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Heroism and the Pursuit of Meaning

Jeff D. Green
Daryl R Van Tongeren, *Hope College*
Athena H Cairo, *Virginia Commonwealth University*
Nao Hagiwara

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27

Heroism and the Pursuit of Meaning

Jeffrey D. Green, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Athena H. Cairo, and Nao Hagiwara

Abraham Lincoln visited the city of Richmond on April 4, 1865, just two days after Confederate forces evacuated. Though he was hated by most residents of the Confederate capital, he was treated as a near deity by others. The African American residents of Richmond who had been freed just the day before clamored to see him, and many sought to touch "Father Abraham" because it made their freedom feel real. Just days prior, General William Tecumseh Sherman met him personally for the only time, and later asserted, "Of all the men I have met, he seemed to possess more of the elements of greatness, combined with goodness, than any other" (Goodwin, 2005, p. 713). Lincoln would be assassinated a few days later, and his Secretary of War Edwin Stanton pronounced his entry into the pantheon of heroes: "Now he belongs to the Ages."

We propose that essential components of heroism and heroic actions are embedded in meaning and virtue. That is, our central thesis is that heroes and heroic behavior are intertwined with virtue and with finding meaning or purpose in life. Abraham Lincoln is an archetypal hero. We argue that it was his singular commitment to the cause of reunifying north and south, and finding his life purpose in this cause, that sustained his efforts and forged a hero. Moreover, his virtuous character likely conferred additional meaning to him and elevated his actions to the heroic; his "greatness combined with goodness" was more properly *greatness (heroism) created by goodness*. Lincoln saw this supremely important goal of ending the Civil War and uniting north and south through in his lifetime, and indeed gave his life for it. He continually rallied and inspired others to his cause, such as in the Gettysburg Address:

> It is for us, the living, rather to dedicate ourselves to the great task before us … that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
>
> *(Lincoln, 1863)*

Before we expand on our thesis regarding heroes and meaning and virtue, we turn briefly to definitional matters.

Definitions

Defining heroes and heroism is a challenge, and some emphasize that heroism, like beauty, exists in the eye of the beholder (Allison & Goethals, 2014). However, most beholders would agree

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 508

that heroes and heroic actions go beyond garden-variety friendliness or helpfulness; rather, they are characterized by a constellation of traits that represent the best in humanity. Prior research supports this idea that heroes can be conceptualized along several "noble" dimensions. One poll of college students suggested that heroes were likely to be described by eight characteristics (the "Great Eight"): *intelligent*, *strong*, *selfless*, *caring*, *charismatic*, *resilient*, *reliable*, and *inspiring* (Allison & Goethals, 2011). We note the obvious overlap with virtues: one could make the argument that six or seven (all but intelligence) of the traits are virtuous. Many heroic exemplars easily can be matched with several, if not all, of these dimensions. Lincoln, for instance, appears to embody all eight characteristics (Allison & Goethals, 2011): his selfless and intelligent blame-taking regarding his cabinet members' poor choices, his caring for disabled soldiers, his charismatic and inspiring speeches, and his resilience and strength in the face of an exhausting and protracted Civil War.

Though heroes may embody any or all of these characteristics, we also have evidence that certain characteristics might be considered more prototypical of heroism than others. A follow-up study (Allison & Goethals, 2011) found that students rated *inspiring* and *selfless* as the most important hero characteristics, reflecting the meaning-enhancing qualities of heroism and the notion that heroes generally help others at their own expense, often in the face of physical peril (Franco et al., 2011). A more recently published poll found similar ascribed characteristics of heroes. Participants were asked what they thought heroes were like and what they do. A cluster analysis of responses found that heroes were thought to be *protecting* (saving, acting against evil), *enhancing* (inspiring, providing morale), and *moral modeling* (making the world better; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015, study 2). Another study found that participants thought that heroes generally fulfilled a protective function more than would regular leaders or role models. Heroes can protect in many ways, from physically saving another person from harm, to offering guidance and wisdom (Allison & Goethals, 2011). These conceptualizations of heroes also can inspire hope about the goodness of others.

Thus, though there is no clear-cut definition of heroes, there appear to be some crucial, empirically-supported themes that emerge from theorizing and empirical work to date. Heroes typically are seen as impelled by other-oriented rather than selfish motives (though sometimes a transformation must occur first in the hero), usually in order to protect others. They make or are willing to make a significant sacrifice or pay a price, which perhaps is why more noble motives are required, such as risking one's life for others. Their deeds also are considered extraordinary in their effects, more so than general acts of helpfulness or prosociality (Becker & Eagly, 2004; Allison & Goethals, 2011; Franco et al., 2011); saving an ant is not heroic, but saving a busload of children is. Such actions square well with definitions of virtuous or moral behavior (Fowers, 2005, 2012; Haidt, 2007), which highlight how moral actors often forgo selfish desires and incur costs—perhaps even risking their lives, in the case of heroism—for the benefit of others. That is, moral or virtuous behavior involves putting others before oneself, so heroic actions are virtuous behaviors enacted on a large stage, with large potential costs, but also powerful results.

Meaning similarly is a slippery construct, so there is value in defining it at different levels (Heintzelman & King, 2014). At a very basic (social-cognitive) level, meaning is broadly defined as "expected associations" among constructs (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). For example, ice is supposed to be cold, fire is supposed to be hot, and oranges are supposed to be, well, orange. Definitions on this level help us make sense of the world: warm ice would be *senseless*, and talking about cold fire or a purple orange would be considered *nonsense*. In this way, meaningful associations may help fulfill psychological needs of understanding and of having control over our environment (Stevens & Fiske, 1995). However, such rudimentary explanations of meaning likely do not fully account for the rich and motivationally powerful effects of understanding meaning in more abstract ways (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Accordingly, others have broader definitions of meaning. For example, Steger and colleagues (e.g., Shin & Steger, 2014) define meaning as the

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 509

combination of coherence (i.e., understanding how life's events and one's identity fit together) and purpose (i.e., orienting life toward something greater than oneself), and others (Heintzelman & King, 2014) have identified a third feature of meaning: significance (i.e., one's life makes an important contribution to humanity). Intrapersonally, we seek to have integrity among the various aspects of and events in our lives by seeking coherence. Interpersonally, individuals are focused on transcending the self and connecting with a larger group or bigger goal through purpose, which involves making productive, enduring contributions to the world and leave us feeling significant (Bronk & Riches, Chapter 26, this volume).

