

The Motives of Heroism

by Jason Lewis
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Heroes are iconic in past and present societies. Heroic accounts inundate the five o'clock news today, similar to the way heroes dominated literature, art, and plays centuries ago. The ability to rise above awesome fear for the salvation of another person's life has captivated society for thousands of years. What inspires uncompromised acts of bravery? Such actions seem to oppose the seemingly selfish nature of man. Answering this question in an abstract manner is difficult; a comprehensive understanding requires an actual scenario. The tragic sinking of the *Titanic* serves as the epitome of scenarios because of the diversity of the passengers coupled with boundless opportunity for altruistic acts to occur. By dissecting a few seemingly heroic acts that occurred on board the *Titanic*, various motives can be identified.

Without doubt there were many brave acts that took place as the *sunk*; the full account will never be known. However, the survivors of the shipwreck did verify a few acts of gallantry. Perhaps the most notable of these acts pertained to the orchestra; they played tunes as the ship sank. None of the orchestra members survived the incident, therefore the motives behind their deeds are nothing more than speculation.¹ Did they play so they would receive notoriety after their death? Did they play so they could die doing what they loved doing most? Or, did their subconscious dictate their actions? It is indisputable the actions of the men were noble. Furthermore, it is proven the music the orchestra played helped soothe those in distress. In fact, Commander Lightholler confirms the band playing in the background helped him deal with the situation, "I could hear the band playing a cheery sort of music…I was glad to hear it that night."² However, nobility and helping people in perilous situations does not solely identify an altruistic act. The act must also be performed with no selfish motives behind it. There is considerable evidence to support the orchestra members had no selfish motives when they played on the deck of the sinking *Titanic*.

In his account of the incident, Lawrence Beechey suggested the band played so they could be "recorded on the rolls of fame." By suggesting that the orchestra members expected to gain something (fame) for their actions discounts their selfless contribution, compromising their status as heroes. Beechey's comment can easily be refuted. The band played as the lifeboats were being loaded; hence it stands to reason that survivors of the disaster would be able to account for the gallant deeds of the orchestra. However, they also played after all the lifeboats had left. Everyone remaining on the *Titanic* was going to die and would be unable to speak about how brave and noble the orchestra was. The band members stood to gain absolutely nothing from their decision to continue playing for the remaining ill-fated passengers. Playing after all the lifeboats departed may be a true demonstration of heroism.

Another easily debunked theory is that the orchestra members played so they could die doing what they loved doing most. Obviously playing for this reason would be self-fulfilling to the band members, they would be seeking enjoyment in their last few moments alive. The ease the passengers experienced from the music would have been merely a by-product of the orchestra members self gratification, far from a heroic act. Pure logic can discredit this idea. Band members assembled on the deck of the *Titanic*, rather than the interior of the ship, to play. Conditions on the deck were far from comfortable; the exterior temperature was below freezing at the time. If the motive of the band members was self gratification, then it stands to reason such gratification would extend to their physical comfort as well. There was a warm lounge, smoking room, and restaurant nearby which could have easily been used.³ Instead they chose to play on the freezing-cold deck where everyone had gathered. Although a minor detail, this simple logic tends to support the act was heroic.

Concrete evidence, based on sound reason and factual data, suggests the orchestra members were selfless heroes. Notwithstanding, more abstract ideology can be applied which opposes the musician's acts as being heroic. One theory, coined as "primitive passive sympathy" explains that a subconscious reward was received by the orchestra members as they played.⁴ The theory states that people are not actually compelled to help those in anguish, rather they seek to alleviate their own sympathetic distress by helping others.⁵ Due to either social conditioning, human instinct, or a combination of both, the orchestra members may have been subconsciously unable to tolerate the distressed passengers they saw.⁶ A survivor paints a clear picture of the severity of the distress the orchestra members witnessed as they played, "the strains of a lively air, mingled gruesomely with the cries of those who realized they were face to face with death."⁷ In applying this theory, the musicians were masking their own undesirable feelings of sympathy by helping others.

