoods to help others. Second, Press's goal with his book – to understand what motivates people to make moral choices, and to urge readers to commit themselves to moral lives and moral choices – is conveyed in no uncertain terms to readers through the simple and straightforward language. Press has a message to deliver, and important points to make, and he does so in a very direct fashion with uncomplicated language.

Tone

Eyal Press divides his book *Beautiful Souls* into six major parts. These include a prologue, four numbered and titled chapters, and an epilogue. Each chapter is further subdivided into sections numbered with Roman numerals. The prologue introduces Press's purpose with the historical anecdote of the 12 German soldiers who refused to participate in the Jozefow massacre, and the epilogue concludes with the account of Darrell Vanderveld and Press's hopes that readers will be inspired. The four chapters



each primarily deal with one individual and the moral choices and stands those individuals have made, and under what circumstances and situations those choices were made in. For example, Chapter 1 deals with Paul Gruninger defying unjust laws, while Chapter 2 deals with Jevtic defying groups committed to destroying each other. The numbered sections in each chapter deal with specific parts of Press's discussion about the individuals he documents. For example, I. Underhanded Practices in Chapter 1. Disobeying the Law, deals with Paul Gruninger's efforts to save Jews, while II. Mechanisms of Denial begins to question why Gruninger alone sought to defy the laws.



Quotes

Why, even in situations of seemingly total conformity, there are always some people who refuse to go along. This is a book about such nonconformist, about the mystery of what impels people to do something risky and transgressive when thrust into a morally compromising situation: stop, say no, resist.

-- Eyal Press (Prologue paragraph N/A)

Importance: Here, Eyal Press lays out in the prologue his reason for writing his book. Having provided the example of a dozen German troops who refused to participate in the killing of Jews near the Polish town of Josefow, Press explains he wants to understand how and why such men could stand in defiance in the face of such overwhelming conformity. Press explains this is especially intriguing to readers, who wonder how they would have responded in such a situation.

...deciding whether to conform or resist is just that: a choice.

-- Eyal Press (Prologue paragraph N/A)

Importance: Press explains that the decision to resist or conform is based on a moral choice the individual must make. Many different factors ultimately feed into how a decision is made. Press explains his book will be about ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances, and how and why they resist. Their choices are important – and so are how and why these choices were made.

He saw what condition the people were in when they arrived and he knew all too well what would happen if he sent them back... He would always say, "I could do nothing else.

-- Ruth Rudoner (Disobeying the Law paragraph N/A)

Importance: Speaking about her father, Paul Gruninger, Ruth explains why a quiet, kind man would risk his career and his livelihood to help Jews. Ruth explains that her father had very personal experiences, dealing with the law and with policies firsthand, while his superiors never had to do deal with such things. Because of this, Gruninger saw himself how these policies affected refugees – and what sending those refugees back would mean. As a result, he saw no other option than to help the Jews who came to him for such help.

Gruninger was not a rebel but a true believer, a conservative, patriotic man who subscribed wholeheartedly to the tenets of a belief system that his subsequent downfall indeed revealed to be a myth.

-- Eyal Press (Disobeying the Law paragraph 35)

Importance: Gruninger's acts of defiance were not those of a rebel, Press explains, but of a deeply conservative, patriotic, and kind man who devoutly believed in the idea of Switzerland being a haven for refugees. Gruninger's faith in his country was misplaced, however, as the Swiss authorities took a hardline stance against Jewish refugees.



Gruninger remained conservative and patriotic, helping Jewish refugees against the law – and lost his own job as a result, spending the last thirty years of his life trying to find steady employment.

The outliers who avoided getting ‘sucked into it’ needed to have a vast amount of courage, it went without saying, and they also needed to possess fiercely independent minds, since resisting the wave of ethnic hatred that swept across the Balkans in the early 1990s required performing a dangerous and unpopular act of imaginative resistance.

-- Eyal Press (Defying the Group paragraph N/A)

Importance: Here, Eyal Press explains that in a situation where nationalism, tribalism, factionalism, and other such movements of loyalty dominate events, someone who refuses to be sucked into such things must be courageous and independent-minded. In such situations, such as the war in the Balkans, one must either stand alone, or succumb or be sucked into a group. Standing alone in such situations is very dangerous, for there is safety in groups and numbers. To stand alone, one must be courageous, and independently-minded.

Still, for all of this, there was a mystery at the heart of his story: the mystery of how an unreflective man with no trace of outward idealism, even one raised on an ethic of tolerance, found the nerve to act on this ethic when so many other people adapted their behavior to the spirit of the times.

-- Eyal Press (Defying the Group paragraph N/A)

Importance: Here, Press speaks admiringly of Aleksander Jevtic, who saved many Croats during the Balkan War by identifying them as Serbians. Jevtic was brought up to love and respect others, and brought up to never view himself as a victim of the past or the present, but so were many other people who willingly took part in savagery during the war. Press explains that this interested him, and created a mystery as to how Jevtic could overcome peer pressure, danger, and nationalism to do something good.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.

-- Henry David Thoreau (The Rules of Conscience paragraph N/A)

Importance: Henry David Thoreau is arrested for refusing to pay the poll tax for the past several years. Thoreau later explains this is because the United States has gone to war against Mexico, and because the United States tolerates slavery. Henry believes that imprisoning someone for an unjust reason – including the imprisonment of slavery – is not only wrong, but must be stood against. He also explains that one must sometimes take a stand where consequences will be harsh, such as ending up in jail for what one believes.

I was torn... I was suffering, really. Hesitating. We had endless discussions: What are the consequences? What will it do? What will people in our unit say?

