

University of Richmond

From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison

2019

James “Sawyer” Ford: The Man Who Had to Become Lost to Find the Hero Within

Leo S Troik



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/86/

3

JAMES “SAWYER” FORD: THE MAN WHO HAD TO BECOME LOST TO FIND THE HERO WITHIN

LEO S. TROIK

"Dear Mr. Sawyer, You don't know who I am but I know who you are and I know what you done. You had sex with my mother and then you stole my dad's money all away. So he got angry and he killed my mother and then he killed himself, too. All I know is your name. But one of these days I'm going to find you and I'm going to give you this letter so you'll remember what you done to me. You killed my parents, Mr. Sawyer" ("Pilot, Part 2" *Lost*, 2006). On the steps of the church in which his parent's funeral is being held, 8-year old James Ford writes a letter to the con-man who drove his family into oblivion and changed his life forever. James would spend the next eleven years slowly transforming himself into the very man who had caused the demise of his parents, eventually even taking the name Sawyer for himself.

From the moment he took upon the name Sawyer to the point that Oceanic 815 crashed onto the sandy shore of The Island, the place which served as the “New World” setting for his heroic transformation (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Campbell, 1949), “Sawyer” lived a life consumed by greed, pride, and deception. Sawyer religiously bound himself to a competitive lifestyle in which he sought personal gain at the expense of others. His own unwavering will to kill the man who had destroyed his childhood, coupled with an unbreakable shell built up over years, created an impediment to heroism for Sawyer. However, Sawyer’s innermost humanity shone through during one of his final ‘long’ cons before his arrival on The Island. During the con he gained the trust of a woman with a wealthy husband and ‘accidentally’ revealed a large sum of money to her, eventually admitting that it is for an opportunity of gargantuan monetary gain, prompting her to talk her wealthy husband into joining him on the economic endeavor. However, upon discovering that the couple he had been conning had a young boy, Sawyer decided to not go through with the con, despite the sizable potential personal gain. This glimpse of Sawyer’s humanity and self-restraint would serve as one of the first cracks in Sawyer’s shell of villainy and baselessness -- a crack that would widen over his time on The Island and bring more inner heroic virtues and character strengths to the surface.

Ever since the fateful night that took the lives of both of Sawyer’s parents, Sawyer was an underdog (Vandello et al., 2017). During every step of his journey, he had to fight and suffer to fulfill the newfound purpose he had found on The Island. The trauma and suffering Sawyer endured upon seeing his parents die and having to carry on afterwards led him initially down a very dark tunnel and almost caused him to transform into a villain. However, evidenced by glimpses of persevering morality and goodness, Sawyer never truly committed to a life of villainy and was therefore able to undergo a heroic transformation. In the aforementioned case of Sawyer discontinuing his con upon seeing that the couple had a young son, he showed that his suffering stimulated compassion within him. “We identify with struggle precisely because we know struggle, both firsthand at the level of personal experience, and also at the deeper archetypal level” (Allison & Goethals, 2017, p. 213) Sawyer closely identified with the struggle he was so close to putting the young boy through, because he experienced something so similar in his own childhood.

Before his transformation, Sawyer was overcome with greed, wrath, and pride. However, one of the most notable changes that he underwent as a result of his transformation was a shift from pride to humility and moderation, as well as one from egocentricity to sociocentricity (Allison, 2015; Allison & Goethals, 2017). He demonstrated these changes in his behavior throughout his time on The Island. For example, Sawyer's earliest instinct on The Island was to hoard as many materials for himself as he could, frequently stealing from others and taking more than his fair share to give himself a higher survival edge. This pattern reflects the competitive nature of life that he had come to fully embrace previous to The Island.