A second abstract theory may also explain why the band chose to play as the *Titanic* sank; the theory is called norm salience. The theory of norm salience dictates the actions of one person directly influences the actions of another.⁸ For example, if one band member started playing, then the others would likely have joined in. Non-compliance with social norms is very rare; many psychology experiments have been performed which support this theory. Is it possible the band played simply because the social norm was established by a single band member? Compliance with a social norm, regardless of how valiant it may be, is not heroic.

On the surface, the actions of the band appear to be nothing less than heroic. Applying deductive reasoning and utilizing known facts supports the notion that the band members were heroes. Notwithstanding, a psychological analysis of the situation can logically discredit the heroic status of the orchestra members. Again, because none of the band members survived we are left with nothing more than speculation. Even so, a thorough investigation has provided a solid foundation for that speculation to flourish.

Investigating the dutiful actions of Commander Charles Lightholler requires far less speculation. Lightholler launched lifeboat after lifeboat into the water and managed the evacuation process with no consideration to his own well-being.⁹ Many of the crew members used the excuse of "manning the lifeboats" so they could board them; Lightholler refused to board a lifeboat when he had the chance. He could have easily had both, the preservation of his own life and the status of a hero. Not knowing at the time he was going to live, he only chose the latter. This action morphed his presumed heroism to an even greater state; in death he would have become a martyr.

There are two theories which can explain Lightholler's dedication the morning the *sunk*. The first theory, which describes Lightholler's actions, is the reactive guilt theory. The theory stipulates that a subject (Lightholler) will do something good or punish themselves when they feel guilty; experiments have been done to support the theory. Commander Lightholler did something good and punished himself the night the *sunk*; he worked relentlessly to load the lifeboats and denied himself a place in a lifeboat. Moreover, Lightholler identified himself as part of "homogenous workable unit" and "a piece of a jigsaw puzzle" when he discussed his position as a crew member of the *Titanic*.¹⁰ Lightholler's association as a team member of the doomed ship asserted a measure of responsibility upon him. This responsibility adds the element of guilt. All the components of reactive guilt were in place. Perhaps Commander Lightholler's acts were not heroic at all; they were merely the result of his own reactive guilt.

At the core of the second theory explaining Lightholler's actions is a study performed in 1977. The study proved that individuals who have status within a community are more likely to perform altruistic acts.¹¹ Furthermore, the study cited that in life-threatening situations the primary motive for heroic acts was for familial legacy and respect; the preservation of status was even more important than life. Charles Lightholler was certainly no stranger to influence in the community. He was born to a wealthy family that valued its lineage. Additionally, his status as a senior officer of the most magnificent ship afloat surely garnered status. Lightholler's brave actions were not performed to help the passengers; rather they were an instinct to preserve his noble legacy. Lightholler, confirms his desire to preserve his status when he recounted his decision to refuse passage on a lifeboat:

lucky stars a thousand times over, in the days to come.

from anyone."

In contrast to the speculative motives of the orchestra, Lightholler paints a clear picture of his subconscious motives. They are hidden in the context of his personal account of the tragedy.

Commander Lightholler's management of the port side lifeboats undoubtedly contributed to the 706 lives that were saved. He demonstrated leadership that is unparalleled in the disaster. Nonetheless, his actions were far from altruistic. Woven into the acts are selfish motives such as the oppression of his reactive guilt and the need to preserve his legacy. By considering the psychological aspects of Lightholler's actions a more compendious image is painted.

In general, the men aboard the *Titanic* demonstrated chivalrous behavior, allowing women and children to be loaded first. During the Senate investigation Commander Lightholler was asked, "is women and children first the law of the sea?" He replied by saying, "no, it the law of human nature." Although Lightholler likely made this statement as a matter of opinion, it is proven to be true in most modern societies. Gender stereotypes cast women [and children] as less competent and more dependent than men. Therefore, the natural social inclination is to help them above all else. Clearly, the masses of men could have dominated the lifeboats. Instead, the men stood idly conforming to their superior gender stereotype. Again, social influence seems to prevail over heroism.