We agree that meaning in all its forms or levels is critical for intra- and interpersonal well-being. Research has amply demonstrated how even mundane violations of meaning (e.g., a blue banana, a transmogrifying experimenter—replacing one researcher for another without participant awareness; Proulx & Heine, 2008) have psychological ramifications and result in compensatory efforts to restore meaning and regain psychological equanimity. However, there appears to be something special about achieving personal meaning (e.g., making sense and finding coherence in life events) in ways that facilitate seeking and finding purpose or significance in life (e.g., making lasting and positive contributions to the world). Perhaps the best way to illustrate linkages between heroism and meaning is to take a dynamic approach to the hero narrative.

With this in mind, we next examine how the search for meaning is imbued within classic hero narratives and psychological processes associated with heroism. Specifically, we discuss how heroes and heroic stories confer meaning through several domains, particularly through social connection and understanding of the world.

"Walking With Destiny": Meaning-Making in the Hero Narrative

Essential components of heroism and heroic actions are embedded in meaning and virtue, particularly the hero narrative. The unfolding hero narrative or script is emphasized by hero researchers (e.g., Goethals & Allison, 2012), inspired in part by Joseph Campbell's (1949) groundbreaking theorizing about transcultural elements of the hero story. This unfolding drama lends itself to examining a central role for meaning. Meaning researchers have identified the dynamic nature of how individuals seek and defend meaning, which nicely maps onto the hero narrative. The hero story unfolds over time to reveal important truths. Heroes typically wade into unfamiliar territory (often literally), encounter strange and sometimes overwhelming situations, enlist help from others (mentors, partners), and eventually acquire a new skill or trait that helps them ultimately to be victorious (Goethals & Allison, 2012). In many cases, heroes are underdogs (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, Chapter 18, this volume), so less is expected of them initially, heightening the drama, such as when it appears that evil is almost certain to triumph over good.

Frodo in the Lord of the Rings is beloved in part because he may exemplify the ultimate underdog hero journey. It seems impossible to believe that a half-sized hobbit could venture into the very heart of evil (Mordor) and defeat a nearly omnipotent and omniscient foe.

Luke Skywalker's journey in the Star Wars films follows this script very closely. He is an orphan stuck in a desolate and backward planet, and the rebellion against the Evil Empire comes to his doorstep. Before he knows it, he has a wise mentor and some bold companions, is learning about the Force and his particular sensitivity to it, is rocketing across the stars to perform courageous acts, and is poised to become one of the most important heroes in the galaxy.

Turning to real life, Abraham Lincoln also is an underdog hero. Even history buffs often forget that before being elected president, Lincoln was a mere state senator, mocked for his backwoods background as well as his gangly and unattractive appearance. He had never won a national election, though he had lost a US senatorial one. As president, he was immediately faced with a

country riven in two over slavery. Reconciliation via either peace or war appeared exceedingly difficult.

Winston Churchill's underdog hero path had many similarities to Lincoln's. Churchill was a failed politician; for example, as secretary of the admiralty he was ascribed the lion's share of the blame for the First World War Gallipoli disaster. Churchill had a speech impediment and a possible drinking problem, and he was largely ignored and even mocked in Parliament—clearly seen as a has-been politician who would never again wield real power. This political ostracism occurred in large part because he incessantly warned the nation, particularly the pacifists in Parliamentary leadership, that Hitler was a megalomaniac whose ambitions would not be sated and whose promises could not be trusted. Named England's prime minister at the outbreak of the Second World War, Churchill appeared to be in a dismal situation as England was isolated at the edge of Europe and hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned by Germany's forces. But the night after meeting with the King and becoming Prime Minister, Churchill wrote in his diary, "I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial … I thought I knew a good deal about it all, I was sure I should not fail" (Churchill, 1948, p. 667).

What enabled Lincoln and Churchill to become heroes and arguably some of the finest political leaders of the modern age? Joseph Campbell suggests that heroes must "follow [their] bliss," and act authentically—and we would add meaningfully (cf. Osbon, 1991, p. 8). In order to help the world, heroes may need to better understand themselves and their gifts, conquer fears and doubts, and often go against majority opinion or social norms. The conviction that one was "walking with destiny"—that one's purpose and significance in life was now set forth—surely played a critical role for both Churchill and Lincoln.

Meaning permeates hero narratives. Seeking meaning often leads heroes into those unfamiliar environments and to ask deep transrational questions (Allison & Goethals, 2014). Who am I? What are my capabilities? How might Good triumph? How can this Evil be defeated? Might I or must I play a role in this cosmic drama? Heroes in the making and underdogs seek to make sense of themselves and their world and to forge an identity of good or virtue in the process. The ultimate end, of course, relates to meaning in life: the hero finds life purpose through her or his actions. By extension, consumers of these narratives also receive a story about purpose or how life or the universe works (or should work). These types of pressing existential questions likely overlap with *deep meaning*, or a rich and lasting understanding of one's role in the larger scope of the universe and the human narrative. Engaging with deep meaning is existentially unsettling, in part because insufficiently satisfying answers about one's role (e.g., if you really think about it, life seems rather meaningless) may elicit considerable anxiety.

For instance, one way in which heroic narratives provide *epistemic wisdom* (Allison & Goethals, 2014), or answers to questions of deep meaning, might be within the domain of mortality salience. Terror management theory (TMT) suggests that we are particularly vulnerable to deep-seated anxiety and dread when considering our own mortality. Many of the institutions and processes that we consider "uniquely human"—culture, worldviews, self-esteem—help to buffer against this anxiety. Participation in these institutions reaffirm our connection to others and our symbolic immortality—our belief that we will live on through our deeds or relationships with others after we die (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pzyszcynski, & Lyon, 1989). Hero stories are concrete examples of how a hero's deeds live on in the hearts and minds of later generations after the hero's death, and provide guidance for what behaviors are most praised and remembered in one's unique culture, thus providing meaning and vanquishing the anxiety espoused by the inevitability of death. Because heroes inherently face great challenges and threats to meaning, they also exemplify how best to cope with the challenges that everyone faces at some point. Moreover, the behavior endemic to heroic stories often reflects central, cherished worldviews and thus may provide relief from the existential anxiety of death (Allison & Goethals, 2014).