Initially upon arriving on The Island, Sawyer would act in ways that would reveal slight of masochistic tendencies. When one of the survivors lost their asthma inhaler, Sawyer refused to tell the truth that would exonerate him of any blame; instead, he would subject himself to physical torture. Sawyer had no personal gain invested in this, encouraging the idea that he acted purely out of a twisted sense of masochism and trickery. Also, upon being treated for a near-fatal wound by Jack, the doctor and 'leader' of the crash survivors, Sawyer crudely remarked that he would not save him if their roles were reversed. This remark runs contrary to the perspective of self-gain and benefit, because it would be in Sawyer's best interest to befriend and be gregarious to the only doctor on The Island for the purpose of pure self-preservation. Also, while these words eventually prove to be divergent from his actions, they dichotomously stray from many of "The Great Eight" attributes of heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The statement demonstrates a lack of selflessness, charisma, care, and reliability, thereby creating conflict between himself and the leader, undermining a sense of trust in himself from the others, and identifying him as an overall reprobate individual.

THE INITIATION OF SAWYER'S PATH TO HEROISM

Sawyer's involuntary hero journey was initiated both by internal purpose and transcendent summons (Dik et al., 2017). The apex of Sawyer's villainy and the inner morality and heroism that Jacob, the ageless protector of The Island, saw within him put him on the Oceanic Flight 815. The mammoth contrast in the good and evil sides of Sawyer which came together to put him on The Island highlight the vast transformation that he would undergo there. The villainy that

put him on the plane stemmed from his pre-transformative purpose of getting revenge on the real Sawyer and the illusion of bliss that it would bring him. This thirst for revenge took him to Australia in the first place and ended with him committing the evil act of killing an innocent man, bringing him no peace or happiness whatsoever. This represented the peak of Sawyer's darkness, which began to peel away as he began his journey on The Island. Sawyer's transcendent summons came from Jacob, a godlike figure on The Island who represented preservation of all that is good and pure on The Island and the world beyond. Jacob's influence over The Island coupled with the extent of the influence that The Island had on Sawyer indirectly made Jacob Sawyer's mentor over his time on the island. By influencing the events on the island and continually testing the survivors of the crash, Jacob attempted to draw the goodness and heroism out of everyone to see who would succeed him as protector of The Island.

Due to the nature of The Island, Sawyer's acts of heroism were unavoidably high risk, high velocity, and full of barriers. In fact, the level of risk and difficulty that Sawyer subjected himself to make his actions heroic as opposed to merely altruistic as noted by Franco, Blau and Zimbardo (2011). One of the earliest and most stark examples of this pattern occurs when Sawyer risked his life and his chance to potentially leave The Island by trying to save Walt, a young boy and fellow survivor of Oceanic 815, from 'The Others'. Not only was Sawyer vastly outnumbered by 'The Others'; he was also unarmed and unequipped, showing that he completely looked past personal risk to selflessly save someone else. The polarity and significance of the choices Sawyer was forced to make early in his tenure on The Island forced him to choose to either take the dark road and remain in his shell or allow himself to be put in danger and risk to help others.

THE EVOLUTION OF SAWYER'S PURPOSE

Sawyer's own internal purpose and meaning were reshaped as a part of his transformation. Initially, his mission in life was to exact revenge on the man who had caused the demise of his parents, doing almost anything and everything that had to be done to accomplish this goal. However, after undergoing certain transformative events on The Island, it became clear that a new purpose took over his being. The newfound purpose was brought onto him by three distinct entities: Jacob, the other survivors of Oceanic 815, and the death of the real Sawyer.

Because Jacob first spotted Sawyer sitting on the steps of the church at his parents' funeral, he had designated him as one of his potential replacements for caretaker of The Island. As mentioned above, Jacob hand-picked everyone on the Oceanic 815 crash to potentially replace him, but had to mentor them both directly and indirectly to impose his own will on them. In this way, mainly by means of indirect influence and oversight, he was able to push Sawyer closer to his newfound purpose. The influence that the other survivors of Oceanic 815 had on Sawyer was paramount in the transformation of his purpose. Despite his initially harsh, bitter, and selfish actions, he still receives a certain degree of kinship and aid from the others which makes him feel an unfamiliar warmth that enhanced his prosocial sentiments (Kafashan et al., 2017). In the initial stages of his journey, Sawyer transitions from pure egoism to some 'expected levels of helping' such as reciprocity and vested interest as noted in Kafashan et al. (2017). Finally, upon killing the real Sawyer, he was finally able to fully move on to his new purpose and leave the old one behind. While the death of the real Sawyer did not provide absolution or resolve for Sawyer, it allowed him to get a sense of closure for his old purpose, allowing him to fully undertake his new goal.

