

Foreword by PATRICK LENCIONI

author of the New York Times bestseller The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

ORDINARY GREATNESS

IT'S WHERE YOU
LEAST EXPECT IT...
EVERYWHERE

PAMELA BILBREY & BRIAN JONES

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Additional praises for *Ordinary Greatness: It's Where You Least Expect It . . . Everywhere*

What are you doing—or not doing—to find “ordinary greatness”? Bilbrey and Jones sharpen our focus and change our perspective with pointers that harness what can be celebrated daily. You’ll find it in places you never imagined and, when you do, higher performance and increased productivity are not far away. Buy two copies of this book—one for you and one for your boss.

**—Barbara Pagano, Ed.S., Founding Partner,
yourSABBATICAL, Author of *The Transparency
Edge: How Credibility Can Make or Break You In
Business***

In the most reflective moments of our life we wonder about paths not taken and whether there still might be time to explore new territory. *Ordinary Greatness* is one of those rare books that allow you to think through what might yet be, both personally and in the wider spheres of existence in our families, and even in our organizations. “What If ... ?” “Why not ... ?” “Could I . . . ?” and once those questions begin, the tremendous voyages of our lives can begin. Greatness is there for the taking so be careful-you may not want to risk moving out of your comfort zone.

**—V. Clayton Sherman, Ed.D., Chairman, Gold
Standard Management Institute, Author of
*Creating the New American Hospital***

What the authors offer us is a well thought out and tested strategy for moving organizations towards their full potential. The thesis is clearly presented that as we acknowledge the greatness that can be found every day right in front of us then we can create even more of what we most need in this challenging moment. What we most need is the confidence and the certainty that we can succeed and this book shows us how available that is to us if we can just take a moment to stop our rushing

towards an immediate solution and fully appreciate the potential that has always been in us.

—Ken Murrell, D.B.A., Professor, University of West Florida, Co-Author of *Empowering Employees and Empowering Organizations*

Ordinary Greatness is an inspirational and practical book that guided each person to discover his/ her unique gifts and the courage to live their “greatness,” demonstrating the highest forms of personal accountability.

—Mark Samuel, Co-Author of *The Power of Personal Accountability*, Author of *Creating the Accountable Organization*

A great guidebook loaded with lots of practical advice and strategies to help leaders actualize their potential. In a very real way, this book also shows leaders how to help others be and do more than they thought possible. And unlike many books, the techniques are easy to use—all it takes is opening your eyes to the greatness that exists right before you.

—Robert Kriegel, Ph.D., Consultant and Author, *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers and If It Ain't Broke . . . BREAK IT!*

Thank you, Pam & Brian, for reminding us about the good/bad news in discovering talent. The good news is that greatness exists all around us —“acres of diamonds” right in our own back yard. The bad news is that we can easily miss it, as it often comes disguised in ordinary packages.

—Jim Hunter, internationally best-selling author of *The Servant*

Ordinary Greatness

*It's Where You
Least Expect It . . .
Everywhere*

Pamela Bilbrey
Brian Jones



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*To my family: Your love, support, and
encouragement are never ending.*

PB

*To Melanie and my boys: Your greatness
is anything but ordinary.*

BJ

Foreword

Antiques Roadshow is a television program that was particularly popular a number of years ago, and which I believe is still running. It involves people bringing their various antiques to a traveling group of experts who tell them how much their item is worth. One of the reasons why so many people watched the show was to witness that moment when one of the experts told an unsuspecting antique owner that the lamp or end table or ceramic dog that had been taking up space in their garage for the past twenty years was actually worth a small fortune.

Beyond the novelty of realizing a windfall without having to do any real work, there is much more at work here. There is just something amazing about looking at an item that you once viewed with ambivalence and seeing it anew as an object of great worth. When that item is a person, the excitement is particularly powerful.

