Suffering and Sacrifice: The Necessary Ingredients of Heroism

Commentary and Analysis

Suffering and sacrifice: the necessary ingredients of heroism

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By Scott T. Allison and Gwendolyn C. Setterberg

“Hardships prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary life.” – C.S. Lewis

Are pain and suffering destructive experiences to be avoided, or are they opportunities for people to develop an extraordinary life? The wisdom of spiritual philosophies throughout the ages has converged with modern psychological research to produce an answer: Suffering and sacrifice offer profound gains, advantages, and opportunities to those open to such boons.

Our review of the wisdom gleaned from theology and psychology reveals at least six beneficial effects of suffering. These include the idea that suffering (1) has redemptive qualities, (2) signifies important developmental milestones, (3) fosters humility, (4) elevates compassion, (5) encourages social union and action, and (6) provides meaning and purpose.

1. Suffering is Redemptive

Buddhism teaches us that suffering is inevitable but can also be a catalyst for personal and spiritual growth. The Buddha cautioned that the desire for enlightenment and awakening asks much from those who seek it. One must turn toward the suffering to conquer it. Buddhists redeem themselves by channeling the full energy of their attachments to the physical world – the cause of all suffering – into compassionate concern for others.

Christianity also embraces the redemptive value of suffering.

Foremost in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the idea that all human suffering stems from the fall of man (Genesis 1:31). The centerpiece of suffering in the New Testament is, of course, the portrayal of the passion of Christ through the Synoptic Gospels. For Christians, Christ’s suffering served the purpose of redeeming no less than the entire human race, elevating Jesus into the role of the Western world’s consummate spiritual leader for the past two millennia.

Our previous work on the psychology of heroism has identified personal transformation through struggle as one of the defining characteristics of heroic leadership. Nelson Mandela, for example, endured 27 years of harsh imprisonment before assuming the presidency of South Africa. Mandela’s ability to prevail after such long-term suffering made him an inspirational hero worldwide. Desmond Tutu opined that Mandela’s suffering “helped to purify him and grow the magnanimity that would become his hallmark.”
In the field of positive psychology, scholars have acknowledged the role of suffering in the development of healthy character strengths. Positive psychology recognizes beneficial effects of suffering through the principles of posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, positive adjustment, positive adaptation, and adversarial growth.

A study of character strengths measured before and after the September 11th terrorist attacks showed an increase in people’s “faith, hope, and love”. The redemptive development of hope, wisdom, and resilience as a result of suffering is said to have contributed to the leadership excellence of figures such as Helen Keller, Aung San Suu Kyi, Mahatma Gandhi, Malala Yousafzai, Stephen Hawking, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Shiva Nazar Ahari, Oprah Winfrey, J. K. Rowling, and Ludwig van Beethoven, among others.

2. Suffering Signifies a Necessary “Crossover” Point in Life

Psychologists who study lifespan development have long known that humans traverse through various stages of maturation from birth to death. Each necessary entanglement on the human journey represents painful progress toward becoming fully human, each struggle an opportunity for people to achieve the goal of wholeness. According to Erik Erikson, people must successfully negotiate a specific crisis associated with each growth stage. If mishandled, the crisis can produce suffering, and it is this suffering produces the necessary motivation for progression to the subsequent stage.

Erikson was the first psychologist to describe the causes and consequences of the “midlife crisis”. According to Erikson, middle-aged people often struggle to find their purpose or meaning in life, particularly after their children have left the home. The only way to move forward is to carve out a life of selfless generativity. A generative individual is charitable, communal, socially connected, and willing to selflessly better society. Generativity is the only antidote to the midlife crisis. Generative individuals are among society’s most valuable human assets; they are often called the elders or heroes of society.

A recurring theme in world literature is the idea that people must plummet to physical and emotional depths before they can ascend to new heights. In The Odyssey, the hero Odysseus descends to Hades where he meets the blind prophet Tireseas. Only at this lowest of points, in the depths of the underworld, is Odysseus given the gift of insight about how to become the wise ruler of Ithaca. The Apostles’ Creed tells of Jesus descending into hell before his ascent to heaven. Somehow, the author(s) of the creed deemed it absolutely necessary for Jesus to fall before he could “rise” from the dead.

