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Bravery, Psychopathy or Purpose? Understanding the Firefighter's Resolve

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The air was crisp as I stepped into the Jurong Firehouse for its open house on a Saturday morning. With a silent yet commanding presence, the station stood tall. Firefighters, their navy-blue uniforms spotless, their boots gleaming in the sunlight, moved with ease and confidence. The garage housed the emergency vehicles, a silent yet imposing fleet ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. The fire truck, a massively superior figure, gleamed in its bright red hue, as if it had been polished just minutes before. Its pristine surface was so reflective that I could see my own face staring back at me. The fire truck mirrored this organization. The firehose was coiled to perfection, the nozzles polished, and the compartments meticulously packed with axes, breathing apparatuses such as oxygen masks and other firefighting tools. I watched as the firefighters moved through their routine inspections, checking the headlights, mirrors, and even the tiniest scratches. I watched curiously as they tested the tire pressure, brakes, coolant levels, license plates, first aid kits and sirens going through each step with careful precision. It wasn't just about keeping the trucks in working order. It was a ritual. It was a way of showing pride in their work and respect for the vehicles that would carry them into danger. It was a symbol of confidence.

As I kept observing, I became aware of how well they coordinated as a cohesive team. It made me wonder—what drives someone to risk their life for a complete stranger? What makes them run into burning buildings, fully aware that fire brings one of the most excruciating pains a person can endure including death? I asked one of the firefighters leading the tour, and he chuckled, "It's definitely not the salary." His laughter quickly faded and transformed into a more serious tone. Firefighting, he explained, was his calling. He regards it as one of the highest forms of giving back to the community that nurtured him. He acknowledged that there are many ways to serve the community, but placing one's life on the line for another is a deed never forgotten, heroic, a testament of why we keep living.

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I was struck by this moment. They demonstrated discipline, dedication, and a strong sense of duty by taking great care to maintain their fire trucks in good condition, which went beyond simple functionality. The gleaming fire truck, the neatly arranged tools, and the careful safety checks weren't just part of the job—they were a testament to the pride and dedication of the firefighters to a noble profession, at times taken for granted by an economics-driven world. However, beyond that, what really struck me was the sheer selflessness of the firefighters. With the human in us, our first instinct is to protect ourselves by running away from danger, yet for them, running *into* and *through* fire is just another day at work. It makes me wonder: what truly drives firefighters to risk everything, even when their instinct is to stay safe? Is it this sense of duty, something inside them, or something else lies beneath? Maybe understanding what motivates them would change how we see heroism and the sacrifices that hold our communities together.

One possible explanation lies in their training. In National Serviceman's (NSF) Fight Live Fire as Part of SCDF's Firefighting Training (2024), Gabrielle Chan describes the gruelling preparation that National Servicemen in the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) undergo. Trainees are subjected to extreme heat, dense smoke, and erratic circumstances that strain their bodies and minds. The ultimate goal is to hone their technical abilities while also developing discipline, teamwork, courage, and a strong sense of responsibility. "Surprisingly, I am not worried about fires on site because I am trained, and I have this muscle memory, so much so that when I turn up for fires, I am confident that I know what to do," says one trainee, highlighting the level of preparation that allows them to face danger with such confidence (Chan, 2024, para. 19). Rigorous trainings explain why firefighters seem almost fearless in the face of danger. However, training alone does not account for their willingness to take risks. Fear is definitely still present, lurking inside of them—the uncertainty of how each call will turn out, and how they respond not only to fire, but also to fear. Training provides the tools, but what truly motivates firefighters to use these tools in life-threatening situations? How do they manage fear?

Many firefighters consider their work to be a calling rather than just a job. Timothy Wang offers a very intimate description of his experiences as a frontliner. He narrates his sacrifices, such as missing vacations, working long hours, and always being on call. Despite these difficulties, he talks about how knowing that his work saves lives gives him a deep sense of fulfilment and meaning in existence. "Someone somewhere has to make unseen sacrifices for our everyday life to go on as we know it," he reflects, capturing the unseen bravery and heroism that defines his profession (Wang, 2024, para. 25).