To understand this phenomenon, consider another popular television show—*American Idol*. There are hundreds and hundreds, probably thousands, of established singers in the world, all of whom are worthy of our time and money if we'd like to hear talented voices. But we just wouldn't get millions of busy people to stop what they were doing twice a week to listen to them simply by putting them on television. But create an environment where we get to discover hidden talent among people who we wouldn't normally notice if they bumped into us on the street, and we're suddenly fascinated.

Well, within the organizations where we work, there are lamps, end tables, ceramic dogs, and pop stars just waiting to be dusted off and celebrated every day, and there is

something powerful and exciting about being the one to take them out of the garage and dust them off or let them sing.

In *Ordinary Greatness*, Pam Bilbrey and Brian Jones explore this concept and provide a comprehensive and practical set of tools for excavating the hidden value and talent buried deep within our companies, hospitals, churches, and schools. They base their advice on their own substantial experience working with real leaders in real organizations where they've helped bring about excellence where others may have seen mediocrity.

But Pam and Brian do something beyond helping organizations achieve more than they thought possible, though that alone is a great reason to buy and use this book. They also provide a blueprint for us to go about changing the lives of people who work for us by helping them realize their potential and become the people they are meant to be. That is certainly one of the most worthwhile endeavors that any executive or manager can undertake. It would also make for some great reality TV.

Patrick Lencioni
Author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*

Preface

One of the world's premier violinists, Joshua Bell, had performed in such illustrious settings as London's Royal Albert Hall, the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, and Carnegie Hall. He had toured with such acclaimed groups as the Orchestre National de France, the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra, and the Tonhalle-Orchester. But he had never, ever done a gig at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station in Washington, D.C.

As it turned out, his performance there on Friday, January 23, 2007 went mostly unnoticed. Yes, amazingly unnoticed. Three days prior, people had paid \$100 for less than very good seats to hear him play in Boston's magnificent Symphony Hall. Several weeks later, he would accept the Avery Fisher prize as the best classical musician in America.

But that chilly day at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station, he was incognito, unadvertised, and unknown. He appeared to be just one more street person hoping to get enough money dropped in the open violin case in front of him to pay for his next meal. What was Joshua Bell doing there? He was taking part in a fascinating project set up by *The Washington Post*. Reporter Gene Weingarten would later describe it, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning article "Pearls Before Breakfast" (April 8, 2007), as "an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste: In a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"

Granted, as Bell entered the station during morning rush hour, he was totally nondescript in appearance, wearing jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. Positioning himself against the wall near the

top of an escalator, he drew his personal instrument from its case—an 18th-century violin handcrafted by Antonio Stradivari. Placing it beneath his chin, he commenced his one-man concert. As the emotionally powerful notes of Bach's "Chaconne" filled the air (Bell describes it as "one of the greatest pieces of music ever written"), uninterested commuters hurried by. In the next 45 minutes, Bell played no fewer than six classical masterpieces as 1,097 people filed past, most on their way to work.

Noticed by a few, Bell managed to amass \$32 and change (including pennies) for his efforts. A grand total of seven people tarried to listen for a moment or two. But a hidden camera videotaping the experience revealed a fascinating turn of events: each and every single time a child walked by, the youngster stopped to listen—only to be dragged off by a disinterested parent.

The experiment revealed that magnificent art was transcended by its ordinary circumstances. Or, as Weingarten put it, Bell's performance was "art without a frame." Thus, it went largely unnoticed because of the context.

This story (and a look at the hidden camera video footage) reminded us of leaders we know who, because of their busy schedule, frantic life, and overall hectic existence, walk past greatness every day because it appears so ordinary. Then we realized that far from being the exception, this has become the norm: Greatness is overlooked on a daily basis due to the way it is encapsulated. Ordinary people do great things in the business environment, but these individuals and their deeds go largely unnoticed. Leaders simply fail to grasp what is right in front of them.