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 511

However, many meaning researchers propose that mortality-related terror is merely one way in which meaning needs can be fulfilled. According to the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM; Heine et al., 2006), meaning is derived from any significant, expected, and coherent associations and connections. These associations can be within oneself (resolving a contradiction or flaw), in the world (good should be victorious), or between the two (e.g., affirming close relationships). Humans are inveterate meaning-makers who are driven to construct meaning (life lessons, insights, relationships) from even the most senseless or overwhelming tragedy or challenge.

In contrast to TMT, the MMM proposes that loss or disruption of meaning in any realm of life leads individuals to attempt to restore it through any domain possible, even if it is unrelated to the domain of lost meaning. People typically engage one of four avenues or domains of meaning: self-esteem, certainty or closure, belongingness, and symbolic immortality (Heine et al., 2006). For example, if one feels threatened in one area, such as certainty, compensatory meaning can be gained in one or more of the other three areas in order to restore equilibrium. This notion of *fluid compensation* is amply demonstrated empirically in related realms, such as the self-affirmation literature (Steele, 1988). From this perspective, heroism may provide meaning through several conceptual domains. As we elucidate in the following sections, heroic stories can provide examples of symbolic immortality and cherished worldviews, but they also may bolster relational bonds with others and inspire meaning-seeking in the face of challenges. Answering questions of deep meaning is difficult, but heroes embrace this challenge of seeking their deep meaning, often wrestling with how they fit in the world, as their journey progresses. Moreover, part of the allure—and perhaps part of what makes heroes so heroic—is their desire, and perhaps their eventual ability, to seek answers regarding their deep purpose, even in the face of uncertain circumstances, terrible obstacles, and threats of death. Not only are their actions heroic, but their personal quest for meaning, deep meaning, is motivational and inspiring.

There Are No Heroes in a Vacuum: Social Connection

The social nature of heroes is almost self-evident. Very rarely may a hero emerge in a social (or literal) vacuum, such as Sandra Bullock's character in the film *Gravity*, lost and adrift in space and trying desperately to get back to earth. But these stories appear to lack several critical elements of the typical hero story. In the case of *Gravity*, the Bullock character does nothing for others, but simply survives. Similarly, those who take extraordinary risks, such as BASE jumpers, or who set records like Charles Lindbergh, are admired for their amazing feats but typically are not labelled heroes. There is neither a moral element nor an other-oriented element. The making of heroes appears to be an archetypal process involving interactions with several other important figures in one's life as well as larger community that is affected by the hero's choices. Very often, they start at a rather un-heroic place in their lives, lacking the confidence or the social conscience to act for a group (e.g., Joan of Arc, Harry Potter, Han Solo). As they develop a sense of identity and purpose, they often benefit from the guidance of a wise elder (e.g., Socrates, Dumbledore, Obi-Wan Kenobi). Through their noble actions they often save other individuals or groups (e.g., Oskar Schindler, Indiana Jones) and their interactions with those they help or lead can also shape their perspective and choices (e.g., Oskar Schindler).

Meaning-making similarly is typically a social experience. In spite of the fact that some emphasize very individual quests for meaning (e.g., Burns, Jackson, Tarpley, & Smith, 1996), such as a monk living a solitary existence, meaning nearly always is embedded in family, community, and culture. Many writers suggest that social connection is a primary vehicle through which we search for and find meaning (Frankl, 1959; Heine et al., 2006). Consequently, our greatest heroes are the ones who appear to affect the largest communities, like Lincoln, Gandhi, Churchill, and Mandela. Heroes, then, are not simply successful individuals, but those who are continuously extraordinary and make a lasting and positive impact on others.

Heroes provide meaning in life through many social avenues: they remind us that we night be remembered after death, that our actions can directly benefit future generations, and in some cases even that we are connected to God or other religious entities. All of these meaning-providing features also help to vanquish the fear of death through the provision of symbolic immortality (Heine et al., 2006); in this way, heroes are lauded as admirable models of excellence to whom we should aspire to emulate as a way to conquer our own death-related terror (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) Similarly, morality in general can be thought of as inherently social. Though there may be elements of morality for an individual in isolation (e.g., Jesus admonishing that a thought is equivalent to an action), some have proposed that morality evolved to help us live in groups, or even that morality requires at least one other person (Gray, Waytz, & Young, 2012). In fact, some have argued that "moral thinking is for social doing" (Haidt, 2007). That is, our moral cognitions and judgments orient us toward actions that benefit the well-being of others, even at a cost to ourselves. Moral behavior allows us to live in groups and helps regulate intragroup and intergroup social interactions. However, morality necessarily implicates that one person is the victim (i.e., moral patient) and one person is the offender (i.e., moral agent) (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Heroes must be virtuous, and their virtuous behavior often is relationally focused: saving the lives of others, rescuing or reuniting separated loved ones, or providing freedom or equality for a large number of people. Next we discuss how virtues which confer positive psychological benefits also enhance bonds of social connection with others.

Heroes Overcome and Transcend Obstacles, which Confers Meaning

Relatedly, the hero narrative almost always starts with a gap: the hero is callow, untested, selfish, or prideful. The hero may face temptation. The opportunity to make a significant sacrifice may be taken, or avoided. At this juncture, tension builds. We interpret this process of fixing a flaw or overcoming an obstacle as exercising virtue. In our work, we've discovered that acting virtuously appears to confer meaning. Usually, this meaning acquisition is in the context of relationships, as in the case of the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006).

