Chapter 1

FOLLOWING ORDERS

The True Story of Joe and the Man in the White Lab Coat

"OK, Joe, you're going to be the Teacher, and Fred, here, will be the Learner." This was said sternly by a man in a white lab coat, a man who had brought both Joe and Fred in to do an important learning experiment. Joe took his place in front of an important-looking row of switches that looked kind of like typewriter keys, except they were labeled with numbers. Fred went off to another room.

Joe listened carefully to the instructions of what he was to do. Though he was being paid to be a part of this experiment, that wasn't really the point. He was eager to help the cause of science. He had answered an ad asking for his help, and here he was at Yale University. The man in the white lab coat was carefully recording what he did. Joe was enthusiastic about being part of this, learning about learning.

Joe was to give words to Fred, and Fred was to give a matching answer. Things went well enough at first, but pretty soon Fred missed one. What Joe was supposed to do when Fred missed one was to push one of the keys, the bottom one. It was at "15," and it would give Fred a very mild electric shock when it was pressed.

Joe didn't like pressing it. He didn't like it one bit. He had hoped Fred would just get answers right. But the experiment had to do with learning, and he was supposed to press the key and give the shock. The man in the lab coat had told him it was a way of giving pain without injuring anyone. Besides, Fred was a volunteer just like him, and he had agreed to be in the experiment.

So Joe pushed the key, pushed it fast so it would only give a small shock. Fred yelled in pain, but it was the kind of yell a person gives when stubbing a toe. Joe would never have deliberately made someone stub a toe, of course. He wouldn't give that kind of pain to anyone. But this was expected by the man in the lab coat, who was running the experiment. So it must be ok.

It wasn't too much longer before Fred missed another one. Now Joe was supposed to push the next higher key, so the shock would be a little worse. This would be a little more pain. Joe hated doing it. But the experiment required it.

Then another was missed, and soon another. Each time, Joe was to push a key that was just a little higher than the last one. Joe was beginning to get very uneasy. This bothered him. He wasn't the kind of person to give pain to other people. Fred was yelling louder.

Joe started to think that something was going wrong, and asked the man in the lab coat if they should be doing this. The man looked at him, stone-faced, and in a steady and cold voice said "The experiment requires that you continue."

So Joe continued. It bothered him to go to higher and

higher shocks, but just exactly where would he stop? If he stopped at one that was only a little bit more than the last one, then why had he done the last one? This next one was only a little higher.

But Fred was sounding more and more pained, and demanding to be let out. So Joe asked the man in the lab coat again—was Fred really in trouble? The man in the lab coat simply said again, "The experiment requires that you continue." Fred kept getting them wrong.

Then came the worst moment of all. The noises from Fred stopped. He was no longer screaming when the lever was pushed to shock him. He also wasn't giving the answers any more. There was just silence.

Now Joe was really worried. He said to the man in the lab coat that surely it was time to stop now, time to go check on Fred. The man answered, "I'll take responsibility for Fred. The experiment requires that you continue."

With no answer at all from Fred, the correct answer was clearly not given. Joe hated this. It scared him. But the instructions were to give the higher and higher shocks as long as he didn't get a correct answer. He got all the way to the highest shock—450. Then the experiment was over.

When Obeying Leads to Violence

The experiment with Joe was part of many experiments that were started by a man named Stanley Milgram. He started this in the middle of the 1960s. He was still thinking about the Nazis, who had deliberately killed millions of people in the 1940s. Milgram wondered how so many young men would have been willing to follow orders to shoot people or send them off in trains that would take them to death camps. He thought it was something in the German culture that made them do that. So he decided he would set up these experiments to see how many people could be made to follow orders from an experimenter even when someone

was hurt. He figured he would try it first on Americans, and then on Germans. The Americans, surely, would rebel against an authority that was telling them to harm someone, while the Germans would be different. He could then try to figure out what the difference was.

He never got to Germany. He found that Americans did obey the demands. About two-thirds of them made it all the way to the top level. Only about a third refused.