This is further evidenced by clients who bring us into their organizations to solve a problem. We soon realize that

they've had everything needed to successfully resolve the issue all along—they just did not see it.

The chapters that follow will analyze the invisibility of ordinary greatness, how it happens and what it is, and how leaders can learn to open their eyes and recognize it regardless of its frame or context. Joshua Bell's story is a remarkable indictment of how society has become inured to greatness. It is a wakeup call for people in all walks of life, but especially for those in leadership positions who struggle every day to keep employees engaged and passionate about their work.

Acknowledgments

We are forever indebted to the scores of clients who have touched our lives and influenced our thinking. The honor of sharing in their pursuit of excellence is humbling. We have learned so much from observing the passion, commitment, and perseverance of these good people.

We are grateful for the story of Joshua Bell, as brought to us in Gene Weingarten's *Washington Post* article, "Pearls Before Breakfast." That tiny seed was all that was needed to spur our thinking on how everyday greatness impacts workplaces across the globe. It encouraged us to document the discoveries and the lessons we have learned over the years in a book format.

Thank you to those individuals who volunteered their time to share their perceptions and stories of ordinary greatness. So often, your stories touched us in ways you will never know. Thanks also go to the hundreds of individuals who added their voices through response to our Web-based surveys.

We are grateful to our publisher, John Wiley & Sons, and especially Sheck Cho, our editor, for the support and encouragement provided that made this book a reality. Early in the manuscript preparation, we worked with our "literary angel," Ellie Smith. Imagine her patience and her talent as she worked with us to unite our voices for the book. We will be forever grateful for her guidance. Later in the process, Deb Burdick came on board and challenged us with a "newcomer's" view of the manuscript, ensuring that our blinders did not distract from sharing our enthusiasm for discovering and celebrating the greatness that exists in all our lives. Her constant encouragement, her ever present

zest for life, and, of course, her superb editing skills made this book a reality. Thank you, Deb. Thanks also to Melanie Jones, our researcher extraordinaire, who never left a stone unturned and found creative ways to add interest to the text.

Thanks to Pat Lencioni and our friends at The Table Group for encouraging us to move forward with the book. A special word of thanks is also given to our many colleagues who, through the years, have challenged our ideas and added new dimensions to our work. The long weeks on the road with delayed flights, the late meetings, the intense discussion sessions, and the rigorous debates were peppered with friendship and admiration. You know who you are and we thank you.

Chapter 1

What Is Ordinary Greatness?

Yes, I saw the violinist, but nothing about him struck me as much of anything.

—RESPONSE FROM A PASSERBY WHO HESITATED ONLY BRIEFLY IN FRONT OF VIOLINIST JOSHUA BELL PERFORMING IN THE METRO STATION, AS QUOTED IN GENE WEINGARTEN'S "PEARLS BEFORE BREAKFAST," WASHINGTON POST, APRIL 7, 2007^{[1](#)}

It was not the musician, the music he selected, or the instrument he played that prevented people passing through Washington, D.C.'s L'Enfant Plaza from recognizing greatness. Instead, the common surroundings, coupled with the perceived tyranny of their schedules, seemed to keep people on their original "track" without stopping to appreciate what was right in front of them. Joshua Bell's impromptu concert was not a destination or an event for which they had planned and saved. He appeared as they were transiting through a Metro station, and because of that, his performance was somehow seen as background noise and dismissed.

Inspired by the Joshua Bell story, and intrigued by the way this phenomenon of ordinary greatness overlooked could be applied to a broader perspective (and especially its impact in the workplace), we set out to determine a definition of ordinary greatness. We first looked to stories of modern heroes, people who were catapulted into prominence—because at one point in time, their greatness was not recognized either.

