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2020

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/109/

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AUDREY HEPBURN: HOW A MISFORTUNATE GIRL TRANSFORMED INTO A SOCIAL HERO

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Audrey Hepburn was born in Brussels, Belgium, on May 4, 1929, and died six weeks later from whooping cough. Her heart stopped after a bad coughing fit, only to start beating again when her mother began spanking her. Unfortunately, this was only the start of Hepburn's difficult childhood. At the age of five she was separated from her mother and two brothers so that she could attend a boarding school in England where her father worked as a recruiter for the British Union of Fascists. At the age of six she suffered the worst pain of all when her father, who had made little effort to visit her, officially abandoned the family.

At the age of ten she was flown back to her home in Holland in order to escape World War II, only to have Germany invade and occupy Holland less than a year later. At the age of fourteen she fought through anemia, asthma, and malnutrition when all food imports into Holland halted. The moment that stuck with her throughout her life, though, came in the form of Holland's liberation on May 4, 1945, on her sixteenth birthday (Paris, 1996). This escape from suffering hurled her forward on her heroic journey.

This chapter will offer an analysis of how the misfortunes Audrey Hepburn endured in her youth eventually led her to become a humanitarian hero. Although Hepburn is best known as the leading woman in movies such as *Roman Holiday*, *Sabrina*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, she eventually cast aside the spoils of her fame in order to pursue humanitarian work for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The work she did to help disadvantaged children in underdeveloped countries elevated her to the status of hero. The story of her transformation is a fascinating one that spans her lifetime, from six weeks after her birth right up to her death. It seems fair, then, to present her transformation chronologically, describing how each stage in her life eventually contributed to her heroic status.

In this chapter, I examine Hepburn's life with regard to the three basic parts of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey: departure, initiation, and return. The hero's journey is a blueprint for a heroic life that maps out the steps every hero takes on their transition from ordinary to heroic. By breaking her life down into parts and applying this structure to Hepburn's life, her transformation becomes very apparent. It will show how Hepburn's story fits together with stories of other classic heroes throughout the ages (Campbell, 1949). Her story will also demonstrate her relation to the great eight traits of heroes as described by Allison and Goethals (2011), traits that all heroes of fiction and in real life share in common. Specifically, Hepburn's charisma, selflessness, and caring nature, represented through her fame, humility, and empathetic capabilities, all demonstrate why this actress and humanitarian deserves to be considered a hero.

DESCRIBING THE HERO

It is important to note, first and foremost, why Audrey Hepburn is a hero. According to Allison, Goethals, and Kramer (2017), “Heroes undergo a personal transformation that includes the development of a motive to improve the lives of others.” Before this transformation took place, Hepburn began her long career in Hollywood when she was cast as the star in the movie *Roman Holiday*. Even during these early years of her Hollywood career she participated in humanitarian efforts, such as her work as a radio narrator for UNICEF in the 1950s, but it was clear that she had not yet turned into a selfless hero. Over the years her motive for heroism developed into a driving force that caused her to give up acting and devote herself to a new career in humanitarian work as a Goodwill Ambassador of UNICEF (Hepburn Ferrer, 2005).

Based on Allison and Goethals' (2013) definition of heroic leadership, Hepburn can be classified as a hero, but not how one might initially think. Her motives for kindness developed slowly over time. Audrey Hepburn's heroic tendencies stemmed from the adversity she endured as a child. Her childhood experiences were only enough to plant the moral values she held, but through the influence of mentors and circumstances her motive and capability to do good grew exponentially. According to Allison and Goethals (2017), this kind of transformation is an emotional one, and it refers to “transformations of the heart, and they include heroes who, through adversity, grow in courage, resilience, and empathy.” Because of World War II, Hepburn learned what it was like to be a starving child, inspiring her to eventually devote her career to ensuring that children would not have to endure her same sufferings.