Wang's (2024) words resonated so much with me as they unravelled the emotional core of firefighting. It is not just about skill or duty—it is about selflessness. Unlike the average person whose instinct is to flee from danger, firefighters feel compelled to run toward it, to face it, to confront it no matter what. But why? Perhaps the answer lies in something more intangible: a deeply ingrained sense of purpose. The culture in which firefighters work emphasizes service, resilience, determination, and camaraderie. This notion was reaffirmed by my visit to the firehouse. Whether they were checking tire pressure, coiling hoses to perfection, or just cracking jokes between shifts, they all had a sense of mutual respect and trust. It became clear to me that firefighting is not just an individual effort; it is a team commitment, a conviction that galvanises the profession and the reasons for why they keep doing the job.

Often, this sense of obligation overcomes fear. Firefighters are trained to trust their team, knowing that their lives depend on one another. This bond fosters a level of courage that allows them to push past their natural instincts. While most people avoid high-risk situations, firefighters willingly step into blazing buildings because they believe in the greater good. They embody values that extend beyond their profession—courage, selflessness, and an unwavering commitment to service. Their work serves as a stark reminder of the vital role of public service even though they often go unnoticed. In a world where individualism is increasingly celebrated, firefighters demonstrate the power of collective responsibility. Despite fear, they face fire. Despite uncertainty, they deal with fire – to extinguish it in order to save lives.

Yet, I go back to the question I asked above: Beyond fear, what truly drives firefighters? Is it sheer courage, or does something deeper lie beneath their willingness to confront danger? Do they acquire an almost innate bravery, an increased capacity for pain, or they are driven by a deeply psychological fortitude that verges on psychopathy making their way through raging fires? Perhaps, to them, fire is more than just a matter of obligation; it is a challenge, a conflict, a relationship, and possibly even a puzzle worth solving. Could their resistance to destruction be a form of narcissism, a subconscious need to demonstrate control over an uncontrollable force, or is it a call to ego, validation, and self-worth? Beyond the call to serve and a sense of fulfilment, fighting fires reveals a deeply complex psychological interplay where fear, ego, narcissism, pain tolerance, and an almost playful defiance of danger intersect. Firefighters' actions challenge us to reconsider our own perceptions of courage and bravery: not as the absence of fear, but as an intricate rhythm between risk, resilience, ego, and the unspoken allure of the mind in confronting the very moment of fighting the fire itself as it turns a building into an inferno eager to kill anyone that comes its way.

My original question—why they do it—feels different now that I've spent time at the firehouse and as I kept ruminating about fires and the firefighters' resolve to fight it. It's not just about their training, duty, or even heroism. It has to do with something more profound—a steadfast faith in their work. Not only do firefighters see the fire in front of them, but they also see the lives they are saving, the families they are protecting, and the community they are defending. More importantly, not only do firefighters confront the fire ablaze in front of them, but deep within, they also view it as a symbol of something deeper – a psychopathological relationship they desire to sustain because it fuels not only their self-worth but their anticipation, their adrenaline rush, their ego, and their value not only to the world but also to the existence of the “self”. Such makes firefighting a complex profession as it signifies something deeper, entrenched in the deepest recesses of the mind of the firefighter.

We often take safety for granted, but behind every siren, uniform, and fire truck speeding through a red light is someone who has chosen to put others first. Knowing what drives them, perceived to be inherently complex, makes us appreciate their efforts even more, encourages us to think about how we, too, can change the world, yet also summons us to dig even further the psychology behind firefighting. We might not only settle seeing what is known, but also what is not.

Bionote

Swetha Sudhakar is a Computer Science undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore who plans to specialise in cybersecurity. Alongside her interest in digital defence, she is passionate about real-world rescue work, which is why she became a volunteer firefighter with the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) under the Civil Defence Auxiliary Unit. Beyond academics and cybersecurity, she trains in Muay Thai and loves pushing her limits through extreme activities like skydiving, paragliding, and bungee jumping. She also tutors children in academic subjects—Maths, Science, and English—as well as piano. Music has always been a big part of her life, and her ARSM Diploma in Performance with Distinction is a testament to this. She thrives on challenge, variety, and purpose—whether solving problems, mentoring young minds, or stepping up in high-stakes situations. To her, life is all about growth, grit, adventure, and giving back.

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