He had his answer. It wasn't just a problem with the Germans. It was something about all human beings. A lot of other people ran the same experiment for several years, up until the 1980s. They found very little difference in different countries or races, and it was about the same for both men and women.

Why is this so?

To begin with, all of us are raised understanding that it's a good idea to obey authority. Normally, this works well. The doctor really does know how to keep us healthy. The firefighter is an expert in putting out fires. The police officer has a lot of training in how to keep us safe. Teachers went to school for a long time to learn all about the things they teach us. People in authority generally get to be in authority because they know what they're doing. When they want to keep us safe and healthy and well-educated, then going along with what they say is a good idea.

But there are some times when it gets to be a bad idea. If the person in authority doesn't really care about other people, and demands that we do something that hurts others, then obeying that authority can get to be a problem. This happened with the Nazi government when it told its soldiers to shoot people. It happens when other governments order all kinds of harm. The problem is, since it's normally a good idea to follow instructions from authorities, some people have trouble realizing when it has become a bad idea.

Another reason people went along with the demands of the people in the lab coats is that they had said they would. They agreed at the beginning that they were helping out with an experiment. Helping out with learning new things is normally a good thing to do. They had volunteered to do it and they had started out feeling eager. If they suddenly decided not to do it, they would be going back on their word. From what they understood, they would also be messing up the experiment. They didn't want to mess up somebody's experiment, especially not when they had come to help. So they felt they had an obligation to go on giving the higher shocks.

It was the person in authority that decided what the situation was. The situation was supposed to be an experiment in learning. The authority said the experiment required the person to continue giving higher shocks. The person would have to define the situation as inflicting pain on someone who was screaming for this to stop. That would be seeing the situation differently from what the authority said it was. The person giving the shocks was seeing it from the point of view of the person in the lab coat rather than the point of view of the Learner, because it was the person in the lab coat who got to decide what the situation was.

The volunteers in the experiment had also decided by this point that the whatever happened to the Learner was not their responsibility. It was the experimenter who was responsible. That is why the man in the lab coat said toward the end that he would take the responsibility. Even though the person actually giving the shocks is the person doing the action that hurts the Learner, it was the person in authority that was seen as responsible for whatever happened.

Yet another reason they went on with the shocks is because they were on a "slippery slope." They didn't start out giving level 450 shocks to people, and they may well not have done it if they had been asked to do that first thing. They started off with a little shock, one that was unpleasant but not much

more pain than slapping someone. Each time they went up just a little more, they weren't doing anything new. They were doing what they had just done already, only a little more. How could they stop at one point when they hadn't stopped before? It was just a little more of the same thing.

This slippery slope is common at times when whole societies are slipping into a huge amount of violence. People don't mean to end up doing this huge amount, and they wouldn't have done the huge amount if someone had asked them to do it at first. They start off with things that are little, and then each step is only a little more. With the Nazis, for example, they started off with laws that took properties from Jews or made them wear yellow stars to show that they were Jews. People didn't object yet because that didn't seem so bad. They did just one step and then another. By the time they got to sending millions of Jews to death camps, it was just the next step over what they had done before, which was the next step over the one before that. People get used to things slowly, and end up in places they never expected to at the beginning.

By the way, the "Learners" in the experiment were never actually shocked at all. Even though it was made to look like they were other people who had volunteered, they were really actors in cahoots with the experiment. A lot of other researchers have decided that this kind of lying is not good, because then people who are in experiments will think they may be being lied to. They've put a stop to it for now.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

There were many of these experiments run to see what would make a difference in how many people would follow orders all the way to the top shock level. Remember, with the original experiments, about a third of the people wouldn't go all the way to the top, so there had to be reasons why some people did and others didn't.

Things that had nothing to do with changing the idea of who had authority made no difference. If they used a place that was less impressive than Yale, there was no change. If the Learner said at the beginning he had a heart condition, that made no difference. If the man in the lab coat looked milder and the Learner looked tougher, that made no difference. If the Learner was another experimenter, rather than another volunteer, that made no difference.

There was a little bit of a drop in people who would go all the way to the top if the Learner got a contract at the beginning to be let out by demanding it. That way, the man in the lab coat was breaking that contract when he insisted on going on. That would mean that instead of two-thirds going to the top, only two-fifths would.