Research has demonstrated this process more directly with meaning as well. We (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010) adapted a popular paradigm for cognitively activating or priming a certain concept by presenting words subliminally (in a fraction of a second) and then assessed individuals on one or more of the domains of meaning. While individuals directed their attention to the center of a computer screen, several words were presented in the periphery (corners of the screen) for 50 milliseconds. Half of the individuals were presented with words related to meaninglessness (e.g., chaos, empty, futile), whereas the other half were presented with a matched set of control words (e.g., curved, echoes, furnace). Participants were not aware that words had been flashed, much less able to identify them. In one experiment, those who experienced the words about meaninglessness reported being more religious and having more meaning in life relative to the control group. In other words, they appeared to compensate for this meaning threat by simply asserting meaning. A second experiment assessed all the domains of meaning proposed by the MMM and found that those exposed to the meaningless words reported having higher self-esteem, higher need for closure, and greater symbolic immortality relative to those in the control group. When meaning is threatened, people quickly and efficiently begin reconstructing meaning by asserting that life is meaningful in myriad ways: they have more positive attitudes toward themselves, seek certainty, and imagine that their contributions will be important and long-lasting. They also report feeling more belonging with their social groups. Thus, in the wake of threats, people are motivated to recover lost meaning through various avenues—heroes may choose paths that are more socially productive.

Underdogs may feel this meaning threat acutely. Their flaws may be highlighted by new characters or situations revealing themselves. They respond by seeking meaning through saving

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 513

another or even the world (a dramatic example of symbolic immortality) or by protecting or rescuing a vulnerable victim or group (belongingness). Luke Skywalker, who already had lost his family as well as a newly discovered but cherished mentor, becomes the symbol of the Rebellion against the seemingly invincible Empire. What could exemplify symbolic immortality better than destroying an object called the Death Star? Similarly, Lincoln and Churchill felt that the very survival of their respective nations—which would live on after them and be beacons of democratic government—were at stake. Studies of lay individuals suggest that underdogs generally are scrutinized regarding how meaningful their struggles are: individuals perceive underdogs' struggles as highly identifiable and worthy of sympathy, but only when they are also relevant and consequential (Kim et al., 2008).

Relatedly, heroes may exert extraordinary effort to move past their previous limitations. The first critical step is to not give up in the face of initial failure or overwhelming odds, which requires the virtues of persistence and self-regulation (see below). This persistence to reach new levels of success confers self-esteem and thus increases meaning. Regarding the motive of certainty, many heroes begin their journeys uncertain of themselves and the world around them. But as they make choices to overcome personal and external obstacles, they gain wisdom, enhance self-concept clarity, and increase self-efficacy. For instance, Harry Potter began his wizarding career very uncertain of his abilities or even his true nature. Upon gaining entrance to Hogwarts, he was told he could do well either in the heroic house of Gryffindor or the conniving house of Slytherin. Harry was sorted into Gryffindor because he wanted to uphold central traits of bravery and integrity rather than cunning. Throughout his life he continuously chose to remain consistent in his values and fought evil even when tempted by arch-nemesis Voldemort to give up. Similarly, Lincoln's heroic efforts to manage disparate political factions and a series of incompetent generals via patience, good humor, and the power of his eloquence was in the service of uniting north and south—perhaps the ultimate in the nation's belongingness since its foundation.

"Greatness Combined with Goodness": Meaning and Virtue

We previously articulated the four sources or domains of meaning according to the Meaning Maintenance Model. We propose a fifth domain of meaning: *virtue*. Virtue, defined broadly as the regulation of selfish impulses for the benefit of others' well-being (Fowers, 2005, 2012; Haidt, 2007), may provide a strong sense of meaning. We've found that when people act virtuously, they report higher meaning in their lives (Emmons, 2003). We do hasten to add that these domains of meaning are not entirely separate. For example, the sociometer literature proposes that self-esteem acts primarily as a gauge of how accepted we feel (Leary, 2005). Thus, self-esteem and belongingness are inextricably linked and empirically correlated. Our proposed additional pillar of meaning, virtue, may similarly be correlated with other pillars such as self-esteem or symbolic immortality. Below, we articulate some of the recent research linking acting virtuously to enhanced meaning in life.

Meaning via Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an especially appropriate avenue to examine the seeking and protecting of meaning. Forgiveness is often described as the process by which individuals replace negative emotions such as avoidance and anger toward a transgressor with more positive emotions such as compassion (Worthington, 2005, 2006). Forgiveness is often (but perhaps not always) a pertinent theme in the hero's journey: are they motivated by revenge (e.g., Batman's quest to avenge the death of his parents through the eradication of evil in Gotham) or will they offer forgiveness of villains by empathizing with the common humanity? (As an aside, we note that

forgiveness and justice are not mutually exclusive; heroes can bring foes to justice but mercifully not end their lives.) Some of the most profound examples of heroes involve extending forgiveness even when it is not sought, such as Pope John Paul II forgiving his would-be assassin or many victims of the Nazi concentration camps forgiving their persecutors. Justice and revenge may in many respects be the easier choice, whereas extending forgiveness may be the more courageous and heroic choice. That said, some heroes may eschew forgiveness entirely and still be considered heroic, such as in the case of Batman. One interesting avenue of future research may be to identify potential differences in forgiving and unforgiving heroes and the types of psychological needs they help provide in individuals.

On the other hand, sometimes potential heroes are the ones who need to ask for forgiveness. This may get at the heart of the missing factor in the hero journey that hero scholars emphasize, and may also take courage. One of Harry Potter's principal friends and allies, Ron Weasley, abandoned him during a dark time, but later reappeared, asked for forgiveness, and played a critical role in Harry's victory over evil. Sometimes the forgiveness process takes a particularly long time to unfold. Jean Valjean, the hero of *Les Misérables*, begins and ends his hero's journey with acts of forgiveness. After being released from prison, he stole silver candlesticks from a priest. After catching him, the priest forgave him and even gave him the silver, telling him to use it for good. The priest's actions shattered Valjean's worldview and motivated him to change his identity (breaking his parole) and to become a new, better man. A decade later in the midst of a war, Valjean in turn forgave and showed mercy to his greatest enemy, the police inspector who had been pursuing him all those years (Hugo, 1887/1987).