There are instances where men demonstrated heroic acts without regard to social influence. For example, Colonel Gracie tells the story of the unidentified man he encountered while on top of the overturned collapsible. Gracie stated the boat seemed to be at its weight threshold when a man swam by and was told to go away. As the man swam in the freezing water he kindly replied, "All right boys; good luck and God bless you." Why did the man carry on without any attempt to save himself? He had nothing to lose by trying to climb upon the overturned boat; certain death was facing him. Any negative consequences received by his attempt to climb on the boat were surely no worse than drowning or freezing to death. Moreover, he would never receive recognition for being a hero; the darkness of the night and trauma caused ambiguity. Additionally, the innate fight of survival from being in the frigid water would have likely dominated any subconscious motives. The decision made to not swamp the boat was truly selfless, a pure act of heroism.

Captain Rostron was hailed as a hero after the disaster. However, it is extremely clear that Captain Rostron's agenda included selfish motives. Consider the recognitions which he graciously accepted after the disaster: a visit to the White House to meet President Taft, a silver cup and gold medal issued by the survivors of the wreck, the Congressional Medal of Honor, the American Cross of Honor, a medal from the Liverpool Humane Society, a gold medal from the Shipwreck Society of New York, and dozens of public appearances. Extensive research did not reveal one circumstance where Captain Rostron humbly down-played his heroic image. His portrayal as a hero is even listed on his headstone. "Sir Arthur Rostron, Captain of the *RMS Carpathia*, saved 706 souls from *SS Titanic*, 15 April 1912." Rostron's depiction as a hero is superficial and not genuine. Opportunity and hype, rather than selfless dedication to others, defined him as a hero.

Dissecting courageous acts that occurred during the *Titanic* tragedy provided the perfect opportunity to scratch behind the surface of heroism. Orchestra members that played as the ship foundered demonstrated that conscious acts of heroism may have been mistaken for fulfillment of the subconscious. Commander Lightholler's actions, while laudable, were likely not heroic. Rather, they were an attempt to preserve his legacy; something he valued more than his own life. The men who refrained from entering the lifeboats so women and children could be saved seemed so chivalrous. Yet, they were merely conforming to the social norms that were dictated through the dynamics of the group. The drowning man who chose not to swamp the boat demonstrated that heroic acts can, in fact, be what they are on the surface. And Captain Rostron's story reveals that hype and popular opinion can create a "superficial hero." The story of the

End Notes

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Publications, 1960), p. 318

² Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 288

³ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 37

⁴ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 288

⁵ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 318

⁶ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (London: Bantam Books, 1977), p. 90

⁷ Lord, *A Night to Remember*, p. 91

⁸ Lord, *A Night to Remember*, p. 89

Academic Press, 1970), p. 83

⁹ Berkowitz, *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, p. 83

¹⁰ Berkowitz, *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, p. 83

¹² *Worcester Evening Gazette*, April, 20, 1912

¹³ Berkowitz, *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, p. 85

¹⁴ Berkowitz, *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, p. 85

¹⁵ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 293

¹⁶ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 296

¹⁷ Berkowitz, *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, p. 164

¹⁸ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 285

Press, 2000), p. 217

²⁰ Wong, *Motivation: A Biobehavioural Approach*, p. 218

²¹ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Lightoller>; "Charles Lightoller"

²² Lord, *A Night to Remember*, p. 296

²³ Lord, *A Night to Remember*, p. 176

²⁴ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 293

²⁵ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 172

²⁶

London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.128

²⁷ Winocour, *The Story of the Titanic as Told by its Survivors*, p. 159

²⁸ Encyclopedia-Titanica, <<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/biography/2461/>>;

"Captain Arthur Henry Rostron"

²⁹ Encyclopedia-Titanica, <<http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/biography/2461/>>;

"Captain Arthur Henry Rostron"

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