

University of Richmond

From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison

2020

Motivational Heroism: A Phenomenon that Keeps the World Spinning

Lauren A Lambert, *University of Richmond*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/118/

2

MOTIVATIONAL HEROISM: A PHENOMENON THAT KEEPS THE WORLD SPINNING

LAUREN A. LAMBERT

A shiny red tailcoat, white gloves, and a top hat can make any man appear to have the world at his fingertips. Add in a powerful song lyric and dazzling choreography, and suddenly you are presented with a charismatic character that has the capability to win over your heart and mind. P.T. Barnum, most recently depicted in the musical film *The Greatest Showman* by Hugh Jackman, used charm and inspiring lyrics to make the audience and his followers in the film view him as a strong and talented hero. He sings:

“You know you can’t go back again to the world that you were living in, because you’re dreaming with your eyes wide open... so come alive!”

In this lyric, Barnum displays his use of charisma and talent to inspire others to find the hero within themselves, establishing pride and power in

their individuality. Receiving his heroic status was no easy task, however. Phineas Taylor Barnum was born into poverty; he was the son of a tailor and had nothing going for him other than a dream to create an unimaginably brilliant life for a wealthy young girl, Charity, that he was desperately in love with. With this dream as his driving motivation, he worked nail and tooth to make it reality, although arguably often at the expense of others. It is safe to say that P.T. is not a flawless character that embodies what society agrees to be heroic, but he perfectly emulates a sense of motivational transformation within himself and the society around him. His entire childhood was composed of negative event after negative event, and he refused to let that become the norm. As he sought after fame and fortune, P.T. found himself wanting to instill the attitude of not giving up on those around him. By gathering various types of societal misfits to perform in circus acts, he not only was achieving his dream of being financially successful but was also providing historically ostracized types of people with a job and a loving community. As seen above, Barnum encouraged his circus members to “come alive” and celebrate their oddities rather than putting them into shameful hiding (Gracey, 2017).

REALITY DOESN'T SPARKLE AND SING

While entertaining and inspirational, P.T. Barnum's story in *The Greatest Showman* is not meant to provide an authentic nor realistic account of motivational transformation. Negative events happen to everyone in various forms, but they aren't typically coupled by dramatic ballads and Broadway-level performances. Rather, events similar to P.T.'s impoverished childhood may be seen in everyone's own lives in the form of bad breakup, a miserable test failure, the loss of a loved one, or even an experience of violence or assault. Bad things happen to good people consistently and more often than we believe they should. Ruminating on the way in which this world presents such negative events can leave anyone feeling hopeless, empty, and purposeless. Regardless of the weight of the event described as negative, it has the potential to completely alter our lives for the worst. How is there still joy in this overwhelming, terrible world of ours? Is there a way for us all to make diamonds out of dust, to make a pleasant song and dance out of our despair as P.T. did?

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Psychologists study a phenomenon defined as “learned helplessness” that illustrates the way in which individuals sink deeper into despair following negative life events. It was originally discovered as a detrimental behavior within neuropsychological experiments, in which rats already exposed to a negatively stimulating shock did not attempt to escape when given the opportunity a subsequent time. Since the initial discover of this behavior, the phenomenon has been studied in human behavior as well, especially in studies of psychological well-being and depressive symptoms. Following negative life events, especially if the event is one that has been repeated, individuals often give up on trying to better the trajectory of their life, accepting the notion that nothing they do will make their situation better (Nuvvula, 2016). At a personal level, learned helplessness and lack of perceived control within social and emotional situations fosters a harmful downward cycle comprised of diminished self awareness, negative psychosocial well-being, and failing relationships with others. Individuals suffering from learned helplessness do not see any way to reverse the downward spiral in their personal lives, so they give up (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

In creating the learned helplessness theory, Martin Seligman focused on the personal experience of individuals and the way in which the helplessness manifest itself on their experience of future negative events and emotional dysregulation. What is not as commonly addressed, however, is the potential for those internalized beliefs and behaviors to have a profound negative impact on the surrounding world. Imagine an individual that consistently succumbs to surrounding pressures-one that is unable to stand up, be bold, and make personal or relational changes. If the world was populated by individuals suffering from learned helplessness like the one you are picturing, there would be no way to see light at the end of the tunnel. Because it is often a symptom of depressive experiences, the state of learned helplessness is not something that can typically be overcome by pure will. It requires a form of combat from the outside-a form that fosters hope and a desire for change in a time of personal or societal downfall or stagnation.