An offense in a close relationship is another clear example of a meaning threat or violation: cherished others are not supposed to hurt the ones they love. But granting forgiveness typically yields both physical and psychological health benefits (Davis, Green, Reid, Moloney, & Burnette, 2015). Might it also confer meaning? In two studies, we (Van Tongeren et al., 2015) found that granting forgiveness does indeed lead to increased felt meaning in life. One study found an association between offering forgiveness and perceived meaning in life. However, this correlational evidence could suggest that those with meaning actually are more likely to offer forgiveness, rather than forgiveness leading to meaning. Therefore, in a second study, we conducted a six-month longitudinal study in which both partners reported offenses and forgiveness or unforgiveness of those offenses every two weeks. We measured offenses both nomothetically (a fixed set of 20 offenses that participants regularly reported on as having experienced or not by their partner) and ideographically (participants wrote about and rated the most significant personal offenses occurring the last two weeks). These offenses ran the gamut from being disrespectful to being emotionally or physically unfaithful. Those who granted more forgiveness across the time periods subsequently reported more meaning in life. Furthermore, the benefits seemed to be particularly potent for individuals whose partners had been relatively prolific offenders. Put another way, low forgiveness in the wake of more partner offenses led to lower meaning in life. There can be a downside to repeated forgiveness if an offender is not willing to make amends or change his or her ways: victims can feel like doormats and experience an erosion of self-respect (Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010). However, if the relationship is not permanently ruptured, forgiveness restores hope and renders the future viable, which restores meaning that is embedded in our close relationships.

It would be interesting to investigate whether *seeking* forgiveness also provides meaning in life. Our view is that it would. Research suggests individuals who transgress against another are often motivated to restore their sense of self-esteem (e.g., through compliance; McMillen, 1971) and when feeling guilty are motivated to restore their relationship with the person they hurt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). If the petition for forgiveness is granted by the partner-victim, meaning almost certainly will be enhanced via increased self-evaluation or relationship satisfaction (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, in press). However, even

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 515

if the victim refused to forgive, the offender may experience increased meaning for having made an attempt to right a wrong and restore the relationship. For instance, autobiographical narratives of transgressions are more likely to include accounts of apologies and attempts to repair the relationship when individuals recall being an offender rather than a victim, suggesting that offenders place a high value on these repair attempts (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). We do have empirical evidence that a virtue related to (perhaps a precursor of) seeking forgiveness leads to increased meaning: that of humility.

Meaning via Humility

We have obtained some indirect evidence for the proposition that humility may confer meaning. Humility involves restraining the self in some way by holding a more moderate and accurate view of oneself. As such, it represents a step away from self-aggrandizement or elevation away from others, and back toward the group or community. This relational approach to conceptualizing humility (Davis et al., 2011) has demonstrated relationship-enhancing properties, such as promoting forgiveness (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014). We (Van Tongeren, Stafford, Hook, Green, Davis, & Johnson, in press) conducted three studies in which humility reduced negative attitudes, behavioral intentions, and overt negative behaviors towards members of religious outgroups. These various manifestations of outgroup derogation are classic examples of defensive reactions to psychological threat, such as threat to meaning or awareness of one's death. For example, one study subliminally activated the concept of humility via very rapid presentation of humility-related words (e.g., humble) versus neutral words (e.g., height) in a control condition. Participants wrote about a cherished social or cultural value, which then was ostensibly criticized by another participant who did not share the same value. In an alleged unrelated subsequent study, these participants had the opportunity to administer hot sauce to the critical other, who was known by the participant to dislike spicy food. Humility apparently inhibited the aggressive act of administering hot sauce relative to the control condition. Thus, this pattern seems consistent with restoring or acquiring meaning, though that has not been directly validated empirically.

Meaning via Prosociality

Allison and Goethals (2014) emphasize the role of hero schemas (a constellation of heroic traits) or scripts (the aforementioned hero narrative) in guiding behavior and inspiring others to act heroically. Central to these schematic models of heroism is the heroic deed, which almost invariably involves helping others, either directly (e.g., rescuing others in need) or indirectly (e.g., working for social change). A violation of these schemas would constitute a meaning violation and elicit the same compensational processes as other sources of meaning. For instance, heroes like Luke Skywalker or Batman are often motivated to take up arms against a greater evil after failing to save someone they love. Anticipation of such violations (e.g., the experience of dissonance or guilt) might motivate heroism, such as when an individual chooses to engage in a heroic action (e.g., saving a child from an oncoming bus) because not intervening would be a violation of one's moral code. Oliner and Oliner (1988) describe rescuers of Jewish citizens during the Holocaust were generally "more sensitive than others to violations that threaten their moral values," perceiving what was happening to the Jewish people as "destructive of the very fabric that gives their lives order and meaning" (pp. 250, 251).

As we stated previously, heroic behavior appears in many ways to be a subset—a more extreme version—of prosocial actions. People typically view heroic deeds as having three elements: unselfish motivation for the action, a significant cost or risk to the hero, and a significant beneficial effect for others (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Becker & Eagly, 2004; Franco

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 516

et al., 2011). Prosocial actions may or may not be motivated by other-oriented emotions such as empathy, and there often is little to no risk or cost to the actor. In addition, the effects could be felt in minor ways and by smaller numbers of people. Despite being positive, helpful behaviors, these typically are not what people think of when they think about heroic action.

Some of our research highlights the relationship between prosocial behaviors and meaning in life, suggesting that virtuous or moral behaviors may even confer a sense of meaning in life (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, in press). A recent survey of Americans also suggests that those who describe themselves as "givers," or those who report more time taking care of others, also report higher meaning in life. In contrast, perceiving oneself as a "taker" was unrelated to perceived meaning (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Interestingly, Baumeister et al. (2013) did not always find that helping was correlated with meaning. Those who were non-parents did not report any association between meaning in life and helping children—suggesting those who help children regularly for their job, rather than through family bonds, may not typically feel greater meaning because of it. These findings suggest that helping behaviors that are motivated by morals or empathy may be more likely to lead to increased meaning. Similarly, heroic actions, done voluntarily and for an unselfish reason, may also be particularly meaningful (Allison & Goethals, 2014). However, this hypothesis remains to be tested directly.

