Mary Elizabeth Bowser: The Humble Hero

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Not many people have heard of Mary Elizabeth Bowser, nor have people known or heard of anyone who was related to her. Bowser was an unsung hero who forever altered lives for the better during the Civil War. She embodied many of the most important attributes of a hero, and the purpose of this chapter is to explain how and why. Mary Elizabeth Bowser spent the majority of her life as a spy, risking her life for the Union Army of the United States. Bowser began her career working as a slave for Varina Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Bowser cleverly deceived the President’s wife, convincing Mrs. Davis that she was a mere slave who possessed excellent skills in organizing and administering large social functions at the Confederate capitol (Franklin, 2016).

Bowser proceeded to work in the Jefferson Davis household until the end of the Civil War, thereby successfully deceiving her employers about her true identity as a spy. In her role as a spy, Bowser provided the United States with
invaluable information that played a profoundly significant role in Union Army’s victory over the South.

It was both a sad truth and a common stereotype that a 19th century slave would be unable to read or write. Mary Bowser was secretly able to do both, which gave her a superb advantage as a spy. Her job as a spy in the household was to act invisible while cleaning and serving, but while doing these household chores she would secretly eavesdrop on Jefferson Davis’s meetings and conversations. Thomas McNiven was the head of the spy ring of which Mary Bowser was a part. McNiven met with Mary every day at his wagon of baked goods to discuss plans and crucial details of Mary’s spy activities. He would deliver bread to the house every day and Mary would go outside to meet him and pass along information (Leeven, 2016). The information was then communicated to Elizabeth Van Lew, a Richmond abolitionist and philanthropist, who passed it along to higher-up Union operatives.

The traits that all spies should possess are keen observational skills, strong interpersonal talents, and healthy self-reliance. Bowser was effective in demonstrating all of these traits in her day to day life. She was able to collect relevant information in a fast period of time and decide which information was useful and which was wasteful. Bowser also possessed a natural ability to interact with people effortlessly. During pivotal moments of spying, she was able to maintain her composure and act as if she were not eavesdropping or collecting vital information. She was able to communicate with her master as a “mere” slave, acting less insightful and more oblivious than she truly was. Bowser displayed self-reliance by being quick on her feet and making smart decisions that ensured her safety and advanced her mission.

Mary conducted her work as a spy until the war ended. At the conclusion of the war, she was compelled to go into hiding for the rest of her life. She and her husband changed their names multiple times and move to different locations, as there was a bounty on their heads for betraying the President and first lady of the Confederacy. Eventually, Bowser and her family fled to Asia and were never heard from again. Clearly, Mary Bowser made remarkable sacrifices and risked her life to do her selfless, heroic work.
In this chapter, I will detail the heroic life of Mary Elizabeth Bowser. In doing so, I will describe her life story and note the many ways that it parallels the hero's journey as described by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949). I will also discuss the central characteristics of Bowser that correspond to the traits of a hero. Moreover, my goal is to delve into her heroic transformation, noting the sources of her transformation and the many people who helped her grow and evolve in significant ways. Finally, I will apply several other theories and principles of heroism science with the goal of achieving a better understanding of her heroic life.

early life of mary elizabeth bowser

Mary Bowser was born as Mary Richards near Richmond, Virginia in 1846. She was born into slavery, the only known labor force for her race at that time and in that location in the United States. The first record of Mary was her Baptism at St. Johns Church in Richmond on May 17, 1846 (Mary Elizabeth Bowser, 2016). For a slave to be baptized was extremely unusual, as slaves during this time period were viewed as mere property. Perhaps this rare event foreshadowed her life as a slave-turned-spy, a life completely out of the ordinary. Bowser was born into the family of Eliza and John Van Lew. They both treated her like their own daughter, providing her with skills to be successful when she was older. Once Eliza Van Lew passed away, her daughter Elizabeth assumed the role of raising Mary. Elizabeth was just as deeply involved in parenting as her mother. For example, according to her diary entry on May 14, 1864: “When I open my eyes in the morning, I say to the servant, ‘What news, Mary?’ and my caterer never fails! Most generally our reliable news is gathered from negroes, and they certainly show wisdom, discretion and prudence which is wonderful.” Van Lew even sent Mary to a boarding school in Philadelphia to get educated. Bowser completed all years of education, graduating with good grades and no difficulties.

Elizabeth Van Lew the Mentor

Elizabeth Van Lew was a significant mentor figure in Mary’s life, serving a maternal role as well as a spy trainer. Van Lew was an abolitionist and
philanthropist who secretly established a spy operation for the United States during the Civil War. Elizabeth was born into a very wealthy family, with her father John Van Lew operating a prosperous hardware business. Elizabeth was sent to the same school where she later sent Mary, a Quaker school in Philadelphia. As Elizabeth got older, she adopted many egalitarian values promoting equality for all human beings, and she proceeded to spend her father’s inheritance on buying slaves and setting them free. She saw promise in Mary and created a strong bond with her, teaching Bowser how to be a strong independent woman, leader, and hero.