The Case for Authority

The fateful day when this movie-mad child got close to his Hollywood dream came in the summer of 1965, when 17-year-old Steven, visiting his cousins in Canoga Park, took the studio tour of Universal Pictures. "The tram wasn't stopping at the sound stages," Steven says. "So during a bathroom break I snuck away and wandered over there, just watching. I met a man who asked what I was doing, and I told him my story. Instead of calling the guards to throw me off the lot, he talked with me for about an hour. His name was Chuck Silvers, head of the editorial department. He said he'd like to see some of my little films, and so he gave me a pass to get on the lot the next day. I showed him about four of my 8-mm films. He was very impressed. Then he said, "I don't have the authority to write you any more passes, but good luck to you."

The next day a young man wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase strode past the gate guard, waved and heaved a silent sigh. He had made it! "It was my father's briefcase," Spielberg says. "There was nothing in it but a sandwich and two candy bars. So every day that summer I went in my suit and hung out with directors and writers and editors and dubbers. I found an office that wasn't being used, and became a squatter. I went to a camera store, bought some plastic name titles and put my name in the building directory: Steven Spielberg, Room 23C."²

Spielberg's call to ordinary greatness was asserting itself; his mindset of authority so convinced the people he encountered at the studio that no one ever questioned his

right to be there! As a matter of fact, he worked there for weeks before he was finally offered a job.

In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds—his youth, inexperience, and anonymity—he rose to the occasion by refusing to be defeated. Though it would be years before it was recognized, Spielberg instinctively knew that he had greatness in him. His air of authority allowed him to be accepted.

Do we question people whom we instinctively perceive to have authority, even though a title or formal designation might be lacking? No; rarely, if ever, do we challenge them. Instead, we respond to their attitude of being in charge almost automatically. It might be a characteristic, a hallmark of greatness to come, yet we seldom recognize it for what it is.

A Harbinger of the Future

Early in his life, one of the character traits of Sir Winston Churchill was his belief in himself. From age 22 to 26 he served in the military, first as a member of the cavalry and then as an officer in the infantry. While he fought in several wars during this time period, coming under heavy fire at the front line, he escaped injury. What was most interesting about his experiences in combat, though, was his outlook. After one battle, he wrote his mother: “I was under fire all day and rode through the charge. You know my luck in these things. I was about the only officer whose clothes, saddlery or horse was uninjured . . . I never felt the slightest nervousness.”

His “luck in these things” he interpreted as Divine Providence. He wrote, “I shall believe I am to be preserved for future things.” And later, “These are anxious days, but

when one is quite sure that one is fulfilling one's place in the scheme of world affairs, one may await events with entire composure."³

Is it possible that those who will someday demonstrate greatness are better at interpreting their destiny? Is this ability to be sure about one's purpose in life a characteristic of ordinary individuals who respond to extraordinary circumstances with courage, who rescue people from burning buildings, and who save comrades from war's peril? Perhaps if each of us could hear the inner voice of ordinary greatness, it might be easier to recognize it in others.

A Desire to Help

Every day people perform acts of ordinary greatness that we fail to recognize. The Little League coach who unfailingly gives the worst players a chance at bat; the couple who adopt a child with grave physical problems; the healthcare worker who spearheads an annual drive to collect books for an inner city school . . . there are countless examples of ordinary and overlooked heroes among us. But these acts are propelled into our consciousness by the circumstances.

In 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 went down in Washington, D.C.'s icy Potomac River in the midst of a snowstorm. A federal employee on his way home from work watched incredulously as the plane clipped a bridge and plunged into the water. Lenny Skutnik could have stood by, waiting for rescue workers to save as many as they could, yet he swam out to rescue a drowning stranger.

The water was 29 degrees that day. As Skutnik watched a crash victim fail again and again to grasp a rescue basket from a helicopter, he went into the river and swam 30 yards to rescue her. Later he would say, "It was just too much to

take. When she let go that last time . . . it was like a bolt of lightening or something hit me—‘You’ve got to go get her.’”

