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Jack Bauer: The Heroic Transformation of the Ultimate Moral Rebel

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JACK BAUER: THE HEROIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE ULTIMATE MORAL REBEL

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In December 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks broke the law by saying one word: “No.” When Parks refused to give up her seat in protest of segregation, she was arrested for her defiance. Today Parks is remembered as a hero and looking back one can see she had the moral high ground. What’s interesting is that at the time Rosa Parks was treated like criminal for exercising a basic right. This leads to the ethical question: Is it wrong to break the law no matter how unjust it may seem? People will argue that no matter how unjust the law, it is still wrong to break it in protest because doing so will set a dangerous precedent. The counter-argument to this idea is that we as a society aren’t going to break a law in mass protest unless some part of that law is deeply unjust. This idea was proposed by Henry David Thoreau and has been coined as “civil disobedience.” Thoreau argued that as a society we

have a responsibility to put pressure on our lawmakers if a law is unjust, and if they ignore us than we have no choice but to take matters into our own hands.

Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland in Fox's hit TV series *24*, took the idea of "civil disobedience" to a new extreme through eight seasons of thrilling and at times cheesy drama and action. The basic mechanism underlying *24* was that events occurred in real time. A *24* season consisted of 24 episodes in which each episode was an hour long in air time, but also an hour long in the show; therefore each season consumed one day. During each of these days Jack Bauer had to stop a terrorist attack by the end of the day, but with so many lives on the line Jack Bauer had to cross the line of the law. As Bauer put it himself, "I will do whatever it takes to save them and I mean whatever it takes." During his career Jack Bauer saved millions of lives but in doing so he disobeyed superiors (including the President at times), but more importantly he tortured people and violated the constitution.

Many characters in the show and many viewers call Jack Bauer a sociopath, but in this chapter I am arguing to dispel this notion. This chapter will also examine the type of hero Jack Bauer is by examining his key attributes, his journey and the transformation he went through during his journey, and his journey's ultimate impact on society.

BAUER AND HERO TAXONOMY

Jack Bauer may occupy two places in the hero situation-based taxonomy proposed by Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011). The first and most obvious classification would be a "military and other duty-bound physical risk heroes" (Franco et al., 2011). As a field agent for the Los Angeles Counter Terrorist Unit, Jack Bauer put his life on the line every day while chasing potential terrorist leads. Bauer exceeded his call of duty like it was a part of his call of duty. There were many instances where he was ready to give his own life even when there were other options on the table. Bauer often found himself in a situation where he had to choose between saving his family and saving thousands of innocent lives, but somehow he always managed to evade these ultimatums and save everyone.

As mentioned earlier, Jack Bauer could also be a social hero because he broke the law in situations where he needed to do it for the greater good of the American people. The reason why Jack Bauer doesn't quite fit into the social hero category is because he is not breaking the law due to its unjust nature but rather because it is inconvenient given the urgency of the matter. According to the United States constitution, people shall not be subject to cruel and unusual punishment. One would not be going out on a limb to say that some of Bauer's punishment methods were cruel and unusual. One of Bauer's favorite moves for interrogation was shooting people and then sticking his gun into their open wounds.

This raises the question about whether it is appropriate for Bauer to obstruct due process of law and torture a terrorist on U.S. soil for the greater good of possibly saving millions of innocent citizens. Jack Bauer understands it is not ethical; he does not view what he does as appropriate. Bauer realizes that he doesn't have time to play philosopher because something terrible must be done to stop something catastrophic from happening. Jack Bauer is a hero because he is willing to dirty his own conscience to save others. Bauer has succumbed to a phenomenon called the "hindsight bias" in that looking back and seeing how everything worked out it is easy to say Bauer was a hero. At the time, however, he was criticized for his methods. Thus, Bauer has been anointed the nickname of "The Ultimate Moral Rebel" (Mouw, 2010).

Bauer and the Attributes of a Hero

Joseph Campbell (1949), who could be called the parent of heroism studies, said "Heroes have an irresistible and mysterious power" (Franco et al., 2011). For Jack Bauer, this power was both a blessing and a curse. Bauer was able to withstand some of the most dangerous situations and overcome insurmountable odds in dramatic ways. This irresistible and mysterious power was also the same thing that dragged Bauer's loved ones into situations they had no business being in (Franco et al., 2011). Bauer would be told later in the series, "You're cursed, Jack. Everything you touch, one way or another, ends up dead." When Bauer absorbed this truth, it struck a nerve with him because he knew it was true. Almost every person and relationship in his life had been sacrificed for the greater good of society. This sacrifice was a unique attribute of Jack Bauer, but he also displays all the standard attributes of a hero.

Bauer and the “Great Eight” Traits

Allison and Goethals (2011) conducted a study of people’s perceptions of the common attributes associated with being a hero. These perceived traits were compiled into eight parent attributes, and this group of attributes was dubbed “the great eight” traits of heroes. The great eight consists of the traits of smart, strong, caring, selfless, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals 2011). Bauer displays all of these attributes in a unique fashion. He has an intelligence for his job as a field agent that is unmatched in his world. Bauer finds creative ways to kill his enemies, such as when at one point he threw an enemy into a dishwasher where the knives were pointing outwards. Bauer’s enemies fear his strength. At certain points in the series when Bauer is being hunted down, his enemies often warn each other about how highly trained and competent Bauer is. He also displays brute strength as he never loses a fist fight during the entire series.