When Virginia seceded in the spring of 1861, Elizabeth eschewed Confederate patriotism and plotted ways to fight back. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Van Lew began working for the Union. She started bringing food, clothing, and writing paper to Libby Prison where Union Soldiers were imprisoned. She began her spy career by helping prisoners with escape plans and passing along information about safe houses. But prisoners also helped Elizabeth; the newly captured, for example, were able to pass along information about Confederate troop levels and positions. Elizabeth would then pass this valuable information along to Union commanders. She is most known for creating a spy ring during the war, a ring that included civilians, soldiers, government officials on both sides, and secret operatives such as Mary Elizabeth Bowser (DeMarco, 2016).

Elizabeth Van Lew truly shined when it came to being a spy. Around the city of Richmond, she bore the nickname, “Crazy Bet,” a moniker derived from her tendency to wander around town wearing shabby clothes and singing songs to herself. Her goal was to be perceived as crazy. She was able to play different roles in her life to protect and defend the Union. As befitting a hero, Elizabeth stood up for what she believed in, an especially dangerous practice during this time period in American history. If a spy were to get captured, the penalty was death. She risked her life to defeat both slavery and the Confederacy, making her a true hero (DeMarco, 2016).

Heroes are known to possess traits such as courage, selflessness, humility, and patience (Allison & Goethals, 2013). Elizabeth had the courage to battle the prevailing governmental power structures in place that promoted slavery. She
also displayed selflessness by placing the welfare of others, especially slaves, ahead of her own. Her goal in life was to improve the lives of others by setting them free. One of her most important traits, humility, was vividly illustrated by the fact that Elizabeth had a secret identity the entire time she performed her heroic spy work. She did not want credit for her actions; she just wanted the Confederacy to be taken down and she did everything in her power to carry out that objective. Lastly, Elizabeth demonstrated the heroic trait of patience. As a spy, she had to bide her time and wait for the right move. Any wrongly timed action could result in the death of herself and others.

Van Lew died on September 25, 1900, at the age of 81, and was buried in Richmond's Shockoe Hill Cemetery. Even into the 20th century, many Southerners regarded Van Lew as a traitor. It is both ironic and interesting that she was chosen to be buried in Shockoe Hill Cemetery, as Shockoe Bottom at one point was known as the largest slave trading region in the South. Elizabeth was buried around many slaves, which is exactly what she wanted. She spent her whole life helping slaves become free and was an inspiration to a world thirsty for heroes willing to risk their lives to free blacks from slavery (Elizabeth Van Lew: An Unlikely Union Spy, 2016). Most importantly, Van Lew was a remarkable mentor for Mary Elizabeth Bowser.

mary bowser pre- and post-war life

After completing boarding school, Mary Bowser was sent by Elizabeth to do missionary work in Liberia. There Mary helped educate impoverished citizens and taught them basic life skills. When she returned from Liberia, she met a man named Wilson Bowser, who was a freed African American slave. They wed on April 16, 1861, just four days after Confederate troops opened fire on Fort Sumner, the first battle of the Civil War.

After the Civil War ended, Mary worked as a teacher to former slaves in the city of Richmond. Mary was also invited to give speeches to discuss her education, her journey to Liberia, and her experience in the war serving as a spy. But her identity at these lectures had to be protected, and so she went by the name of Richmond Richards. As a teacher, Mary used the name Mary
J. Richards, and in 1867 she founded a Freedman’s school in Saint Mary’s, Georgia. Her school served day students, adult night students, and Sunday school students. She taught all the classes and created each lesson plan.

Bowser was known to be a fiercely independent person, rarely seeking help from anyone. Yet, as befitting a hero, she always sought to help others. She educated others and inspired others by sharing her remarkable story of heroism with them. She was, and continues to be, an inspiring role model for countless African American women. In this way, she became (and still remains) a powerful and inspiring mentor figure for others, much like her own mentor, Elizabeth Van Lew. Bowser went about every deed she did with the goal of benefitting others. Mary was grateful for the opportunity she was given to improve people’s lives and never bragged about her heroic accomplishments to anyone.

The Great Eight Traits of Heroes

Mary Elizabeth Bowser devoted her life to protecting and defending the lives of enslaved African Americans, thus meeting most definitions of heroism. Allison and Goethals (2011) proposed that all heroes possess most or all of the great eight traits of heroes. These traits are smart, strong, selfless, caring, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. Bowser displayed all of these traits. She was smart because she was able to trick people, including the President of the Confederate States of America, into thinking she was a harmless, illiterate slave. Bowser was strong because she was abused as a slave yet demonstrated courage in becoming a highly effective spy. Her caring and selfless side was shown in her devotion to placing the needs of others ahead of her own well-being. Clearly, Bowser was also reliable, resilient, inspiring, and charismatic in her own quiet way. Based on Allison and Goethals’ (2011, 2017) framework of heroism, Bowser meets the definitional criteria for heroism.