There were several people that day who also performed feats of heroism: a helicopter pilot who endangered his own life while rescuing others; a medic who climbed out to help a victim too weak to save herself; two bystanders who went into the water to assist people; and one of the plane’s passengers, who drowned after passing the lifeline numerous times to others.

The publicity-shy Skutnik was never at ease with the accolades for his bravery. “I wasn’t a hero,” he protests. “I was just someone who helped another human being. We’re surrounded by heroes. What made this different was that it was caught on film and went all over the world.”⁴ Yes, we are surrounded by ordinary greatness, embodied in heroes who make a profound difference in others’ lives. We seldom see this greatness for what it is, though, unless—as in Skutnik’s case—it visits us in our homes on the nightly news.

Could you have done what these people did? They were common, everyday people who performed great acts, driven to help others despite the peril to themselves. They might never have been recognized were it not for the circumstances that flung them into heroism, situations they responded to as if they were predestined for them.

Hardwired to Rescue

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign law professor David Hyman conducted a four-year study about the willingness of average Americans to help others in need. Wondering whether U.S. law should require citizens to help each other in times of emergency, he made an

interesting discovery: Rescues outnumber non-rescues 740 to 1 each year.⁵ “This study shows you don’t need laws to get people to rescue one another. They seem to do it themselves,” Hyman said. “Americans are much better than the law expects them to be.... [The study suggests that] people are hard-wired to rescue. It’s an instinctive response. People see someone else in peril and they will jump in, almost regardless of risk.”⁶

Definition of Ordinary Greatness

Our definition of ordinary greatness evolved over the course of writing this book. Finally, we settled on “superior and often unrecognized characteristics, qualities, skills, or effort found in a person who may be otherwise undistinguished; sometimes discovered in a response to unexpected circumstances.” Perhaps the easiest way to describe ordinary greatness is that it is most often uncelebrated, sometimes possesses an element of nobility, and is rarely on display. In fact, when we celebrate true ordinary greatness (see [Exhibit 1.1](#)), it is because it has managed to transcend its invisibility.

People who exhibit ordinary greatness elect to put forth an abundance of personal effort when they find themselves in extraordinary, demanding, or special circumstances with the opportunity to make a difference. They do so without reservation, answering a call that comes from deep within. The desire to be in the spotlight is never a factor. They demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity, persistence in the face of great odds, and a determination to live the values they hold most dear.

Exhibit 1.1 Ordinary greatness defined

Ordinary Greatness

Superior and often unrecognized characteristics, qualities, skills, or effort found in someone who may be otherwise undistinguished; sometimes discovered in response to unexpected circumstances.

Former prisoner of war Bob Blair says he had an “epiphany—to get volunteers to help him grow nutritious food for the needy.” According to ABC News, the organization that named Blair one of their “Persons of the Year,” Blair noticed there were an awful lot of people, hundreds of thousands of people, who are “food insecure, meaning they don’t know where their next meal is coming from.” Between June and December 2008, Blair estimated he had harvested about 35 tons of vegetables with the help of 3,100 volunteers.⁷

Ron Clark, a teacher who “never wanted to teach; all I wanted was a life filled with adventure,” also embodies such determination. After teaching fifth grade in Belhaven, North Carolina for five years, he saw a television program about a school in East Harlem, New York that was having trouble attracting good teachers. He immediately packed up his car, drove to New York, stayed at the YMCA, and searched out a school like the one he had seen on television. “When I started teaching there (New York City’s P.S. 83, in Spanish Harlem), people at the school said it was the worst class they had seen in 30 years,” Ron recalls. “There were so many discipline problems in the classroom I couldn’t get the kids’ attention. They didn’t respect me, they didn’t respect each other, nor [did they respect] the other teachers.” Ron recognized the way adults take things for granted when dealing with kids. “We’re constantly telling them to behave or be respectful, but we’re not taking the time to show them what we expect,” Ron states. He came up with a list of 55 rules for his classroom—how to give a firm handshake, how