In eastern religious traditions, such as Hinduism, one encounters the idea that suffering follows naturally from the commission of immoral acts in one’s current or past life. This type of karma involves the acceptance of suffering as a just consequence and as an opportunity for spiritual progress.

The message is clear: we must die, or some part of us must die, before we can live, or at least move forward. If we resist that dying – and most every one of us does – we resist what is good for us and hence bring about our own suffering. Psychoanalyst Carl Jung observed that “the foundation of all mental illness is the avoidance of true suffering.”
Paradoxically, if we avoid suffering, we avoid growth. People who resist any type of dying will experience necessary suffering. Those who resist suffering are ill equipped to serve as the leaders of society. Our most heroic leaders, like Nelson Mandela, have been “through the fire” and have thus gained the wisdom and maturity to lead wisely.

3. Suffering Encourages Humility

Spiritual traditions from around the world emphasize that although life can be painful, a higher power is at work using our circumstances to humble us and to shape us into what he, she, or it wants us to be. C.S. Lewis once noted, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Richard Rohr opines that suffering “doesn’t accomplish anything tangible but creates space for learning and love.” Suffering serves the purpose of humbling us and waking us from the dream of self-sufficiency.

Humility is a major step toward “recovery” in twelve-step programs such Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gambler’s Anonymous, and Al-Anon. Step 1 asks participants in these programs to admit their total powerlessness over their addiction. The spiritual principle at work here is the idea that victory is only possible through admitting defeat. Richard Rohr argues that only when people reach the limits of their private resources do they become willing to tap into the “ultimate resource” – God, Allah, the universe, or some power greater than themselves.

In twelve-step programs, pain, misery, and desperation become the keys to recovery. Step 7 asks program members to “humbly ask God” to remove personal defects of character (italics added). This humility can only be accomplished by first admitting defeat and then accepting that one cannot recover from addiction without assistance from a higher power. In the end, selflessly serving others – Step 12 — is pivotal in maintaining one’s own sobriety and recovery.

4. Suffering Stimulates Compassion

Suffering also invokes compassion for those who are hurting. Every major spiritual tradition emphasizes the importance of consolation, relief, and self-sacrificial outreach for the suffering. Buddhist use two words in reference to compassion. The first is karuna, which is the willingness to bear the pain of another and to practice kindness, affection, and gentleness toward those who suffer. The second term is metta, which is an altruistic kindness and love that is free of any selfish attachment.

Biblical references to compassion abound. According to James 1:27, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.” In Mark 6:34: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he
Psychologists have found that just getting people to think about the suffering of others activates the vagus nerve, which is associated with compassion. Having people read uplifting stories about sacrifice increases empathy to the same degree as various kinds of spiritual practices such as contemplation, prayer, meditation, and yoga. Being outside in a beautiful natural setting also appears to encourage greater compassion. Feelings of awe and wonder about the universe and the miracle of life can increase both sympathy and compassion.

Being rich and powerful may also undermine empathic responses. In a series of fascinating studies, researchers observed the behavior of drivers at a busy four-way intersection. They discovered that drivers of luxury cars were more likely to cut off other motorists rather than wait their turn at the intersection. Luxury car drivers were more likely to speed past a pedestrian trying to use a crosswalk rather than let the pedestrian cross the road. Compared to lower and middle-class participants, wealthy participants also showed little heart rate change when watching a video of children with cancer.

These data suggest that more powerful and wealthy people are less likely to show compassion for the less fortunate than are the weak and the poor. Heroic leaders are somehow able to guard against letting the power of their position compromise their values of compassion and empathy for the least fortunate.

5. Suffering Promotes Social Union and Collective Action

Sigmund Freud wrote, “We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so forlornly unhappy as when we have lost our love object or its love.” It is clear that Freud viewed social relations as the cause of suffering. In contrast, the spiritual view of suffering reflects the opposite position, namely, that suffering is actually the cause of our social relations. Suffering brings people together and is much better than joy at creating bonds among group members.

Psychologist Stanley Schachter told his research participants that they were about to receive painful electric shocks. Before participating in the study, they were asked to choose one of two waiting rooms in which to sit. Participants about to receive shocks were much more likely to choose the waiting room with people in it compared to the empty room. Schachter concluded that misery loves company.