Meaning via Self-Control

Self-control or self-regulation is a critical component of the hero's journey, and this self-control may be especially critical when exercising virtue (or restraining evil, which sometimes may involve restraining one's own selfish impulses). Indeed, as Allison and Goethals (2014) asserted, "redeeming ourselves through effort and achievement or through moral commitment requires self-control," and similarly, many of the traits ascribed to heroes also require self-control such as selflessness, resilience, and reliability (p. 107). Self-regulation is the effortful altering of one's behavior from what is easy and desirable. This relates to both action and inaction; inhibiting the impulse to lash out at someone or to give in to temptation requires self-control just as persisting in an unpleasant task or making a sacrifice does. Research over the past two decades has revealed that self-regulation draws from a common source of energy that is depleted when it is used, like a muscle (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2012). Hence, after exercising self-regulation, individuals are in the state of ego depletion and will typically fail at subsequent self-regulation efforts (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Finkel & Campbell, 2001). No matter what the specific first task is, such as inhibiting an emotional response, solving complex problems, or avoiding eating delicious food, a second, unrelated task is likely to be compromised. A classic study compared individuals who either avoided eating delicious, fresh-baked cookies or indulged in those cookies in an ostensible taste test. Those who ate the cookies were not ego depleted, and they persisted more than twice as long on a problem-solving task relative to those who successfully avoided eating the cookies but became ego depleted in the process. The good news is that self-control capacity can be restored after enough rest or even strengthened with regular practice and training (Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999).

In this way, self-regulation may be the *fuel* that allows people to move from being potential heroes to actual heroes. In fact, we've argued elsewhere (Green & Van Tongeren, 2012) that self-regulation could be considered the "master virtue." That is, many of the virtues like patience, perseverance, and humility appear to require self-regulation in order to overcome our "natural" tendencies to be impatient, give up, or act selfishly. For instance, self-regulatory ego depletion has been associated with less willingness to help others (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, Maner, 2008), greater aggression (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007), and greater dishonesty (Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009). Thus because heroes engage in selfless,

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 517

patient, and just behavior even in the face of hardship, when psychological research would expect people to act most selfishly, we believe self-regulation holds an important place in the constellation of heroic traits.

Henry Morton Stanley, the famed African explorer who located a lost missionary with the famous quip, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume," is an embodiment of research findings regarding strengthening or extending the stamina of self-control. He endured unspeakable hardships and lost many of his men on several trips into the heart of Africa. For example, an expedition followed the Congo River to the sea for several months, but lost two thirds of the men. Stanley was the only surviving European. His endurance and persistence in these expeditions can be traced to his childhood. From a young age, Stanley worked hard at developing discipline and virtue. He practiced keeping his room scrupulously clean, and his handwriting neat. Even on his arduous expeditions, Stanley insisted on shaving every morning (Baumeister & Tierney, 2013).

Although no direct evidence exists supporting this notion, one implication of the literature on self-control may be that people who engage in self-control more often may be more likely to engage it during potentially heroic situations. The earliest empirical work long-term strengthening of self-regulatory resources revealed that individuals who worked on their posture and recorded everything they ate for two weeks exhibited heightened willpower after a laboratory ego depletion task (Muraven et al., 1999). More in-depth work by different research teams had individuals exercise self-control over several weeks in areas such as regular workouts or more disciplined study habits. These folks not only improved in their target areas, but in the other areas of their lives. For example, those who regularly worked out also got more responsible and disciplined with their money (e.g., Oaten & Cheng, 2006). Thus, though people differ in their dispositional levels of self-control, they can make lasting changes, and these changes will be associated with success and work and school as well as greater happiness and self-esteem (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). We note that a virtue cannot be described as a virtue unless there is consistency over time. A partner is not faithful and an employee is not honest unless they eschew temptation every time they face it, day after day, year after year. We can strengthen the self-control muscle in a particular domain (including most virtues) until it becomes a habit.

We see self-regulation as especially critical in two areas of the hero's journey. The first is *temptation*. Heroes often go through a testing, like Jesus Christ in the desert with Satan thrice tempting him. Usually this test involves a choice between what is self-enhancing versus what is beneficial for a group (the latter being a transcendent, moral action which should confer meaning by connecting the hero to something greater). In this respect, many hero stories may be a bit unrealistic from a scientific standpoint because the hero may already be ego depleted on his or her journey. However, there is some research in which significantly increasing motivation somehow allows individuals to persist and exercise greater than expected self-control (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Snapping at a co-worker or taking undue credit for a group endeavor may be avoided after reflecting on long-term goals and increasing motivation to achieve those goals. Perhaps a hero whose motivation is increased (such as by reflecting on his or her desire to save others in need) is able to exercise greater self-control than previously, and thus reaches a more exceptional goal.

The fallen hero typically fails due either to hubris or to failed self-regulation, or both. While stories often illustrate how close a hero comes to failure and tragedy (Allison & Goethals, 2011), it often takes only a single failure in order to disqualify the potential hero. This failure could be action, such as killing a villain in a moment of blinding rage, or inaction, such as not responding to the plight of a victim. Examples abound in both the real world and in film and literature of a single episode of cheating unraveling a marriage, or a single loss of temper leading to death or imprisonment. New York Governor Eliot Spitzer had a distinguished record as a lawyer and politician, but was discovered to have used an escort service and resigned after just one year in

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 518

office. Celebrated golfer Tiger Woods fell from public grace after his extramarital affairs were revealed. Redemption for heroes also often involves personal commitment to self-regulate in order to change and help others, such as in the case of Betty Ford's work to overcome her drug addiction and support for treatment centers to help others do the same (Allison & Goethals, 2011). If needs for meaning are met through domains of control and understanding over one's environment (Heine et al., 2006; Stevens & Fiske, 1995), self-regulation may play a direct role in meaning-making by allowing heroes to show how we all can achieve difficult goals and succeed where we used to fail through hard work and perseverance.