Soon after his role as leader was unofficially confirmed by his companions, he was faced with a situation in which a woman was being held at gunpoint by two men, pleading for mercy. Instantly, despite personal risk and discouragement from some of his companions, Sawyer stepped in and managed to save the woman. Sawyer's pure, inner compulsion to save a woman he did not know for absolutely no personal gain, coupled with his willingness to place his own safety at huge risk, defines his act as that of pure heroism. "Heroism is an extreme form of pro-sociality, a category of behavior that involves benefitting another. By definition, "typical" pro-sociality involves the actor delivering average – or expected -- levels of benefits to others. Here we define heroes as those who incur costs (e.g., risk of injury or death; or significant sacrifices such as time, money, or other forms of personal loss) to deliver greater-than-expected benefits to others" (Baumard & Boyer, 2013).

PROSOCIAL ELEMENTS OF SAWYER'S HEROIC EVOLUTION

A tremendous contrast from the beginning of his journey to this point in the series involved how people around him viewed him and treated him. In his

very first notable scene, Sawyer was seen blaming Sayid, a fellow survivor of Oceanic 815, for the crash purely because of his Arabic appearance, quickly placing Sawyer in a very negative and villainous light. This act of racism toward Sayid not only formed a negative precedent for the way the others saw Sawyer but also succeeded in surrounding him in an antagonistic light. Furthermore, instead of attempting to redeem himself in the eyes of the others, Sawyer continued to act in a manner that temporarily solidified his status as the (self-admittedly) most disliked member of Oceanic 815 survivors.

“Ain’t that just like a woman? She keeps the house, you get the cheap-ass apartment. Man, I thought these people hated me, but I gotta hand it to you... Stealing a baby, trying to drown it, now that’s a new low. You even made Locke take a swing at you. Hell, that’s like getting Ghandi to beat his kids.” - Sawyer (“The Long Con” *Lost*, 2006)

Had Sawyer not mended his ways and acted in a heroic way, he would not have ever been able to get the support and trust that he eventually received as a leader. “We define heroes as symbols, and leaders as agents. We see heroism as a perception in the eyes of followers, one that symbolizes the desires and values of the collective they represent” (Decter-Frain et al., 2017).

Falling in love on *The Island* proved to be a catalyst for Sawyer’s evolution into a hero. The principle of “kin selection” (Kafashan et al., 2017) can be used to explain this positive correlation between Sawyer’s love for another and his will to do good. From an evolutionary standpoint, by helping and ensuring the safety of a woman he loves, he is acting in the best interest of his potential children. However, his love for Kate and, eventually, for Juliette, did not just engender noble actions toward them, but helped invoke a certain sense of compassion into his life, allowing him to cast aside more of the dark armor that he stubbornly held on to for so long. The strong feelings he had for Kate forced him into action, where he might have acted more selfishly otherwise. When put into captivity with Kate at the hands of ‘The Others’, Sawyer acted atypically when Kate’s well-being was threatened. This is significant because prior to this incident, Sawyer’s stubborn, prideful, and hard-headed nature ensured that no number of threats could push him to act or say something he was not compelled to.