Schachter then went a step further and asked a different group of participants, also about to receive the shocks, if they would prefer to wait in a room with other participants who were about to receive shocks, or a room with participants who would not be receiving shocks. Schachter found that participants about to receive shocks much preferred the room with others who were going to share the same fate. His conclusion: misery doesn’t love any kind of company; misery loves miserable company.

Effective leaders intuitively know how to use suffering to rally people behind a cause. This leadership skill can be used to achieve evil ends, as when Adolf Hitler roused the German people to action after their nation suffered from the aftermath of the first world war. Leadership that uses suffering to achieve a moral or higher purpose can
be said to be heroic leadership. Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt were masters at capitalizing on the suffering of British and American citizens to bolster resilience and in-group morale. Suffering can be the glue that binds and heals after everything has seemingly shattered.

Suffering can also mobilize people. The suffering of impoverished Americans during the Great Depression enabled Franklin Roosevelt to implement his New Deal policies and programs. Later, during World War II, both he and Churchill cited the suffering of both citizens and soldiers to promote the rationing of sugar, butter, meat, tea, biscuits, coffee, canned milk, firewood, and gasoline.

In North America, African-Americans were subjugated by European-Americans for centuries, and from this suffering emerged the heroic leadership of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson, among others. The suffering of women inspired Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and a host of other heroic activists to promote the women’s suffrage movement.

6. Suffering Instills Meaning and Purpose

The sixth and final benefit of suffering resides in the meaning and purpose that suffering imparts to the sufferer. Many spiritual traditions underscore the role of suffering in bestowing a sense of significance and worth to life. In Islam, the faithful are asked to accept suffering as Allah’s will and to submit to it as a test of faith. Followers are cautioned to avoid questioning or resisting the suffering; one simply endures it with the assurance that Allah never asks for more than one can handle.

For Christians, countless scriptural passages emphasize discernment of God's will to gain an understanding of suffering or despair. Suffering is endowed with meaning when it is attached to a perception of a divine calling in one's life or a belief that all events can be used to fulfill God’s greater and mysterious purpose.

Friedrich Nietzsche once observed that “to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering”. Psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl suggested that a search for meaning transforms suffering into a positive, life-altering experience: “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice…. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has a meaning” (145). It appears that the search for meaning not only alleviates suffering; the absence of meaning can cause suffering.

The ability to derive meaning from suffering is a hallmark characteristic of heroism in myths and legends. Comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949) discovered that all great hero tales from around the globe share a common structure, which Campbell called the hero monomyth. A key component of the monomyth is the hero’s ability to endure suffering and to triumph over it. Heroes discover, or recover, an important inner quality that plays a pivotal role in producing a personal transformation that enables the hero to rise about the suffering and prevail.

Suffering is one of many recurring phenomena found in classic hero tales. Other phenomena endemic to hero tales include love, mystery, eternity, infinity, God, paradox, meaning, and sacrifice. Richard Rohr calls these phenomena transrational
experiences. An experience is considered transrational when it defies logical analysis and can only be understood (or best understood) in the context of a good narrative. We can better understand the underlying meaning of suffering within an effective story.

The legendary poet William Wordsworth must have been intuitively aware of the transrational nature of suffering, sacrifice, and the infinite when he penned the following line: “Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark, and shares the nature of infinity.” Joseph Campbell connected the dots between suffering and people’s search for meaning. According to Campbell, the hero’s journey is “the pivotal myth that unites the spiritual adventure of ancient heroes with the modern search for meaning.”

**Conclusion**

For an individual or a group to move forward or progress, something unpleasant must be endured (suffering) or something pleasant must be given up (sacrifice). Humanity’s most effective and inspiring leaders have sustained immense suffering, made harrowing sacrifices, or both. These leaders’ suffering and sacrifice set them apart from the masses of people who deny, decry, or defy these seemingly unsavory experiences.

Great heroic leaders understand that suffering redeems, augments, defines, humbles, elevates, mobilizes, and enriches us. These enlightened leaders not only refuse to allow suffering and sacrifice to defeat them; they use suffering and sacrifice as assets to be mined for psychological advantages and inspiration. Individuals who successfully plumb the spiritual treasures of suffering and sacrifice have the wisdom and maturity to evolve into society’s most transcendent leaders.