The second critical area in the hero's journey is when extraordinary effort is required, such as when a hero faces great costs or sacrifice for the benefit of others. This taps into the idea of ego depletion. How can the hero or would-be hero exercise this extraordinary effort when it has not occurred before? One way we seem to expand our capacity is via self-affirmation (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009), such as reflecting on our values. Those heroes who are aware of their critical choice point may be affirming their values, providing additional motivation and ability to persevere. We suspect others, such as mentors and family members, can also provide this boost by affirming us. Obi-Wan Kenobi told Luke that the Force was strong in him, and Winston Churchill's wife Clementine regularly wrote encouraging letters to him that bolstered his resolve. The hero's mentor also may help the hero develop the habit of self-control via effortful training. We recall the notion that heroes are highly competent as well as highly moral; many presumably have spent a good bit of time building up their self-regulation muscle.

Self-regulation often is a highly social process. For instance, outside the scope of heroism, researchers have found that romantic partners who are depleted are less likely to accommodate (inhibit a destructive response) when their partner behaves badly (Finkel & Campbell, 2001), and self-control failure is associated with more violent impulses and thoughts toward one's romantic partner (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). With this in mind, we must refer to the social context in order to get the best picture of self-regulation, virtue, and meaning for the hero or would-be hero. Very recent work has pointed to the importance of relationships in exercising self-control. Transactive Goal Dynamics Theory proposes that two more individuals can exercise self-control jointly, as a single system (Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, in press).

What does this mean for heroes or even the casually virtuous? Close others can provide direct support in helping reach an individual, dyadic, or group goal. Many hands may lighten the load and reduce ego depletion. Close others may increase motivation to succeed. They might provide self-affirmation or positive mood, which have been shown to ameliorate the effects of extended effort. As stated previously, heroes develop in large part through their relationships with friends, mentors, and teachers along their journey. These mentors and partners on heroic journeys may be especially helpful in the context of self-regulation. Moreover, this assistance may be particularly crucial when the difficult tasks are virtuous ones. Once the journey begins, however, the initial steps may begin to be self-reinforcing, as the individual feels increased meaning in life, and starts to see beneficial changes in the group or community. A journey begins with a single step, though, and that first step for the would-be hero might be the most difficult from a self-regulation standpoint. Moreover, self-regulatory efforts can often enhance the well-being of others. Although it requires self-regulation to meet personal goals (e.g., forgoing ice cream during a diet to achieve a target weight), sometimes self-regulatory efforts directly benefit others (e.g., waking up early to care for a child so one's partner can exercise, spending time listening earnestly to a friend in need despite the desire to take a nap). Such actions add value to relationships and enhance meaning (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, in press). We hope that future research empirically tests several of these points.

In conclusion, although little empirical work directly ties self-regulation to heroism, we believe self-regulation may play a critical role in the meaning-making process that heroes engage in as well as exemplify for others. Self-regulation is required for the truly virtuous actions that

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 519

heroes engage in, particularly acting virtuously in the face of hardship, and acting selflessly when there is a significant personal cost. Future research is needed to understand better whether self-regulation is necessary for heroic meaning, and how self-regulation is inherent in meaning-making for individuals.

Meaning via Gratitude

Recent research has highlighted the importance of feeling and expressing gratitude in maintaining positive relationships and personal well-being, and there are many reasons to think that heroes are more likely to feel gratitude as well. Feelings of gratitude are positive and invigorating, and can be distinguished from conceptually similar states like indebtedness, which emphasize one's lower position of power to the debtor (Mathews & Green, 2010; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Gratitude is a "relational virtue," a behavior and mindset which works to strengthen and repair interpersonal relationships (Davis et al., 2013). Gratitude predicts greater positive affect, a sense of connectedness with others, and helping (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude is evoked when we know someone has done something good for us when they did not have to, and promotes a desire to not only repay the benefactor, but also be closer to them (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; McCullough et al., 2001). Heroes often inspire gratitude from others, and this feeling may increase the salience of one's meaning in life through an increased sense of closeness and belongingness (Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, & Kiskind, 2013). Experimental work has shown that writing notes of gratitude increase meaning relative to those in a control condition who wrote about their plans for the week (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, in press). Heroes also may feel more grateful to others and for their available resources because of their tendency to be other-oriented, and thus their gratitude may motivate additional virtue. Take for instance the notable example of James Harrison, an Australian man diagnosed with a life-threatening illness at 14. Although he recovered, his treatment required him to receive almost two gallons of donated blood in order to survive. Full of gratitude toward the unknowable number of people who helped him with their blood donations, he vowed to donate as much blood as possible in order to give back. So, at the age of 18 he began donating blood every few weeks, and has been doing so for the last *60 years*. Harrison's heroic impact goes beyond normal blood donations, however: in a serendipitous twist, his blood has an extremely rare antibody which is necessary to treat a disease called Rh incompatibility in pregnant women. Because of this antibody, Harrison's donations have been estimated to have saved the lives of over two million babies at the time of this publication, and he plans to keep giving until he is no longer able.

In short, one avenue for creating and sustaining personal meaning is acting virtuously, and the virtues of humility, prosociality, self-control, and gratitude may be virtues that confer meaning or purpose. However, the search for or defense of meaning may in some cases prevent the birth of heroes or even birth villains.

Does Defending Meaning Create Heroes or Villains?

Social psychology literature is replete with examples of how individuals defend the self-concept from threat (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). For instance, they prefer flattering over critical or accurate feedback (Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011), derogate the source of negative feedback (Fein & Spencer, 1997), and eschew opportunities to learn accurate but unflattering facts about themselves (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). These self-concept defenses occur both consciously and unconsciously (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). We previously discussed how defense of meaning may also occur largely outside of conscious awareness. That is, fluid compensation may occur in situations in which our meaning or view of the world is somehow challenged, even subliminally (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010).