Departure

Departure in the context of the hero's journey corresponds to when the hero leaves her ordinary, familiar world and enters an uncomfortable, unknown one (Campbell, 1949). Hepburn's departure is rooted in the heroic arc of stagnation to growth discussed by Allison and Goethals (2017), which states that a heroic transformation can occur when a person is forced out of their comfort zone, making them realize their true potential. From a very young age, Hepburn dreamed of becoming, and trained to become, a prima ballerina. She told her

biographer Barry Paris (1996), “I was going to be a ballerina. I was very fanatic about it.” However, because of the physical consequences of the malnutrition she suffered during World War II, she was told that she could never fulfill her dream (Ferrer, 2008). This news was devastating to her, but it forced her to choose a new path that she had never considered before, a path that eventually led her toward helping disadvantaged children. This section of the chapter will discuss how Hepburn’s forced departure from her dream and set path eventually led to her moral fulfillment, and how it relates to her importance as a hero.

Stagnation to Growth

The concept of stagnation to growth relies heavily on how disconnected the hero feels from their ordinary world (Allison et al., 2017). Hepburn’s ordinary world was that of becoming a prima ballerina, almost to the point where it became an obsession. A ballerina was all she could see herself as becoming, having idolized ballerinas and having taken classes since she was twelve. It is easy to imagine, however, that if she had been allowed to pursue her dream of becoming a ballerina she would have been sent on a different, less heroic path. Paris (1996) wrote that during her ballet years, “the older she got, the more she disliked what she saw in the mirror: Ballerinas were slender with perfect features. She was chubby. She thought her eyes were too big. She hated her irregular teeth.” Hepburn herself said “I had an enormous complex about my looks.... I thought I was ugly and I was afraid no one would marry me” (Paris, 1996). Hepburn’s ordinary world was one based on vanity and jealousy.

It might have been happy serendipity that forced Hepburn out of her ordinary world, but after she learned that her dream could never come true, she still felt lost. This sort of sudden separation from what was expected is obviously a part of stagnation to growth, but Hepburn’s journey was jumpstarted because of her resilience. Others may have settled with living an underwhelming life after having learned their dream could never come true, but Hepburn put what she already knew to good use and went hard at work in the cabaret show *High Button Shoes*. Her strong efforts and unbreakable charm are what stimulated her growth after her departure from the ordinary world, leading her to meet a mentor who would provide her with her first break (Paris, 1996).

Humility at a Young Age

Hepburn suffered through and witnessed the worst of humanity during World War II, but this suffering turns out to be the basis of her heroic transformation. Because of her misfortune, Hepburn was able to understand other people's misery for the rest of her life. Allison and Setterberg (2016) describe six benefits to suffering and make the claim that suffering is the necessary ingredient for heroism. In relation to Hepburn, suffering's ability to encourage humility is most important because it explains the origins of her trait of selflessness.

According to Allison and Setterberg (2016), suffering "doesn't accomplish anything tangible but creates space for learning and love." Hepburn often put learning and loving above herself during her humanitarian career, and this notion was instilled in her from a young age. Hepburn often put her humanitarian work above her Hollywood career and even herself. This sentiment is best expressed when she was asked about her stardom: "If people are still interested in me, if my name makes them listen to what I want to say, then that is wonderful. But I am not interested in promoting Audrey Hepburn these days. I am interested in telling the world about how they can help in Ethiopia, and why I came away feeling optimistic" (UNICEF, 1988). I would argue, however, that suffering itself was not enough to instill her with the purpose of putting her needs below others' needs. The sensation of liberation that she felt when the Germans were driven out of Holland was just as important as the suffering she endured. The resolution to her suffering is what drove her to instill the same feeling of liberation in children all over the world.

Hepburn as an Underdog

Vandello et al. (2017) describe the importance that an underdog has in the realm of heroes. Underdogs become successful even though they have faced great adversity. Because of their rags to riches stories, underdogs are much easier to relate to, making their stories more inspirational when compared to other heroes. Audrey Hepburn, going from a misfortunate young girl to an accomplished humanitarian, fits this category well. Often during her life, though, her status as an underdog is not only inspirational to others, but it enhances her ability to do great things. Relating to her trait of caring, being

an underdog gives Hepburn a unique position as a hero. Not only can others look up to her and relate to her humble beginnings, but her humble beginnings often allowed her to relate to those less fortunate. This, again, relates to the six benefits of suffering, this time focusing on suffering's ability to stimulate compassion (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Many times in her life, Hepburn used her understanding of what it was like to be a starving child to expand her capacity for empathy.