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**Bibliography**


Fred Rogers: Love, Wisdom, and Compassion For All Ages

By Scott T. Allison

About 25 years ago, a friend of ours was in the throes of a major depression. As she lay listlessly on the couch one day, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders, she flipped through the television channels and came across the classic children’s television program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Struck by the show’s gentle,
loving host Fred Rogers, our friend penned a letter to him, expressing her grief and hopelessness, but also her appreciation for briefly lifting her spirits with his message of love and hope. A week later, to her great surprise, she received a hand-written letter back from Rogers, who thanked her for writing and gave her encouragement and support. To this day this framed letter from Rogers hangs on the wall of our friend’s home, and she remains deeply grateful to him for reaching out to her during the most difficult time in her life.

Not surprisingly, Fred Rogers wrote many such letters to his fans. In an age when celebrity misbehavior and drug use capture most of the headlines, Rogers was a true gentleman whose primary mission in life was to enrich the lives of other people, especially children. As a young man, Rogers noticed during television's infancy how the new medium was being misused. “I went into television because I hated it so,” said Rogers. “I thought there was some way of using this fabulous instrument to be of nurture to those who would watch and listen.”

Rogers developed a show in 1968 that helped children build self-esteem, conquer their fears, and love others. *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* encouraged children to become happy and productive citizens. It was the longest-running program on public television, lasting 33 years and finally ending its run in 2001. Rogers was an American icon of children’s education and a symbol of compassion and morality. He became such a beloved figure that one day, when the media reported that his car had been stolen, the thieves immediately returned the car to the exact spot from which it was taken, with an apology on the dashboard. It read, “If we’d known it was yours, we never would have taken it.”

While accepting a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 1997 Emmy Awards Show, Rogers approached the microphone and said, “All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are. Ten seconds of silence.” Tears began to flow from the eyes of many in the audience. Rogers finally looked up from his watch and softly said, “Whomever you are thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they’ve made.” Actor LeVar Burton recalls a time when Rogers was invited to a gathering at the White House, and he asked everybody, including President Clinton, to close their eyes for 60 seconds and think about someone who had helped shape them. Again people wept. “Fred felt it was critical to acknowledge those who have helped us come into being.”
Rogers was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002, and one year later, after Rogers passed away at the age of 74, the U.S. Senate approved a resolution to commemorate his life. It read, in part, “Through his spirituality and placid nature, Mr. Rogers was able to reach out to our nation’s children and encourage each of them to understand the important role they play in their communities and as part of their families. More importantly, he did not shy away from dealing with difficult issues of death and divorce but rather encouraged children to express their emotions in a healthy, constructive manner, often providing a simple answer to life’s hardships.”

To the very end of his life, Rogers encouraged people to love one another and to appreciate the deep connections all humans have with each other. Shortly before he died, while giving a commencement speech at Dartmouth College in 2002, he said, “Our world hangs like a magnificent jewel in the vastness of space. Every one of us is a part of that jewel, a facet of that jewel. And in the perspective of infinity, our differences are infinitesimal. We are intimately related.”

This past year, a documentary entitled Won’t You Be My Neighbor? based on the life and legacy of Rogers, was released to critical acclaim and became the highest grossing biodoc film of all time. It has also been announced that Tom Hanks will portray Rogers in an upcoming biographical film entitled You Are My Friend.

Growth, Wholeness, and Intelligence are at the Core of the Universal Journey

A central part of Joseph Campbell’s (1949) genius resided in his ability to see a universal journey among all the great heroes of mythology across the globe and throughout all time periods in human history.

Swimme and Tucker (2011) take this universality to its furthest extreme in suggesting that the hero’s journey and the human journey – which are arguably one and the same – represent a microcosm of the journey of the entire known physical universe.
They propose that “the universe is best understood not as discrete incidents of evolution, but as a whole unfolding dynamic and developmental process, which is a like a story” (Mowe 2017, p. 48-50). Swimme and Tucker boldly set out to “create a new genre of a fusion of science and humanities”:

“We’re not looking at science as just facts or numbers or equations or graphs, but science in relation to the humanities – literature, history, art, music, philosophy, and religion and so on. These are the disciplines that have tried to understand how humans have lived in the past and how might we live more integrally in the future. So Journey of the Universe is a conscious fusion of fact, metaphor, and meaning.”