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 520

What does this mean for heroism? It means that people often face key points in their lives in which their world is upended. These points constitute meaning threats. Unfortunately, the default response is to defend meaning—and thus to fail to learn or grow or act heroically. That is one reason why heroes are rare. But others may have the resources with which to cope with the meaning threat and change or grow in some way. Virtues themselves may be an affirmation of sorts: People typically value being seen as moral (Aquino & Reed, 2002), and are motivated to live up to socially bound expressions of virtue within particular cultures (Fowers, 2012). One way of responding to meaning threats is to reaffirm those values—likely moral or virtuous values—that individuals desire to see in their own identity and which are supported by prevailing social norms—as a way of restoring a sense of meaning. Thus, virtue affirmation may be one (positive) response to violations of meaning.

However, this process of meaning restoration does not always yield prosocial outcomes. It appears that individuals also often engage in self-serving cognitive gymnastics when meaning is threatened. There is ample indirect evidence of this in how individuals process information. They readily embrace information that aligns with their existing beliefs (particularly existential beliefs), but go to great lengths to discredit information that challenges their existing beliefs (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). This process has been called confirmation bias (among other names) and helps to explain why individuals are surprisingly resistant to attitude change regarding centrally held or cherished attitudes, even in the face of rather powerful countervailing evidence. Even asking people to consider information in an unbiased fashion has no discernable effect (Lord, Lepper, & Preston, 1984). So we are not likely to be persuaded to change our gods, our political views, or our sports teams.

We suspect that these central beliefs are especially resistant to change because they are imbued with meaning; to change these beliefs is to change our worldview. If we admit that our worldview may not be completely accurate, at least through the concession that even a mundane aspect of our belief system is flawed, then we may question the veracity of our entire worldview, including existentially pressing issues such as beliefs regarding the afterlife and the purpose of human existence. As a way to maintain absolute and unwavering faith in their constellation of beliefs, people are motivated to discount disconfirming information, and, more radically, eliminate alternative viewpoints and dismiss or derogate the individuals who hold them. Closure and certainty are one of the foundations of meaning, according to the MMM, so questioning central beliefs may necessarily result in reduced felt meaning in life. Perhaps in some respect heroes are heroes because they are willing and able to endure meaning threats. They are open to new experiences and new ways of thinking and are willing to undertake a painful cognitive journey (that may accompany a painful physical journey). Finding meaning via other sources may help in this regard, consistent with MMM theorizing. For example, a mentor or love interest may provide a meaning boost via self-esteem or belonging that gives the would-be hero strength to change her thinking and worldview.

One of the most heroic acts may be the cognitive transformation needed to reconsider an arch enemy to be a potential friend who can be redeemed, as Luke Skywalker did with his father Darth Vader in Return of the Jedi ("I sense good in you"). The central thesis of Doris Kearns Goodwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Team of Rivals* is that Lincoln had the courage and humility not to demonize vanquished political enemies, but to recognize their gifts and put them in his cabinet, even though some would continue to sharply criticize him behind his back or even make overtures at running against him in 1864. Allison and Smith (2015) discuss key differences between heroes and villains, and one sharp distinction is that heroes discover a missing inner quality, whereas villains do not. Identifying and fixing such a flaw likely constitutes a meaning threat, so this theorizing is consistent with our argument.

There may be a point in someone's life that serves as a trigger moment or hero crossroads. The choice may not always be between acting like a hero and failing to act (and being just

6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 521

another ordinary person). In many cases, the other divergent path may be that of a villain. That is, defensive reactions to maintain meaning—to bolster one's worldview even when faced with disconfirming evidence—may actually lead to antisocial or harmful actions. For example, people more readily disparage or even mistreat outgroup members when they feel psychologically threatened (see Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). Meaning systems are helpful to provide structure and order in the world, answer questions about the nature of humanity and the potential purpose of life, and guide actions by explicating the moral standards for right living. However, the content of a meaning system matters greatly—we have argued elsewhere (Van Tongeren et al., 2011) that for meaning systems to effectively manage existential anxiety and not promote evil or villainous acts, they should provide certainty (i.e., have relatively concrete claims), confer meaning that transcends death (i.e., extend the meaning and significance of one's life and actions beyond the grave), and value all human life (i.e., recognize the importance of each life as equal and worth protecting). Certain constellations of beliefs may provide certainty and death-transcendent meaning, but may do so by dehumanizing another group or promoting violence (e.g., Nazi ideology). Perhaps the valuing of all human life is one important distinguishing feature that separates heroes from villains. Moreover, such responses are often magnified under threats against one's meaning system.

In the face of identity threat, individuals may increase collective self-esteem by derogating out-group members (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). A soldier whose identity is closely bound to either his nation or a higher code of honor could choose to save an enemy combatant's life or follow his orders. This dilemma is illustrated clearly in the story of Franz Stigler, a German pilot in the Second World War who came upon a wounded American bomber, piloted by Charles Brown, struggling to reach friendly territory. Instead of following his orders and shooting the defenseless Brown out of the sky, Stigler thought of his code of honor, and guided Brown safely back to Allied territory. After the war, the two reunited and became close friends.

Heroes are treasured individuals because they affirm our meaning structures (Allison & Goethals, 2014). Heroic stories, or basking in the glory of real-life heroic successes (e.g., sports teams) can bolster social identity (Allison & Goethals, 2011), which may subsequently bolster meaning via increased self-esteem (Proulx et al., 2006). Heroes themselves may have their meaning affirmed through their own actions. Heroes who provided physical assistance reported feeling a spontaneous, overwhelming drive to help immediately (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Joseph Campbell asserts that "the heroic life is living the individual adventure" (Osbon, 1991, p. 8): the heroic journey is itself thought to be a search for personal identity and meaning in life, and to truly help others heroically, individuals must affirm their sense of self.

Though there is little extant empirical work linking heroes and meaning-making, we have proposed that there are ample possible connections, and we urge researchers to investigate empirically many of the points we have raised. Investigating these connections will yield a fuller understanding of both heroes and how they are made as well as how individuals construct meaning. Virtuous behavior appears to be the critical connection. Morality confers meaning, and extraordinary morality creates heroes. Seeking meaning and affirmation of meaning via virtuous behavior may be a key to unlocking the latent hero that exists in all of us.

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6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 523

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6321 T&F Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership.qxp_Style.qxd 05/07/2016 16:37 Page 524

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