Even as a traditional underdog, Audrey Hepburn is peculiar and worth analyzing. Her inspiration is not as widespread as it should be, most likely because her career as an actress outshines her career as a humanitarian. However, even her Hollywood career is not as inspirational as it could be. Many will remember her for her various starring roles in films but not nearly as many will point out how unlikely it was for her to get those roles after her childhood trauma. Her downplayed inspiration, then, may be because of her trait of selflessness. Hepburn's legacy, then, lies within the public. Since she would not promote herself, it is up to all of us to share her inspiring story.

Initiation

Initiation refers to the various trials and challenges the hero encounters after her initial departure from the ordinary world (Campbell, 1949). This portion of the chapter will describe the conditions that came to nurture Hepburn's moral values, eventually leading to her heroic status. Truthfully, she faced few trials once her acting career started, but she also did not fail to learn from the friends she made during this time. She found many people who nurtured the best within her, reinforcing her transition into heroism.

Call to Career

Dik et al. (2017) describe the different ways in which a hero is called to their profession, either through transcendent calling, calling through meaning and purpose, or calling for the greater good. Audrey Hepburn's career can be split into two categories: her acting career and her humanitarian career. Her later years were defined by the latter, which was inspired by a call of greater good, whereas her initial call toward acting came from a transcendent, outer force.

The transcendent call to a career comes from a force outside the self. This call is normally spiritual in nature, but often the transcendent source can be another human being. Hepburn's work at High Button Shoes opened the door to small acting jobs in movies. After she took a small part in the movie *Monte Carlo Baby*, the famous French writer Colette took an interest in her. Colette saw Hepburn and immediately went on to cast her as the main role of Gigi in her Broadway play (Paris 1996). Colette, in this case, was a transcendent source that transported Hepburn on her path towards stardom. Without her,

Hepburn would never have discovered her talent, even saying to Colette when she asked her to play the role of Gigi, "I'm sorry, Madame, but it is impossible. I wouldn't be able to, because I can't act." Despite Hepburn's lack of confidence in her abilities, she was cast, and time with Colette turned out to be more of a trial than mentorship. Tensions were high during Hepburn's time in Gigi, as many of the actors and actresses around her were being fired. Hepburn learned to deal with the tension, though, by constantly practicing and focusing on her dancing (Ferrer, 2008).

Hepburn's call to her career is an important aspect of her transformation because of the new and important role in which she found herself. This was just her start, though, and her later work would only further her moral growth and her capability to do good. This personal evolution, in large part, was due to various friends she met in film.

Friends and Mentors

According to Campbell (1949) and Allison and Smith (2015), people cannot transform into heroes unless they receive assistance from friends, allies, and mentor figures. The people that helped Hepburn realize her passion played an even bigger role in catalyzing her transformation toward heroism. The first person that showed her this kindness was director William Wyler. While casting for the movie *Roman Holiday*, what would be Hepburn's first starring role in Hollywood, Wyler appreciated Hepburn as an underdog and cast her over already respected actress Elizabeth Taylor. The chance that Wyler took with Hepburn when he could have gone for the safer choice in Taylor meant a lot to Hepburn, leading to a lifelong friendship between the two (Paris, 1996).

The next friend and mentor to facilitate Hepburn's growth was her co-star in *Roman Holiday*, Gregory Peck. After having met Hepburn, Peck insisted that she got top billing on all advertisements for the movie. Peck knew Hepburn had what it took to be a star, and he knew that he'd look like a fool if he tried to overshadow her. This act of kindness and recognition of her talent, again, led to another lifelong friendship that fueled Hepburn's self-confidence and personal growth (Ferrer, 2008).

Many other friends and mentors can be found throughout Hepburn's life, but none are more important than Hubert De Givenchy whom she met on the set of *Funny Face*. As head designer of the lavish costumes in the movie, he contributed significantly to setting the style of each scene. As Hepburn's friend, he would go on to establish the style that skyrocketed her career. After working together on *Funny Face*, he and Hepburn stayed friends throughout her life. De Givenchy was responsible for creating the look she was most famous for, her little black dress in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, making her a fashion icon (Paris, 1996).

Overall, the help Hepburn received allowed her the room to expand her morals and elevated her career to the point where she was able to use her influence to help others. If not for the kindness of Wyler and Peck, Hepburn might not have achieved success in Hollywood. Due to their help, though, Hepburn was able to flourish, and she was inspired to show the same kindness to others. Similarly, De Givenchy facilitated the growth of Hepburn's charismatic traits, widening her popularity and influence. All of these actions accumulated to produce the humanitarian hero that Hepburn eventually became.