Swimme and Tucker (2011, p. 15) first examine the origins of the physical universe, including the Big Bang and the creation of galaxies and solar systems. Patterns among physical entities, both immensely small and infinitesimally small, show emergent qualities that are reminiscent of the hero’s journey — birth, expansion, calamity, contraction, and then repetition of the cycle. The authors argue that the universe’s “overall journey depends, in critical moments, upon the transformations taking place in the microcosm.” These transformations, moreover, show the same tendencies toward integrated wholeness that every hero shows on the classic journey: “To commune may be one of the deepest tendencies in the universe.” (p. 51).

The Universe is drawn toward learning, growing, and truth-seeking, with the ultimate truth pointing toward wholeness: “The ancient process of evolution can be understood as a higher-level form of ‘learning’” (p. 60). For example, the entire process of adaptation and memory in animal life is responsible for the ability to turn breath into energy and to transform food into flesh. “Life adapts. Life remembers. Life learns” (p. 61).

This inherent drive to learn is the key toward achieving wholeness and communion. According to Swimme and Tucker, “Humans have at their disposal vast storehouses of learning accumulated and refined over millennia in written and oral traditions. There is little validity to the idea that humans are isolated individuals, for each of us arises out of an ocean of experience and understanding acquired by our species as a whole.” (italics added, p. 90).

The pervasive rhythmic cycle of nature, especially that of expansion and contraction, ensures that death and life form an intelligent whole. Swimme and Tucker (2011) review many recurring patterns of growth and development in the physical universe that map onto patterns found in humanity. The authors pose a number of questions: Does deep geological and cosmological time offer us useful insights into human meaning and purpose? How can the rhythms of the physical world inform us of our own human destiny? “Can it be that our small self dies into the large self of the universe? Are our passions and dreams, as well as our anguish and loss, woven into the fabric of the universe itself?” (Swimme & Tucker 2011, p. 69).

These ideas are reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of *sympatheia*, which refers
to the phenomenon of all beings on earth and in the heavens as inextricably linked together to form parts of a whole. Sages over several millennia have sensed the centrality of sympatheia in the cosmos, and Swimme and Tucker (2011) invoke Zhang Zai’s Western Inscription from the 11th century as one telling example:

*Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companion.*

Swimme and Tucker (2011, p. 109) suggest that the human journey is a product of deep time, originating with the Big Bang and marked for eternity. “We can begin to reflect on the way in which time, in a cosmological sense, is the creativity of the universe itself… We live not in any mechanical time but in this enveloping cosmological time. *We live in that time when Earth itself begins its adventure of conscious self-awareness.*”

Swimmer and Tucker (2011, p. 112) further suggest that our purpose may be “to drink so deeply of the powers of the universe that we become the human form of the universe.” Human being may be answering a call to “become not just nation-state people, but universe people…. knowing how we belong and where we belong so that we enhance the flourishing of the Earth community” (p. 113). Swimme and Tucker then make the leap from the universality of the journey to human well-being. First, the authors emphasize the centrality of storytelling in mapping out the realities of the physical universe as well as the human world. “We have discovered the ongoing story of the universe, a story that we tell, but a story that is also telling us” (p. 114).

According to the Swimme and Tucker, the Earth has given rise “to the possibility of an empathetic being who could flow into and become one with the intimate feelings of any being. Our human destiny is to become the heart of the universe that embraces the whole of the Earth community… That is the direction of our becoming more fully human” (p. 115). From this perspective, the connection to well-being is a logical one: “*Our human role is to deepen our consciousness in resonance with the dynamics of the fourteen-billion-year creative event in which we find ourselves…. Our role is to provide the hands and hearts that will enable the universe’s energies to come forth in a new order of well-being*” (p. 117).

All heroes begin their journey missing an important inner quality that they must either recover or discover during their heroic quest (Allison & Smith 2015). Swimme and Tucker (2011) propose that creativity may be humanity’s missing inner quality. Their analysis implies that life on our planet has always been on a hero’s journey and that it has relied on extraordinary creativity for survival and well-being:

“We find ourselves inside an amazing drama filled with danger and risk but also stunning creativity. Two billion years ago, when the [Earth’s] atmosphere became so filled with oxygen, all of life was deteriorating. The only way for the life of that time to survive was to burrow deep into the mud at the bottom of the oceans. The future of Earth seemed bleak. And yet, in the midst of that crisis a new kind of cell emerged, one that was not destroyed by oxygen, but was in fact energized by it. Because of this miracle of creativity, life exploded with an exuberance never seen before…. It is the nature of the universe to more forward between great tensions, between dynamic opposing forces.”
The idea that creativity is essential for heroic transformation is consistent with the metaphor of heroic imagination put forth by Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011). At the human level, heroic imagination “can be seen as mindset, a collection of attitudes about helping others in need, beginning with caring for others in compassionate ways, but also moving toward a willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause” (p. 111). From this metaphorical perspective, unleashing the heroic imagination involves igniting people’s drive to create the best life for themselves and others.