-- Moshe Vardi (The Rules of Conscience paragraph N/A)



Importance: Moshe Vadi, a soldier who refused to fight in wars he considered to be unjust, explains that his choosing to violate the law was not something he, or other refusers, did lightly. They had many concerns, including how their fellow soldiers would respond. Moshe explains that a lot of the decision to refuse had to do with them questioning what their acts of defiance would do, and what sorts of consequences refusal would have.

Breaking the frame of law is good when it serves your purpose, and not when it serves the purpose of the other side.

-- Moshe Vardi (The Rules of Conscience paragraph N/A)

Importance: In determining whether someone is right or wrong in breaking a law, Press is told that such things are subjective. If breaking a law is convenient to one, then breaking the law is good. If it is convenient to the other side, then it is not good. Moshe goes on to explain that people on both sides of the argument, about breaking laws, say it is all the same. Moshe explains he does not entirely disagree, at least from that point of foundation. Issues themselves must be considered, but the general idea of breaking the law as a matter of one's own conscience, he asserts, is generally the same starting point.

This is what was hard at Stanford – not asking questions per se, but doing so in an environment where so much money was sloshing around and, if you played along, some of it could be yours.

-- Eyal Press (The Price of Raising One's Voice paragraph N/A)

Importance: Leyla Wydler came to work for Stanford Group Company, where she took on clients and handled brokerage. Leyla resisted the allure of easy money at the company to ensure her clients would invest their own money well. Because Leyla put her own morals and the well-being of her clients ahead of the company, and because she dared to ask questions about the soundness of Stanford's practices, she was fired. Leyla does not regret her choice, however.

I would have done it again... It was the right thing to do, and I feel like my actions, my intentions, have to have a sort of meaning in this life.

-- Leyla Wydler (The Price of Raising One's Voice paragraph N/A)

Importance: Asked if Leyla would do everything all over again even though she never truly received justice, Leyla says she would. She says she would because it would be the right thing to do, and she believes that her own life must have good meaning. Even though Leyla knows the hardships she would have to endure all over again, she does not hesitate to say she would do it all again because, above all, it was the right thing to do.

Inevitably, then, displays of moral courage sow discord and make a lot of people uncomfortable – most of all, perhaps, the true believer who never wanted or expected to say no.



-- Eyal Press (Epilogue paragraph N/A)

Importance: Press, in concluding his book with an Epilogue, notes that oftentimes, the last person who ever expects to make a moral stand is the individual making the moral stand. Such dissenters and resisters are usually average, normal people who find themselves placed in unique situations and abnormal circumstances. When confronted with these situations, they must react as morally as they can.



Topics for Discussion

Ordinary people must make extraordinary moral choices

Press notes in his book that average people must often make extraordinary moral choices. According to Press's work, what sorts of situational factors contribute to a person's decision-making? Choose one of the individuals profiled by Press, describe their moral stand, and describe how situational factors affected them.

Ordinary people must make extraordinary moral choices

Press explains that in some situations, similar and identical people will often make different choices in grave situations. Why is this so? From the examples in Press's book, select one situation in which people of similar backgrounds responded differently, and explain why.

The effects of moral defiance

Press argues that acts of moral defiance always affect the world in different ways, both large and small. Why does Press argue that such impacts are important? Select one of the individuals profiled in Press's book, and explain what effects his or her act of moral defiance had on the world.

The effects of moral defiance

Press points out in his book that moral stands usually only have negative effects on those who have made the stand. Why is this so? Why do people make stands regardless as to the consequences? Why does Press argue that moral stands should be made regardless of the consequences? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Situational factors

What are situational factors? How do these affect a person's moral choices in difficult situations? Select one of the individuals profiled by Press in his book, and explain how situational factors affected the individual's choices. Based on this evidence, do you believe the individual would have reacted differently given a different set of even one or two situational factors? Why or why not?



Situational factors

Why do identical, or similar situational factors seem to affect different people in different ways when faced with the same set of circumstances? Do you believe situational factors are enough to explain why a person makes one choice, and not another? Explain.

Individual moral weight in making decisions

Press points out that similar and identical situations may yield individuals who dissent and make a moral stand against the situation, but for different reasons they both respectively believe to be moral. How does one determine whether a dissenting individual is making a genuinely moral stand? What should one do when confronted with someone who is believed to be making a disingenuous stand? Why? Should anyone making a moral stand be judged at all? Why or why not?

Individual moral weight in making decisions

Why does Press argue that individual morality must play a part in the moral decision-making process? Why does he say this is especially true when it affects other people? Do you agree or disagree with Press's assertion? Why or why not?

Individual moral weight in making decisions

Press notes that the moral judgment of those who have made moral choices may sometimes seem contradictory, such as in the case of Americans who dislike troublemakers, but who also dislike sheep. Compare and contrast the case of Daniel Ellsberg, declared a traitor, with the cases of Leyla Wydler and Paul Gruninger, both declared heroes. Why is Ellsberg considered a traitor, when Leyla and Gruninger are considered heroes? How do you come to draw a moral judgement against someone? How do you handle the idea that you might be wrong? Why?

Moral defiance has negative consequences

Press explains to readers that moral stands nearly always have negative consequences of one kind or another. Choose one of the individuals profiled by Press in his book, and describe the negative consequences the individual faced for his or her moral stand. Why does Press argue that negative consequences should not dissuade one from taking a moral stand? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Would you still take a moral stand even if you knew it would have seriously negative, or even dangerous consequences for you? Why or why not?