Return

The return is the part of the hero's journey where the hero uses everything she has learned to help those around her. In a way, the return is a return to the ordinary world, but now with a new moral understanding that will help the hero to do good (Campbell, 1949). For Audrey Hepburn, her return came late in her life, but it came in full force. Her work for her children and children around the world defined her later years, as she used her celebrity status to make a difference in the world (Paris, 1996).

Healing her Childhood Wounds

The return is characterized by the hero going back to the original world from which she came. In Audrey Hepburn's case, the return occurred when she reunited with her father after almost 25 years of separation. Hepburn never knew what became of her father after the war, but that changed when her then husband, Mel Ferrer, reunited the two. Hepburn often called her father's abandonment "the most traumatic event of [her] life," citing it as something she never recovered from (Paris, 1996). Although her father still remained emotionally distant, this reunion marked the beginning of Hepburn connecting her experiences as a child to her now fully developed moral values. After this point, Hepburn's desire to give back to the world is most apparent as her fame and her desire for humanitarian work finally converge.

Semi-Retirement

Not long after reuniting with her father, Hepburn put acting on the backburner in order to focus on her family. Her new role as a mother was another new beginning, as it signaled her priority of putting others above herself. The trauma of her youth, now fully resolved, could be put to good use. Because she wanted to give her children the childhood she was not allowed to have, Hepburn gave up acting for nine years in order to spend time with her two sons in her country home in Switzerland. She only partially went back to work once her sons were happily attending school (Ferrer, 2008).

Hepburn's willingness to step away from her acting career was one of the greatest markers of her heroic transformation. Although her acting career is what set her up to be able to do great things, her withdrawal from it shows that she really did wish for more than fame. She was a humble hero (Worthington & Allison, 2018), and focusing on her children was the start of her emotional transformation. Her strong empathic concerns, especially toward children, gave Hepburn a drive to do more with her life. This aspect of Hepburn's life relates back to Dik et al.'s (2017) notion of being called to a career path. This time, though, Hepburn is called by the greater good. This call is one that comes from the inner desire to bring make the world a better place by doing good to other people. This new call led to Hepburn's truly heroic years: those working for UNICEF.

Humanitarian Work

Audrey Hepburn stated multiple times that her work as a UNICEF International Goodwill Ambassador was what she was most proud of. She was invited to do this work in 1988 along with five other celebrities, in hopes that her influence combined with this work would create a large change in the world. As a Goodwill Ambassador, she traveled to various underdeveloped countries so she could report what she saw back to the United Nations. She traveled to over twenty countries in the four years she worked for UNICEF, often reporting back abysmal conditions in which children were forced to live. Due to her work, the United Nations sent food and supplies to where they needed to go (Hepburn Ferrer, 2005).

For Hepburn, this work was her most important contribution to society, and it marks the end of her heroic transformation. Having transformed herself, she was now committed to promoting the well-being of the world (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018). After living a life based on the misfortune of her youth, Audrey Hepburn became a truly selfless, heroic figure through the help of friendship and extraordinary circumstances. Unfortunately, right as her career as a great hero was starting, she was diagnosed with colon cancer at the age of 63. Even with four months remaining to live, she was still working for UNICEF in Somalia (Hepburn Ferrer, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Audrey Hepburn's early life experiences should have truly limited her heroic potential. The fame she achieved through determination and talent, though inspirational, is hardly heroic at first glance. This fame, though, is what allowed her to make great change in the world. As with many notable heroes, her story is deeply rooted in her humble beginnings (Worthington & Allison, 2018). She made it well known that her passion for saving starving, ill-fated children came from her experiences during World War II, but it would be unfair to say her years as an actress were superficial. She used her luxurious career in Hollywood as a springboard for her fulfilling work with UNICEF. The position her fame put her in allowed her to do more good than someone with less influence. Her story serves as evidence that great financial success in the first part of adult life can

lead to even greater success in heroic endeavors later in adulthood. Audrey Hepburn represents the best of what humanity has to offer. She cherished what liberation felt like when it saved her life as a child to the point where her whole life became a journey to discover how she could give that same liberation to other children around the world.

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