Such heroic imagination implies creativity borne of non-dual thinking (Rohr 2009) and transdisciplinary thinking (Efthimiou 2017a, 2017b; Efthimiou & Allison 2017). Swimme and Tucker (2011) have extended this metaphor of imagination to include the idea that it is embedded in the universe. As products of the universe, the human race has a built-in predisposition toward fulfilling its heroic personal imperative to imagine and create heroic growth for each individual, for all of humanity, and for the planet and cosmos in which we live.

Leading scientists are coming to embrace this direction of the universe. Celebrated physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson once observed: “The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known that we were coming.”

Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, moreover, has said: “We are part of this universe; we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts, is that the universe is in us.” The journey we’re all on is the universal journey.

References


Can You Try to Become a Hero, or Does it Just Happen to You?

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By Scott T. Allison

An online conversation with my dear friends Olivia Efthimiou, Ellie Jacques, and Sylvia Gray, got me thinking about whether we can choose to become a hero and how much fate, luck, or circumstances — forces beyond our control — just make heroism happen.

It’s an issue about heroism that is both psychological and philosophical. Can we receive heroism training and do what it takes to transform ourselves into heroes? Or is heroism something that is “done unto us”?

Way back in 1966, a highly underrated psychologist named Leslie Farber noted that most of the best psychological states that we strive for cannot be “willed” by us. These are things like happiness, wisdom, courage, resilience, and even a good night’s sleep. For example, I can decide to read books but I can’t decide to be wise. I can do fun activities but I can’t “will” happiness. I can go to bed at 11pm but I can’t “will” myself to sleep.

I would say the same is true for transforming ourselves into heroes. We can do things to make heroic transformation more likely, such as attend Hero Round Table conferences, participate in hero training, or engage in mindful meditation — in much the same way we can make sleep more likely by going to bed.

But like falling asleep, we can’t “will” heroism.

Those Thai Navy Seals who saved the soccer boys in the cave recently didn’t become life-saving heroes until circumstances presented themselves that allowed for heroism to happen. Those Seals had the training and were ready, for sure. But most Seals don’t save a soccer team. (And we should be thankful that most training goes to waste — imagine the bloody carnage of a world where every trained hero uses their training)

In short, there are some “end states” that we cannot “will” to happen — they have to happen as byproducts of various behaviors, experiences, and processes, some of which we can control and some we cannot.

One of my favorite quotes was penned by Georges Bataille: “Mere words have...
something of a quicksand about them. Only experience is the rope that is thrown to us — and we must grab that rope even if, and maybe especially if, the experience is painful.

By the way, Farber says that we live in a society that confuses these “two realms of will”, resulting in rampant anxiety and depression in people who try so hard to make some wonderful things happen that cannot happen “directly”. So think twice before making either happiness or heroism your goal.

The hero’s journey “happens” to us; it’s not something that we plan. In fact, if we were in charge of the planning, we’d try to avoid the painful journey altogether! The ego cannot be in charge of our destiny. We have to wait for heroism to happen, and sometimes it never will. Which is okay.

Yes, we can decide to do things that make heroic growth more likely. These things include taking CPR classes, getting EMT training, engaging in spiritual practices, and enrolling in hero training programs. But let’s be honest — participating in these activities does not guarantee that you will become a hero.

Perhaps the title of this essay shouldn’t be, “Can You Try to Become a Hero, or Does it Just Happen to You?” Rather, the truth may be closer to, “You Can Try to Become a Hero, and it Might Just Happen to You.” You can’t plan for it, but you can prepare for it.

Knowing all this, I’m doing all I can to prepare for heroism, whether it happens or not. And so should you.