Sawyer's rivalry with a Jack helped him grow as a leader and realize much about the nature of the importance of interaction with groups and society in relation to heroism. Through the multitude of frequent conflicts between Sawyer and Jack, there was no doubt that Jack usually had the support of the majority, the moral high ground, and the status of the de-facto leader, constantly ensuring that Sawyer would always come out second best. The most notable direct conflict between Jack and Sawyer revolved around Kate; their individually strong feelings of love for her solidified their rivalry and ensured that there would be a continuous competition between them. Also, much of Sawyer's growth as a hero is seen in contrast to Jack, who, as opposed to Sawyer, took upon the role of the leader and the hero the moment he stepped on The Island. Due to coming to The Island already possessing so many of 'The Great Eight' attributes of a hero (Allison & Goethals, 2011) as well as instantly using his skills as a doctor to save others and contribute to the well-being of the survivors, Jack was quickly designated as the leader and protagonist.

Meanwhile, Sawyer was busy clinging to his old, dark ways and quickly came to obtain the reputation as the most hated of the survivors. Sawyer's growth and transformation relative to both Jack and himself is highlighted by the scene in which Sawyer jumped out of Lapidus's helicopter in order to slightly increase the chance that Kate, Jack, Hurley, Aaron, and Lapidus survive, due to the helicopter not having enough fuel to carry all of them. When it was made evident that the helicopter did not have enough fuel to carry the amount of weight that was on it, Sawyer did not hesitate to jump out of the helicopter, sacrificing himself for everyone else, while Jack sat motionless, unable to do anything. In this moment Sawyer's heroism purely overshadows Jack's and shows, more than anything else, how far he had come.

SAWYER'S JOURNEY AND HOW HE TRANSFORMED

Sawyer's moral and emotional transformation from a sardonic, egocentric, con man to a caring, courageous, leader is spotlighted by his physical transformation into Jim LaFleur: the head of security of the Dharma Initiative. Not only did his role as the head of security of The Dharma Initiative propel him into a role where he had no choice but to lead people in a wise and disciplined manner, but Jack's departure from The Island solidified Sawyer as arguably the most prominent

and important character left on *The Island* at this time. His role as primary decision maker and leader was confirmed shortly after the final time shift when his plan, despite being admittedly risky and stupid, was quickly accepted by almost everyone. Not only did this confirm the people's trust and confidence in Sawyer, but it also reaffirmed his own willingness to assume the role of a leader when one was so desperately needed.

Sawyer's transformation journey follows Joseph Campbell's (1949) original description of the classic hero's journey: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell, 1949, p. 30). However, Sawyer falls under more than one subcategory of heroes as described by Goethals and Allison (2012), making him a transcendent hero of sorts. Much of the suffering Sawyer undergoes throughout his journey -- largely brought about by himself on himself -- causes him to grow and develop in some way. However, even after Sawyer shifts almost entirely to a heroic persona, tragedy and suffering still follow him. Most notably demonstrated by the death of Juliet, the woman whom Sawyer had come to love. Her demise came at a time during which Sawyer was no longer at the negative end of any of the interpersonal conflicts, as he had shifted to a purely protagonist role. Unlike many of his previous tragedies and calamities, this one played no role in his positive transformation, but instead acted to reinforce the tragedy and suffering that heroes often endure.

Sawyer's willingness and bravery in sacrificing himself for the safety and well-being of others demonstrated the degree of heroic martyrdom that he embodied. This martyrdom was made most evident in the aforementioned scene in which Sawyer jumped out of Lapidus's helicopter to save everyone else in it. This act of martyrdom was not only heroic because it helped save the lives of others, but also included the highest degree of personal risk. Not only did Sawyer risk his own life by jumping out of a moving helicopter, but he also condemned himself to losing Kate, whom he cared for and loved more than anything else. This ultimate act of selflessness in what could have easily been his last moment alive, brought to light the new purpose he had developed in his heroic transformation.