STAGNATION

As described previously, experiencing consistent negative life events can create a sense of hopelessness and despair, a spiraling negativity and loss of control that never stops moving downwards. This sentiment is widely understood and experienced by anyone that has ever encountered some sort of loss or tragedy. Those same events may also foster a dangerous sense of stagnation rather than downfall, however. Allison and Goethals (2017) explain stagnation as a different transforming outcome that is not necessarily a detrimental downfall but instead one that never reaches its fullness or potential. Remaining stagnant following a journey creates a “reluctant hero,” one that is oblivious to his or her vital role in developing society, choosing to remain comfortable and set in the current ways of the world. Stagnation may be just as detrimental to society as downfall is; it disregards the potential for heroism in anyone and creates a deceptively narrow focus of potential progress or growth. Ignorance is not bliss when it comes to developing heroes, and the motivational hero is a perfect example of how stagnation and hopelessness can be overcome.

MOTIVATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AS A FORM OF COMBAT

Motivation is explained as a desire and urgency to do something that works towards some ends. Intrinsically, individuals may be motivated to accomplish the ends because it is internally pleasurable. Extrinsically, however, they may feel an urge to work for something simply because of the positive consequences that arise from it. Regardless of the intention behind the desire, motivated individuals tend to have steadfast directionality and a defined purpose within their life trajectory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Having motivation, however, is not in and of itself heroic. An individual’s motivations may only satisfy their own self-serving bias or create some sort of temporary pleasure and feeling of accomplishment. The individual’s altered motivations may serve as a precursor to heroism, but he or she only becomes a hero when the positive outcomes of the motivationally-driven actions are evident to the broader world and not just to the individual’s personal development.

Motivational transformation describes the process of individuals developing into heroes by using their experienced negative events as a means to alter the trajectory of their lifetime motivation (Allison & Goethals 2017). Rather than allowing the event to negatively impact their well-being or even pretend that the event happened at all, individuals can become heroes by acknowledging that the event has forever altered their motivations. This change of motives into ones of heroic characteristics serves to counteract the negative event and the emotions that it caused. Overcoming the adversity can in and of itself be a heroic act, allowing those in similar situations to learn from the transformation of one who has overcome, instilling in others a desire to grow. More importantly, however, is the potential for motivational transformations to change society at large in some way. These heroes may work towards the prevention of events similar to theirs happening in the lives of others, which could be seen in the form of educational programming or increased awareness of the negative event or phenomenon.

Sharing their stories, serving as a spokesperson, and fighting for systemic changes in the fabric of society are just a few examples of how motivational transformations have the capacity to make profound differences beyond the individual experience. Whether or not his or her initial motivations preceding the negative life event were considered to be heroic, the individual fosters a newfound definition of heroism by allowing the negative event to create change for the better, combating the downward cycle of helplessness and despair that was previously described. Motivationally-driven heroes are resilient; they overcome adversity and serve as a vital example that their transformation can change the functioning of society for the greater good. Aly Raisman, a two-time Olympic gold medal gymnast, and Liz and Jay Scott, founders of Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation, serve as realistic examples of the trials, triumphs, and profound impact that motivational transformations have on both a personal and societal level, leaving the world changed for the better.

The face of the USA Women's Gymnastics Team both in 2012 and 2016, Aly Raisman is recognized by all and highly regarded by most. She led the team to victory in the London 2012 Olympics, receiving a bronze medal for her performance on the beam and a gold medal for her floor routine. Aly was a leader among the group of five young girls who came to be known as the "Fierce Five" throughout the Olympic competition. The team won overall gold, defeating impressive and historically successful teams trained in Russia, Romania, and China. With three medals around her neck, Raisman became the most decorated American gymnast in London. Before participating in the Olympic trials, she had given up the opportunity to do gymnastics at University of Florida, and took a major risk in deciding to pursue professional gymnastics rather than higher education.

Her dedication and determination to succeed led her to impressively high achievements in London in 2012, and her success didn't stop there. Although she was injured in 2012 during a tour, Aly rose above and didn't let the injury stunt her future. She returned to Olympic training in 2014, and was named again to the USA Women's Gymnastics Team. The 2016 Rio Olympics brought even more success to Aly and her team, winning the team gold medal yet again. She was praised for her maturation both as a gymnast and a leader among her peers, and although she did not win the all-around gold medal in 2016, Aly continued to be highly regarded for her skills and courageous attitude in the sport, especially in times of intense competition (International Olympic Committee, 2017).