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**Powerful Hero Archetypes in Game of Thrones**

By Scott T. Allison

Since the advent of language, human beings have been magnetically drawn to tales of inspiring heroes. The powerful allure of heroism is wired into us, and science appears to support that claim. Hero stories fascinate us because we are all potential heroes, and we're called to follow the same heroic journey as the protagonists in the stories we love.
*Game of Thrones*, one of the most highly acclaimed series in television history, owes much of its success to its effective portrayal of heroes. There are at least five deep hero archetypes that *Game of Thrones* uses to create alluring heroes. These archetypes are: (1) the underdog hero, (2) the hero’s secret royal heritage, (3) the hero’s redemption, (4) the heroic transformation, and (5) the hero’s mentor.

**1. The Underdog Hero.** There are over a half-dozen characters in the series that win our hearts because of their ability to overcome their underdog status. Tyrion Lannister is a dwarf whom everyone seems to underestimate. He uses his wit, intelligence, and wisdom to survive and thrive in *Game of Thrones*’ harsh world. Jon Snow is the bastard child of Ned Stark, a status that relegates him to third-class citizenship, yet his overall goodness and courage allow him to climb the social ladder.

Two legitimate Stark children, Sansa and Arya, are diminished and underestimated due to the lowly status of women in Westeros, yet their resilience and cunning enable them to overcome evil. Samwell Tarly is at first a lovable coward whom everyone dismisses but he evolves into a brave and stalwart member of the night’s watch. Daenerys Targaryen is, at the outset of *Game of Thrones*, mere breeding stock for the Dothrakis yet she emerges as the most powerful ruler of the seven kingdoms.

**2. The Hero’s Secret Royal Heritage.** In many classic fairy tales, the hero is oblivious to their true special identity, which is often that of a king, queen, prince, or princess. Jon Snow suffers the status of an outcast, and unbeknownst to everyone he is actually the true heir to the iron throne.

As mentioned, Daenerys at first is nothing more than a sex slave while her true identity is Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Protector of the Realm, Queen of Meereen, Yunkai and Astapor, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Mother of Dragons, The Unburnt Breaker of Chains, Lady of Dragonstone, and more.

Bran Stark has been reduced to a crippled boy but soon discovers his true identity as the three-eyed raven who can see the past, present, and future. It should be noted that the “third eye” is considered a sign of deep enlightenment in Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist cultures. Bran grows from nothingness into omniscience.

**3. The Redeemed Hero.** Stories of redemption abound in *Game of Thrones*. One notable redeemed hero is Theon Greyjoy, an arrogant jerk who develops severe PTSD after enduring lengthy mental and physical torture at the hands of Ramsey Bolton. Humbled almost beyond repair, Greyjoy slowly regains his confidence and appears to be climbing to the status of a leader as the series enters its final season.

Jaime Lannister’s redemption looked next to impossible after he shoved young Bran Stark to his seeming doom in the series’ first episode. Seemingly irredeemable, Jaime has proven himself to be one of the more loyal and honorable Lannisters. In fact, he could be the only person willing and able to stop his evil sister Cersei. The Hound, who was once a vicious killer, is another character who appears to be slowly carving out a redemptive heroic path for himself.
4. Heroic Transformation. During their journeys, heroes undergo significant mental, moral, emotional, spiritual, and physical transformations. The two Stark sisters, Arya and Sansa, each undergo transformative arcs. Sansa grows in confidence and wisdom, whereas Arya grows into a fierce and daring swordsman. Jon Snow, too, evolves from a mere guardian of the wall into a wise king of the north. Bran, of course, undergoes a striking spiritual transformation.

Theon Greyjoy transforms twice, first from an arrogant lord into an emotionally destroyed cipher, and then from that cipher into a newly empowered lord. Daenerys owes her remarkable transformation to an unnamed servant to Drogo, a woman who teaches the future Queen how to empower herself in her marriage. This act of mentorship sends Daenerys on her heroic journey.

5. The Hero’s Mentor. In classic hero mythology, heroes receive assistance for someone older, wiser, or unusual in some respect. Daenerys has had several mentors giving her advice over the years, the two most prominent being Jorah Mormont and Tyrion Lannister. Jon Snow was mentored by Ned Stark, Davos Seaworth, and Maester Aemon. Snow himself has served as a mentor to Samwell and to Theon.

