When Heroism is Not Optional

“Heroes Work Here.” “A Hero Lives Here.” I’ve seen those signs posted everywhere this year—not just in front of hospitals and physicians’ and nurses’ homes, but at grocery stores, teachers’ houses, and my local Walgreens. Is it really true? Should we call people “heroes” for reporting to work, whether that work is caring for COVID patients, bagging groceries, or (like me) teaching online classes?

I’m not really going to answer that question. Although I’m not comfortable being labeled a hero for continuing with my teaching (I’d rather have a “No Heroes Living Here!” sign for my yard), some of those “hero” labels, especially for my readers on the front lines of a pandemic, may be perfectly appropriate. Instead of answering the question, I’m going to reflect on the situation that has raised it: for many of us, there is no acceptable option other than to do the “heroic.” For some of us, that’s been the way of things for a long time; for others—perhaps including those behind the proliferation of signs—it’s unusual.

We tend to think of a hero as someone who goes well beyond the demands of obligation. In philosophical ethics, we have a fancy word for that: supererogation. Part of what makes supererogation impressive to those of us who study ethics is that it’s hard. Not just anyone has the courage and altruism to run into a burning building to rescue a stranger, for example, and you almost never see people as compassionate and generous as [Gloria Lewis](http://careinactionusa.org/glorias-story/) of Care in Action USA, who will literally give away her last dollar or the shoes on her feet. But another essential part of supererogation is that it’s optional—not obligatory. No one but a firefighter with the necessary training and equipment is obliged to rescue a stranger from a burning building, and Lewis doesn’t owe the last of her resources to the homeless residents of her city.

In some situations, though, we encounter a different kind of heroism: one that is not optional. An example I use with my ethics students is parents of children with special needs. (Sometimes I even have Mary Kellett of [Prenatal Partners for Life](http://www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org) visit class to talk about the joys and challenges such parents face.) For those parents, meeting their children’s needs every day, every hour, and sometimes every minute or even every second, is *hard*. The sort of hard that takes heroic virtue, even if they have the support of medical professionals and extended family. The sort of hard that is usually associated with supererogation. But what they do is not optional: to fall short of meeting their children’s needs would be completely unacceptable.

Although I’ve never been a clinician and thus don’t speak from personal experience, from observation it seems to me that 2020 has called for that kind of heroism from many medical professionals. It has required heroic levels of virtue: the courage to take significant risks to one’s own health and well-being, the perseverance to do so on a daily basis, and the generosity to continue working in order to provide their patients with the best care possible. But, at least in many cases, this heroism is the only morally acceptable choice: these patients must be cared for, and these clinicians are the ones with the wisdom, training, and resources (and, often, the contractual obligation) to provide it. As with parents meeting their children’s needs, clinicians meeting their patients’ needs is not optional.

Of course, the two situations aren’t completely analogous. Members of a care team are far more replaceable than parents, and there is not necessarily an obligation to continue with a particular clinical role, or even to stay in the profession, indefinitely. But given that one *has* committed to a particular role, to a particular set of patients—human beings whose needs must be met—the call to heroism, at least for now, is real. I extend my gratitude and deepest respect to my readers who have, in some cases almost inadvertently, become heroes. May God bless you all.