From an early age, Aly embodied many of the characteristics that researchers define as traits of a hero (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Raisman was heroic in her physical abilities ("strong"), her skills as a leader for her Olympic teammates ("selfless," "caring," and "reliable"), her strength in overcoming injuries ("resilient") and her ability to serve as a positive role model to countless young and aspiring gymnasts worldwide ("inspiring"). Especially evident is Raisman's physical heroism in achieving what others thought impossible in the tumbling pass of a floor routine. She took a major risk in performing a "round-off, one-and-a-half stepout, into a roundoff back handspring, arabian double front, punch layout" in her first tumbling pass

of the 2012 London Olympics. Although it had never been accomplished by any other gymnast, Raisman humbly stated that “the first tumbling pass is crucial to the routine because it sets the tone” for success in the remaining movements of her routine (Wall Street Journal, 2016). She conquered new territory in the world of gymnastics without a boastful attitude and rather with a quiet confidence in her capabilities. Indeed, Raisman showed great heroic humility (Worthington & Allison, 2018).

Allison and Goethals (2014) describe the needs-based hero as one that arises from individuals finding heroic status in another figure due to their personal needs in that time of development. More than likely, Raisman served as this situational, needs-based hero to gymnasts who were lacking a drive to continue the intense training and rehearsal that gymnastics requires. With her trait of inspiration at the forefront, she displayed determination and commitment in her media appearances and performances, therefore potentially becoming a needs-based hero even without her knowing. Regardless of the various forms of heroism that Raisman may have fulfilled in her performance as a gymnast and service as an Olympic leader, the transformation that occurred two years after her last Olympics is what led to an unwavering distinction of Raisman being a hero to all. Nothing could have predicted the astounding impact that she would make some years later, uncovering that her moments in the spotlight were not as shiny as the gold medals hanging around her neck.

Inspired by the braveness of other gymnasts coming forward against a villain, Aly Raisman publicly came forward with a powerfully heroic statement on January 19, 2018 during a sentencing trial for US Olympic Doctor Larry Nassar. Nassar was discovered to have been sexually abusing the young women that he treated during their time competing with the US Gymnastics team, taking many of the gymnastics into private rooms for “treatments” to heal their injuries. Raisman stated, “Imagine how it feels to be an innocent teenager in a foreign country, hearing a knock on the door, and it’s you. I don’t want you to be there, but I don’t have a choice. Treatments with you were mandatory. You took advantage of that. You even told on us if we didn’t want to be treated by you, knowing full well the troubles that would cause for us” (Gajanan, 2018).

In watching the press coverage of the intense and emotional story that Raisman exposes in her sentencing statement, it was evident that she was resurfacing something difficult that had been creeping beneath the surface of her achievements for over 6 years. Although it took time and influence by other brave souls to confront the negativity in her Olympic experience, Raisman displayed insurmountable wisdom and a desire for change-for change that expanded far beyond having Larry Nassar punished for his actions. She addressed her personal drive towards healing from the anxiety that Nassar's abuse caused her. She looked Nassar in the eye, facing the enemy with full force.

This simple act of stepping out and wanting to overcome the tragic experience of sexual abuse allowed her to become a needs-based hero to those in similar situations, proving that it is possible to heal following abuse. Since the day of her sentencing trial statement, Raisman has been a prevalent and impactful figure in supporting victims of sexual violence, writing a book entitled *Fierce: How Competing for Myself Changed Everything* and partnering with Darkness to Light's #fliptheswitch campaign that encourages adults to properly educate children on how to recognize sexual abuse (Darkness to Light, 2018). Raisman could have stopped there, pleasantly settling with the fact that justice was served by getting Nassar locked up. Serving as a spokesperson for the awareness and prevention of sexual abuse highly regards her as a hero in and of itself, but the return to her familiar world signifies the profound impact of her motivational transformation.

In her statement, Raisman boldly addressed a systems-level change that was the overarching enemy across the negative events of sexual abuse for her and over 140 other girls- USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee. She explained the various ways in which Nassar's horrendous actions were covered up by officials, massively due to the fact that Nassar had aided in the creation of policies lasting over 30 years that were meant to protect the gymnasts from medical harm. Raisman powerfully stated, "I will not rest until every last trace of your influence on this sport has been destroyed like the cancer it is...to believe in the future of gymnastics is to believe in change. False assurances from organizations are dangerous, they make it easier to look away from problem and enable bad to happen" (Gajanan, 2018). With this statement, she exhibited urgency in

her newfound motivation, abandoning any acceptance of stagnation within the system of creating policies that support athletes (Gajanan, 2018).