It got much lower, only one-fifth of the people going to the top, if the man in the lab coat wasn't there, but had his voice piped in by phone. Without that face-to-face contact, far fewer people were willing to keep giving shocks. The same thing happened when it was just another ordinary person, someone claiming no authority, who was in the position of demanding further shocks.

There was a much more dramatic drop when people were free to choose shock level. Instead of having an experimenter telling them they must keep going up, they were told they had to give shocks but could choose the level. Then they were more likely to choose the lower levels, and only 1 in 40 went to the top. This is important, because it shows that the reason people went to the top really was that they were following orders. It wasn't that they were people who just wanted to be mean and were given a chance to be.

Then there's the situation where there are two people in the lab coats, and one of them argues with the other about whether or not the experiment should continue. All but two volunteers stopped as soon as the argument started, and those two both stopped at the next level. That is, all people

stopped if the people in authority couldn't agree that this should go on.

Most important, there was a dramatic drop when people saw someone else rebel. The way the experimenters did this was to have another one of the same experiments running across the large room. The other experiment was actually done by actors. The volunteer saw that the Teacher in the other experiment decided not to go on with the shocks after going up just a few levels. In this case, when they had an example of someone else just like them refusing to do it, then their making it to the top level went down to 1 in 10.

In other words, people are most likely to decide not to keep on giving shocks when

- the person in authority is not there, allowing for "cheating."
- the person giving the orders isn't seen as an authority.
- people in authority aren't united.
- other people in the same situation set an example of refusing to give more shocks.

If a nonviolence campaign needs to encourage people not to cooperate with authority, then that last point can be especially powerful. In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi decided he would march to the sea to make salt. The British government ruled India at this time, and made a law that people couldn't make their own salt but had to rely on the British for it. This was one of many things that the British were doing that hurt the people in India, leaving them poor and badly governed. Gandhi did this march to rebel against a government that had conquered India and was telling people they couldn't do this for themselves. He was breaking a law that he thought the British had no right to make.

Many of the British thought this was funny. They thought

it was just a symbol, not actually doing something. One person, after all, can't make that much salt—not enough to break the British salt business.

Yet Gandhi did have the sympathy of millions of people in India. Because of this, the example of only one was enough to get a group to come with him. That group inspired huge numbers more to join the campaign. Millions of people went to make salt. The British had to change that law.

After many different campaigns like this, the British ended up having to leave India entirely. They left in 1947, not because they were kicked out with violence, but because they knew they couldn't rule people who wanted to be ruled by their own government.

Another example is an event that happened during the Civil Rights movement in the United States. On the buses in some states, Black people had to go to the back in the "colored" section, and if there were not enough seats for the White people, then the Black people would have to stand. One day, in Montgomery, Alabama, a woman named Rosa Parks was told to stand up so that a White man could take her seat. She had a long day at work and was tired. She refused to do it, and was kicked off the bus.

This event sparked off a boycott of the buses by the African-Americans of Montgomery. It lasted over a year, but they finally got what they wanted, so everybody could sit anywhere on the bus. Martin Luther King, Jr. got involved in this protest, and went on to become important in the Civil Rights movement. The movement was successful in getting many laws passed and attitudes changed so that many people who had been prejudiced based on skin color stopped doing it.

In both these cases, it's not as simple as one person refusing to go along with unfair demands and then other people doing the same. A lot of people were already organized, and there had been a lot of talk about how unfair the problems were. Real life is not likely to be as simple as a

laboratory experiment, because the whole point of experiments is to take one simple part and study it separately. In the real world, there will practically always be more going on.

Yet this shows that when conditions are right, it makes sense that one person can set the example that brings about changes in behavior in many others. In the case of the Milgram obedience experiments, people thought someone was being hurt, so there was a good reason not to go along. They already felt bad about giving higher shocks. The example of someone refusing to do it was all most of them needed to decide to stop doing it themselves. That's how it worked in laboratory experiments. Many times, that's the way it works out in the real world, too.