

Name: _____ Class: _____

Putting Good Deeds In Headlines May Not Be So Good

By Tovia Smith
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When Glen James, a homeless man from Boston, found a backpack filled with \$42,000 in cash and turned it in, the media immediately picked up the story. Before long, the story of his good deed had gone viral. But as Tovia Smith reports, James' story is just one of many examples of people making moral decisions—but is publicizing these good deeds making people better or worse? As you read, take notes about what tools the author uses to support her argument.

- [1] An online collection has raised more than \$145,000 for a man who stumbled onto a pile of money and turned it over to police.

Glen James' story of a good deed is just one of many making headlines. It may not be exactly brand new, but public interest does seem to be piqued¹ these days by ordinary folks making what are seen as extraordinary ethical decisions.

Some, however, question if airing this kind of "good" news is actually good.



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A Series Of Good Deeds

James' story — he's the homeless man in Boston who turned in a backpack filled with \$42,000 — went viral. So did another recent story about a Dairy Queen manager from Minnesota who stood up for a blind man who didn't know he'd been robbed.

- [5] The blind man dropped a \$20 bill, and a woman picked it up and pocketed it. The manager threw her out of the restaurant and then handed the man \$20 from his own pocket.

Just a few weeks before that, stories swirled about four college football players who found themselves inside a store that was accidentally left unlocked.

Instead of just taking what they wanted, they left every penny they owed at the checkout. One television report called it "a story of honesty that's become a shining beacon of righteousness."

"There are lots of people who suffer from moral myopia,² and so when you see this good happening, it renews some of your faith," says University of Texas professor Mimi Drumwright. She says these are the types of stories you hope will inspire copycats: "The reports of these good deeds probably are going to beget³ more good deeds, and that is a good thing."

1. **Pique** (*verb*): to stimulate (interest or curiosity)

Already, countless strangers have been paying it forward with \$20 tips to the Dairy Queen worker, and everything from jobs to gift cards for the other do-gooders — not to mention the small fortune for Glen James.

Moral Grade Inflation

- [10] But at the risk of twisting any of these precious good-news stories into more bad news, experts say there may be a downside to overplaying it.

"They did do the right thing, and that's commendable. But heroic? I think not," says Carnegie Mellon ethics professor Peter Madsen. He sees the high praise swirling around the stories as a kind of moral grade inflation.

"They had an obligation to do what they did. It was not above and beyond the call of duty. They really just did what we should have expected them to do," he says.

When you celebrate what should be ordinary behavior as extraordinary, experts say, it sends a dangerous message.

"I do worry about a culture in which people are giving selves credit for not having done terrible things. It sets a really low bar for what it takes to be a good person," says London Business School professor Daniel Effron. Effron, who teaches behavioral ethics, says feting⁴ folks for what he calls "the immoral road not taken" could actually encourage bad behavior.

- [15] When guys with integrity get put on a pedestal, he says, the implication is that they're exceptional — far greater than the rest of us.

"It suggests that most people in that situation would have done those bad things. So, it reinforces a norm that most people are selfish and self-serving, and therefore, it's OK if you're selfish and self-serving," Effron says.

The Big Surprise

Others, however, suggest the reason these stories are seen as remarkable is not because we diminish ourselves, but because of the way we diminish these particular do-gooders.

"In this particular case — I'll just say it — the homeless man was an African-American guy, and most of the young football players who paid for their goods were African-American," says Candace Upton, who teaches moral psychology at the University of Denver. "I don't think it's beyond this culture at this time to say that we do have lower expectations, which is unfair. But that's what sets up the big surprise, and hence probably the big response."

2. nearsightedness; inability to see "the big picture"
3. **Beget** (*verb*): to give rise to; to result in
4. to honor or entertain (someone) lavishly

Giving good Samaritans⁵ celebrity treatment may also have the unintended consequence of creating monster expectations, kind of like a kid expecting a prize every day that he's not late for school. You have to be careful not to go overboard, as one expert put it. But celebrating people for doing the right thing is still the right thing to do.

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5. a charitable or helpful person

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best states the central idea of the article?
 - A. Reporting on good deeds may make people less likely to perform them
 - B. Reporting on good deeds may make people more likely to perform them
 - C. Reporting on good deeds makes them less special
 - D. Reporting on good deeds may change society's expectations about performing them

2. PART A: In Paragraph 11, what is meant by the phrase "moral grade inflation"?
 - A. Performing good deeds improves your "moral grade"
 - B. Good deeds that would have gotten a lower "moral grade" in the past are receiving higher praise now
 - C. Good deeds that would have gotten a higher "moral grade" in the past are receiving lower praise now
 - D. The tendency for people to do good deeds is increasing

3. PART B: Which sentence from the article best supports the answer for Part A?
 - A. "The reports of these good deeds probably are going to beget more good deeds, and that is a good thing." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "They did do the right thing, and that's commendable." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "When you celebrate what should be ordinary behavior as extraordinary ... it sends a dangerous message." (Paragraph 13)
 - D. "Giving good Samaritans celebrity treatment may also have the unintended consequence of creating monster expectations..." (Paragraph 19)

4. What can the reader infer is the author's reason for including quotes from other sources in the article?
 - A. By quoting sources with relevant credentials, the author wants to bolster the argument that reporting on good deeds may have negative consequences.
 - B. By quoting sources with relevant credentials, the author wants to bolster the argument that reporting on good deeds usually has positive consequences.
 - C. By quoting sources with weak credentials, the author wants to bolster the argument that reporting on good deeds always has negative consequences.
 - D. By quoting sources who all have the same opinion, the author wants to bolster his argument that reporting on good deeds is necessary regardless of the consequences.

5. According to the text, how does race play a role in the specific good-deed examples cited by the author?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why do you think Glen James' story went viral? Explain your answer.
2. What is your position about publicizing good deeds in the media? Support your answer.
3. Do you think we give good Samaritans "celebrity treatment"? Why or why not?
4. What is good and how do we know? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art or literature in your answer.