In Joseph Campbell's monomyth of a hero, the return to the hero's familiar world is of highest importance in the capability to make a difference to society at large (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). In the conclusion of her statement, Raisman reminds Nassar that he has not taken gymnastics away from her, sharing that it "is stronger than the evil that resides in you, in the those that enabled you." (Gajanan, 2018). There's no denying that she found motivation and purpose in her time successfully competing as a gymnast. However, Raisman's transformations through the negative events of her experienced sexual abuse fostered within her a newfound motivation to not only hold the villain accountable for his action, but to return to her familiar world and make massive change. Since the day of the trial, three board members for US Gymnastics have resigned, the organization has been sued and it is being forced to make systems-level changes because of Raisman (Hobson, 2018). Her words, her desire to heal, and her urgency to remove Nassar's influences from gymnastics are already creating evident changes to society at large.

LIZ AND JAY SCOTT'S MOTIVATED HEROISM

Liz and Jay Scott were ordinary parents in Connecticut with four children, fighting to create the best life possible for their developing family. Following the first birthday of their daughter, Alex, they received tragic news that would alter the trajectory of their lives, but not in a typical nor desirable fashion. Alex was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a type of cancer that develops within the early nerve cells of the sympathetic nervous system in children. Doctors informed the family that even if she was to survive the cancer, her condition would not allow her to walk for the rest of her life. However, Alex heavily surpassed their expectations, living until the age of eight years old. The Scotts were heroic to their daughter, consistently providing her support and resources to receive treatment and seek hope amidst the darkness of cancer. Their original motivations towards fighting to keep their daughter life were forced into an unexpected transformation after her passing in August of 2004.

Joseph Campbell's monomyth of a hero journey includes the help of a mentor that guides the individual towards finding their missing inner quality (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). A young and tragically ill girl named Alex served as this mentor to her own parents, Liz and Jay Scott. She exhibited strength despite the consistent attack of cancer on her body, learning to walk at the age of two years old despite the doctors' prognosis. However, her physical strength could not always carry on, as the cancer spread and her life expectancy shortened yet again. Following a stem cell surgery at the age of four, Alex informed her mother that she wanted to have a lemonade stand when she got out of the hospital to help other children that were suffering from cancer like herself. Blown away by her altruism and dream to strive towards a better reality in cancer research, her parents agreed and they hosted the first of many "Alex's Lemonade Stand" events, raising over \$2000. The lemonade stand became a tradition in the Scott household that eventually caught national attention. Even in her short eight years, Alex made a massive impact on the lives of many. She displayed many of the Great Eight traits of heroism, especially strength, resilience, and selflessness beyond her years (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

In a small way, Alex experienced a motivational transformation once the cancer began to take her away. Her work with running lemonade stands, while at first a charismatic and small effort to seek change as a child, surpassed expectations and became one of the largest national cancer fundraisers. However, Alex is not the hero experiencing motivation transformation in this narrative, but rather the mentor. She instilled within her parents, Liz and Jay, something vital to the trajectory of their lives, even if she didn't have the chance to witness that transformation while still on earth.

After the passing of their beloved young girl, Liz and Jay were faced with many options. Their hope and experience of happiness could have been profoundly shattered by the fact that they lost the love of their lives, causing a sinking downward spiral of depression. It could have fostered a development of learned helplessness due to their consistent efforts in trying to save their daughter that ultimately failed with her death. Such a reaction would not only have threatened their own well-beings but also those of their other three children and their surrounding community, as helplessness and

perceived loss of control would be detrimental to all social relationships. The Scotts, too, may have chosen to avoid the word “cancer” for the rest of their lives, shutting out any negative memories that the disease brought to their family, remaining comfortably stagnant following Alex’s death.

Stagnation may not have appeared to have any long-term consequences, as there could have been some form of discovered happiness from the removal of the negative stimulus “cancer.” However, as Allison and Goethals (2017) explain, the experience of stagnation would remove the possibility of finding fulfilled purpose and a future life trajectory. While they may have been able to have positive life experiences that eliminated any sense of depression or perceived loss of control, the Scotts simultaneously would never have made a full transformation that welcomed the possibility of growing from the negative event in a way that changed the society around them. Luckily, Alex was a heroic mentor during her life and even after her death. Because of Alex’s influence within her short but vibrant life, Liz and Jay were able to defeat both downfall and stagnation, instead carrying on Alex’s legacy and continuing to raise money for childhood research in the form of nationwide lemonade stands.

Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation is now one of the largest childhood cancer foundations that has raised more than \$80 million since its establishment in 2006. The organization has not only supported over 450 research projects in hospitals, but also has a variety of programs aimed at bettering the lives of families struck by childhood cancer. Liz and Jay Scott serve as the co-executive directors of the foundation, and have more than 35 staff members supporting them. They are constantly striving to counteract the negative experience that they had in losing a child to cancer by raising money that goes towards preventing childhood cancer at the forefront. Rather than simply becoming needs-based heroes for other parents that might need an example of parents that grow from their grief, the Scotts are working to stop the initial cause.