Functions of a Hero

Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) proposed that heroes serve three major functions. First, heroes enhance the lives of others, helping them grow and evolve. Second, heroes model moral behavior for others to emulate, signaling
to people how essential morality is to good living. Finally, heroes offer protection and defense against dangerous situations and villains. Mary Elizabeth Bowser most certainly fulfilled all three of these heroic functions. Regarding the enhancement function, there is no question that her heroic spy work enhanced the lives of African American slaves who were freed at the conclusion of the Civil War. Regarding the moral modeling function, Bowser’s spy work was unquestionably ethical, and she no doubt served as a powerful role model for millions of people around the world. Regarding the protection function, it can be argued that Bowser’s heroism protected future African Americans from the horrific suffering associated with enslavement.

The Hero’s Transformation

Allison and Goethals (2017) propose that all heroes undergo an inner transformation that enables them to perform their heroic acts. The transformation serves several purposes. First, the heroic transformation fosters developmental growth. The hero’s journey “helps us pass through and deal with the various stages of life from birth to death” (Campbell, 1991, p. 56). With regard to Mary Bowser, it is clear that the mentoring she received from Elizabeth Van Lew helped Mary to develop and grow into a morally enlightened human being. Second, the hero’s transformation promotes strength and healing. A growing number of clinical psychologists invoke hero transformations in their practice to help their clients develop the heroic traits of strength, resilience, and courage. Clearly, Mary Bowser developed strength through her missionary work and other life experiences which helped her transform into a heroic individual.

Third, Allison and Goethals (2017) propose that the heroic transformation builds social unity. Campbell (1972) cites an essay written in 1840 by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who observed that the transformed individual has moved “from the lesser, secondary knowledge of himself as separate from others” to “the greater, truer truth, that we are all one in the ground of our being” (p. 151). The most meaningful heroic transformations are a journey from egocentricity to sociocentricity and from elitism to egalitarianism (Allison & Goethals, 2017). No longer isolated from the world, transformed individuals enjoy a feeling of union with others. Describing the hero’s
journey, Campbell (1949) wrote, “where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world” (p. 25). With regard to Mary Elizabeth Bowser, it is clear that her upbringing transformed her into a person who desired slavery to end so that humans of all races could live together as one.

Fourth, the heroic transformation advances society. The culmination of the hero’s journey is the hero’s boon, or gift, to society. This gift is what separates the hero’s journey from simply being a test of personal survival. For the voyage to be heroic, the protagonist in myth must use her newly acquired insights and gifts to better the world (Campbell, 1949). Hero mythology, according to Campbell (1972), is designed to teach us that society is not a “perfectly static organization” but represents a “movement of the species forward” (p. 48). Mary Bowser’s heroic work as a spy was clearly in the service of advancing society, with the goal of producing a society that valued equality for people of all races, ethnicities, and genders.

Purpose-Guided Heroism

In a fascinating article that examines the relationship between heroism and having a sense of purpose in life, psychologists Bronk and Riches (2017) discuss important figures in human history whose sense of purpose either preceded or followed their heroism. One such person was Archbishop Oscar Romero, a man who risked his life fighting on behalf of impoverished citizens of El Salvador. Romero had a purpose: to fight for the rights of the poor and hungry in his home country. Sadly, Romero was assassinated by people who opposed his mission. But his purpose-guided heroism has inspired millions. Mary Elizabeth Bowser was also guided by a noble purpose. Her goal was to free African Americans from slavery, and so she, too, is a shining example of purpose-guided heroism.

Bronk and Riches (2017) also describe the heroism of Miep Gies, one of the people who helped hide Anne Frank and her family during the holocaust. While Gies was not politically active to begin with, the act of protecting the Frank family radicalized her and filled her with a lasting purpose in life. Accordingly, her actions illustrate heroism-guided purpose. One could argue that Mary Elizabeth Bowser also demonstrated heroism-guided purpose. After
the Civil War, Bowser shared her inspirational story with others and used her heroism to bolster her resolve to bring about racial equality in the United States. Mary Elizabeth Bowser may have thus been one of those rare individuals whose purpose guided her heroism, and whose heroism also guided and reinforced her purpose.

concluding thoughts

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Mary Elizabeth Bowser is one of the most important and most unsung heroes in American history. She was a great hero, yet it is clear from the historical records that she never desired to attain the status of a hero. Mary balked at receiving credit for what she accomplished; she only wanted the problem of slavery to be solved and for others involved in her spy operation to remain safe. Her childhood upbringing proved to have a tremendously important transformative effect on her drive to make the world a better place. Being an educated slave and having parental figures who actually cared for her was pivotal in shaping her life trajectory. The major influence in Mary’s life that made her the heroic person she became was Elizabeth Van Lew. Van Lew inspired Mary to dare to be different, to care about others, and to beat the odds stacked against her. This effective mentoring, along with the privileges that Mary received while she was growing up, gave Bowser the inspiration to do whatever it took to end slavery in the United States. After the war, Bowser’s rousing speeches inspired many people to follow in her heroic footsteps.

Bowser was a remarkable woman who summoned her inner strength to fight for what she believed was right, all the while doing her heroic work outside the spotlight. She is perhaps the most extraordinary hero that Americans have never heard of. I hope this chapter represents at least a small step toward giving Bowser the recognition that she so richly deserves.
references