The antithesis between what Sawyer said and what he did showed that his acts of heroism were not rooted in self-acclaim and self-promotion, but were

genuinely based on his desire to promote the good of others. Often, Sawyer even saw himself as a bad man due to the bad things he had done in the past, but he had no interest in hiding the misdeeds of his past from others. He even encouraging them to view him in a dark light:

“Sawyer, this idea, all of this, what we did, what made... How does someone think of something like that?” [Charlie asks]

[Sawyer has a flashback]

“I’m not a good person, Charlie. Never did a good thing in my life.” [Sawyer replies]

-- From “The Long Con” (Lost, 2006)

Sawyer’s abrasive, witty, and harsh manner of communication initially had the effect of portraying him as a villain. However, as Sawyer developed and transformed, his harsh demeanor and attitude worked to redefine him partially as a ‘Tragic Hero’ (Kinsella et al., 2017).

Sawyer did not complete ‘the return’ aspect of the hero’s journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949) in the traditional sense. However, by opposing and fighting against The Man in Black, Sawyer benefited society on account of the fact that The Man in Black represented everything evil and dark on The Island, and, if successful, this dark entity would extend its influence past The Island to ultimately turn the world into a dark place.

Sawyer’s transformation demonstrates the epitome of the notion that all people, no matter how seemingly evil and irrevocably afflicted by their past, have the capacity to transform into a hero. Sawyer’s transformation also shows how invaluable relationships and interactions with other people are to one’s innermost development. No matter how independent and distrustful of the world Sawyer was upon coming to the island, the relationships he forged with his fellow islanders brought the inner aspects of his heroism out into the light and allowed him to develop traits such as leadership. Sawyer’s transformation brings hope for humanity in the sense that even the most unlikely underdogs have the potential of becoming remarkable individuals who can make the world a better place. The message of hope for humanity can be found in the message that great good can be found in some of the most seemingly villainous individuals.

REFERENCES

- Allison, S. T. (2015). The initiation of heroism science. *Heroism Science*, 1, 1-8.
- 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. (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, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Kramer, R. M. (Eds.) (2017). *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2013). Heroic leadership: An influence taxonomy of 100 exceptional individuals. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., Marrinan, A. R., Parker, O. M., Spyrou, S. P., Stein, M. (2019). The metamorphosis of the hero: Principles, processes, and purpose. *Frontiers in Psychology*.
- Allison, S. T., & Setterberg, G. C. (2016). Suffering and sacrifice: Individual and collective benefits, and implications for leadership. In S. T. Allison, C. T. Kocher, & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Frontiers in spiritual leadership: Discovering the better angels of our nature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bender, J. (Director), & Abrams, J. J., & Williams, S. (Writers). (2006, February 08). "The Long Con". In *LOST*. Harrisonburg, Virginia: ABC.
- Baumard, N. & Boyer, P. (2013). Explaining moral religions. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Volume 17, Issue 6, 272-280.
- Campbell, J. (1971). *Man & Myth: A Conversation with Joseph Campbell*. *Psychology Today*, July 1971.
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New World Library.
- 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.
- Eylon, D., & Allison, S. T. (2005). The frozen in time effect in evaluations of the dead. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1708-1717.
- Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011, April 11). Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism. *Review of General Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0022672
- Gray, K., Anderson, S., Doyle, C. M., Hester, N., Schmitt, P., Vonasch, A., Allison, S. T., and Jackson, J. C. (2018). To be immortal, do good or evil. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.
- Kafashan, S., Sparks, A., Griskevicius, V., & Barclay, P. (2014). Prosocial behaviour and social status. In J. T. Cheng, J. L. Tracy, & C. Anderson (eds) *The Psychology of Social Status* (pp. 139-158). New York: Springer.
- Kafashan, S., Sparks, A., Rotella, A., & Barclay, P. (2016). Why Heroism Exists: Evolutionary Perspectives on Extreme Helping. In S.T.Allison, G.R.Goethals, & R.M.Kramer (Eds.) *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, pp. 36-57. Routledge.
- Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., & Igou, E. R. (2015). Zeroing in on heroes: A prototype analysis of hero features. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 114- 127.

Vandello, J. A., Goldschmied, N. P., & Richards, D. A. R. (2007). The appeal of the underdog. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33, 1603-1616.