Additionally, they do not shy away from reminders of Alex’s life, and instead welcome any and all positive influences that her short but fulfilling life had on society as a whole. In this way, the Scotts have become examples of figures that create diamonds out of dust, demonstrating massive

resilience, selflessness, and strength despite the barriers that loss and grief present. Alex's Lemonade Stand has recently been named one of Charity Navigator's "10 Best Medical Research Organizations" in the United States. Even more special is the way in which the foundation fosters the potential for heroism within everybody. Jay explains that anyone is capable of setting up a lemonade stand that supports Alex's desire to provide financial resources to the fight against childhood cancer. Fundraisers can be seen across the nation on college campuses, neighborhood streets, and everywhere in between (Alex's Lemonade Stand, 2018). When life gave the Scotts lemons, they not only made lemonade but allowed for society at large to do the same, fostering a vital sense of growth that spread beyond their initial desires to continue Alex's legacy.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

How can society find good in this tragic and complex world? While there has not yet been an answer revealing a way to prevent bad things from happening, it is evident that individuals overcoming their own negative experiences can display good by allowing their tragedy and grief to alter their lifetime motivations towards the greater good. Aly Raisman did so in the form of addressing not only the villain that is Larry Nassar, but by fighting for better policies within US Gymnastics as a whole. She was not required to come forward with her testimony, and even then did not have to address more than the internal experience she had with Nassar and his abusive actions (Beggan & Allison, 2018). However, the motivational transformation that occurred after years of abuse led her to attack the system with urgency and boldness (Davis et al., 2011).

Similarly, Liz and Jay were not required to continue Alex's lemonade stand following her death. No one would have blamed them for wanting to move on from the world of childhood cancer. Instead, however, the transformation they experienced altered their motivations in a way that served the greater good of the medical world, providing more financial resources towards research in preventing and treating childhood cancer. Motivational transformations provide a light in the darkness, allow others to find hope in hopeless situations, and create systems-level changes in society to prevent

the dangerous state of stagnation. P.T. Barnum stated it perfectly in “The Greatest Showman,” emphasizing the incapability of heroes to “go back again to the world that (they) were living in,” but rather to use their altered motivations to create an improved world, one that brings their dreams to life.

REFERENCES

- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2011). *Heroes: What they do and why we need them*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2014). “Now he belongs to the ages”: The heroic leadership dynamic and deep narratives of greatness. In Goethals, G. R., et al. (Eds.), *Conceptions of leadership: Enduring ideas and emerging insights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2017). The hero’s transformation. In S.T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R.M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Kramer, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise and coalescence of heroism science. In S.T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R.M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Darkness to Light. (2018, March 08). Aly Raisman partners with Darkness to Light to provide immediate training and support to gymnastics community. Retrieved from <https://www.d2l.org/aly-raisman-partners-darkness-light-provide-immediate-training-support-gymnastics-community/>
- Davis, J. L., Burnette, J. L., Allison, S. T., & Stone, H. (2011). Against the odds: Academic underdogs benefit from incremental theories. *Social Psychology of Education*, 14, 331-346.
- Gajanan, M. (2018, January 19). 'It's your turn to listen to me.' Read Aly Raisman's testimony at Larry Nassar's sentencing. *Time Magazine*.
- Glista, K. (2014, September 26). When life gave their daughter cancer, she made lemonade. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from <https://www.courant.com/courant-250/moments-in-history/hc-250-alex-lemonade-stand-20140926-story.html>
- Gracey, M. (Director). (2017). *The Greatest Showman* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.
- Hobson, W. (2018, January 24). Larry Nassar, former USA Gymnastics doctor, sentenced to 40-175 years for sex crimes. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
- Hoyt, C. L., Allison, S. T., Barnowski, A., & Sultan, A. (2020). Lay theories of heroism and leadership: The role of gender, communion, and agency. *Social Psychology*.
- International Olympic Committee. (2017, April 27). Alexandra Raisman. Retrieved from <https://www.olympic.org/alexandra-raisman>
- Maier, S. F., & Seligman, M. E. (1976). Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 105(1), 3-46. doi:10.1037/0096-3445.105.1.3

- Nuvvula, S. (2016). Learned helplessness. *Contemporary Clinical Dentistry*, 7(4), 426.
doi:10.4103/0976-237x.194124
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54-67. doi:10.1006/ceps.1999.1020
- Wall Street Journal. (2016, July 08). Inside the floor routine once thought impossible. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VX29jEkyhA>
- Worthington, E. L., & Allison, S. T. (2018). *Heroic humility: What the science of humility can say to people raised on self-focus*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.