There have been plenty of dark mentors, too — people who appear to mean well but are intent on steering the hero down a dark path. Sansa Stark’s dark mentor is Petyr ‘Littlefinger’ Baelish, who manipulates her into making several bad decisions. King Tommen’s dark mentor is the High Sparrow who steers Tommen toward betraying his wife and his mother. Some mentors are a mix of good and bad, as when Arya Stark is trained by the assassin Jaquen H’ghar, the mysterious man of many faces who teaches Arya important skills yet almost destroys her in the process.

Game of Thrones has won 39 Emmy Awards for a reason – the series has crafted highly memorable characters who have undergone dramatic heroic arcs. We've reviewed five ways that Game of Thrones has used powerful hero archetypes in portraying extraordinary heroism. We look forward to the series’ eighth and final season when all these hero journeys reach their natural completion.
by Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals

In our Mother’s Day blog, we noted our research finding that people listed their mothers as heroes more often than any other person. Fathers were a close second. Why are parents viewed as so heroic? Developmental psychologists tell us that the relationship we have with our parents is the first significant relationship of our lives. It is a relationship that indelibly shapes our values, our aspirations, and our future behavior. Thus when we experience successes in our careers and in our personal lives, it is not surprising that we attribute those triumphs, at least in part, to our parents.

The origin of Father’s Day is not entirely clear, but there are several fascinating possibilities. Babylonian scholars have discovered a message carved in clay by a young man named Elmesu roughly 4,000 years ago. In the message, Elmesu wishes his father good health and a long life. Some believe this ancient message represents evidence of an established tradition of honoring fathers, but there is little evidence to support a specially designated Father’s Day until modern times.

There is some debate about the origin of the Father’s Day that we celebrate today. Some claim that a West Virginian named Grace Golden Clayton deserves the credit. In 1907, Clayton was grieving the loss of her own father when a tragic mine explosion in Monongah killed 361 men, 250 of whom were fathers. Clayton requested that her church establish a day to honor these lost fathers and to help the children of the affected families heal emotionally. The date she suggested was July 8th, the anniversary of her own father’s death.

Still others believe that the first Father’s Day was held on June 19, 1910 through the efforts of Sonora Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington. Inspired by the newly recognized Mother’s Day, Dodd felt strongly that fatherhood needed recognition as well. Her own father, William Smart, was a Civil War veteran who was left to raise his family alone when his wife died giving birth to their sixth child. Dodd was the only daughter, and she helped her father raise her younger brothers, including her new infant brother Marshall.

Whereas Mother’s Day was met with instant enthusiasm, Father’s Day was initially met with scorn and derision. Few people believed that fathers wanted, or needed, any acknowledgement. It wasn’t until 1972 that President Richard Nixon made Father’s Day an official holiday. Today the holiday is widely celebrated in the month of June by more than 52 countries.
Why are fathers heroes? The respondents in our survey listed two main reasons. First, fathers are given credit for being great teachers and mentors. They teach us how to fix a flat tire, shoot a basketball, and write a resume. Fathers are less emotional than mothers, but they lead by example and devote time demonstrating life skills to us. Former governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, once said, “I talk and talk and talk, and I haven’t taught people in 50 years what my father taught by example in one week.”

Second, fathers are great providers and protectors. Our respondents told us that their fathers were heroes in their commitment to provide for their families, often at great sacrifice. Many fathers work at two or more jobs outside the home to ensure that their families have adequate food and shelter. Fathers also provide us with a sense of safety and protection. Sigmund Freud once wrote, “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection.”

On this Father’s Day, we wish all fathers, and all men who serve as father figures, all the kudos they so richly deserve. Happy Father’s Day!

Do you have a hero that you would like us to profile? Please send your suggestions to Scott T. Allison (sallison@richmond.edu) or to George R. Goethals (ggoethal@richmond.edu).

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It is unusually well done for several reasons: • It is a splendid read compactly covering the topic of Heroes and Villains in 207 pages. • The book cites numerous psychological studies yet understandable to the lay reader. It does tilt slightly leftward in its depiction of social change and list of heroic figures but also includes heroes like Ernest Shackleton, Booker T. Washington, Sully Sullenberger, those who neither the left or right would dispute. • Scott Allison and George Goethals have touched all the bases, in a largely balanced way.