Compassion is definitely not the first trait that people think of when considering Jack Bauer. Bauer does care deeply about his loved ones, but because his job takes them away from him he shows no compassion towards his enemies because he blames them for what he has lost. It is to Jack’s benefit that he does not take mercy on his enemies because it makes him more effective at his job of saving as many lives as possible. Selflessness is Bauer’s most defined trait, as everyone knows he does not do what he does for the fame. Bauer sacrifices everything he has so others can keep everything they have, and yet the series ends with him as a fugitive of the United States government. He saves millions of lives, sacrificed his own and never receives recognition for it; this is most certainly heroism with a capital “H”.

People who are charismatic tend to draw people towards them like a magnet. Jack Bauer’s charisma stems from his bluntness. Out of all the candidates people want Bauer to work for them because they know he will find some way, no matter what, to get the job done. This relentlessness is reminiscent of his irresistible and mysterious charisma mentioned earlier. If there is one thing that Jack Bauer is not, it is a quitter, and no one would blame him if he did quit. After losing his wife, his best friend, and the relationship with his daughter, Bauer is able to work his way out of dark depressions.

Often a season will open with Bauer in a depression, a new terror threat will surface and Bauer will be forced out of his retirement or firing. This new challenge pulls him out of his depression because he needs to be his best self to get the job done. If Jack Bauer is not reliable then the United States in the world of “24” would be decimated. Jack’s bosses jump through hoops to get Bauer involved with the newest threat. Bauer gets pulled into a crisis by the FBI while being indicted by them at the same time. Jack Bauer is certainly not considered an inspiration to society but he should be. From the little glimpse we get of normal civilians on the show, we see that they view Bauer as deranged and dangerous. However, if they knew what he went through they would see him as the inspiration that we, the audience, know him to be.

BAUER’S JOURNEY AND TRANSFORMATION

Introduction to the Hero’s Journey

According to Joseph Campbell, the hero’s journey consists of three stages encompassed into the hero’s “monomyth” (Campbell, 1949). These three stages are departure, initiation and return. Each season of 24 could be considered a different hero’s journey for Jack Bauer, yet this would ignore the overarching transformation that takes place across eight seasons and a reboot series. At the end of the last series Bauer is still alive, which raises the question: Is Jack Bauer’s transformation complete? The short answer is yes and this is due to the some of the non-traditional features of Bauer’s heroic transformation. Let’s now examine each stage of Bauer’s journey.

Departure

Before the departure of a hero even begins, the hero usually has a calling (Dik et al., 2017). When choosing his career Bauer found his calling by making an environment-fit choice. To make this choice effectively, he had to understand himself and the opportunities the world had to offer (Dik et al., 2017). By understanding this idea, Bauer was able to choose a role that optimized his skills to the benefit of society. In the P-E fit chart Bauer fits under the role of the police detective (Dik et al., 2017). The core value of this role is independence, which is a core attribute of Bauer. Many times in the series Bauer goes rogue because

he need to circumvent government restraints on him to get the job done. Bauer is arguably more dangerous on a mission alone than in the group because his level of intuition is so far above everyone else that other allies will slow him down. There are three dimensions of calling, and Bauer mostly fulfills the third. This third dimension of a calling is “the sense that one’s work is not principally carried out for personal happiness or fulfillment but rather to advance the well-being of others, or the greater good” (Dik et al., 2017). This is the story of Jack Bauer’s life.

Before a hero departs on their journey, they are living in a state of comfort and are familiar with their world. The first season of 24 opens with Bauer at home with his wife and daughter. Bauer’s wife and daughter aren’t getting along, but in the same way that all families don’t always get along. It is apparent that Bauer feels comfortable and is happy with his home life. Like many heroes, Bauer does not leave his world of comfort by choice. Bauer gets called into work late at night for something that seems to be routine. It turns out that it’s not routine and a terrorist group is trying to assassinate a presidential candidate. While this is escalating, Bauer’s daughter gets kidnapped. Bauer is now in a situation where terrorists are blackmailing him to not do his job. At the end of the first season Bauer reaches the breaking point of his world of comfort.

After rescuing his daughter and stopping the terrorists, Bauer watches his wife bleed to death right in front of him. With Bauer’s wife now dead and his relationship with his daughter strained, the two loving constants in his life are gone. As tragic as this situation was, the pain was necessary for Bauer to undergo his transformation and become the hero the world needed.

Campbell (1949) describes the hero’s transformation as follows: “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.” During this journey, three transformations are said to take place: A transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017; Ross, 2019). We have mentioned the hero venturing from the common world, which is the transformation of setting (Campbell, 1949). Let’s now look at the transformation of self.

Initiation

Usually the initiation stage and transformation of oneself requires a mentor to guide the experience. For Bauer, there is not any one individual who guides his transformation but rather a group of people. Bauer is transformed into someone who uses unconventional methods to do his job, and adopt his unorthodox ways he needs the support of his work colleagues. Bauer is able to gain the trust of people within an hour after meeting them. Bauer's energy gravitates people towards him and he gains trust fast. This is where the argument of Bauer being a sociopath should be put to rest. Bauer makes genuine friendships, and he shows time and time again that he would put his life on the line for these people. If he were a sociopath he would have sacrificed them for his own benefit.

During a hero's initiation, the hero encounters the toughest obstacles they will have to face (Campbell, 1949). For Bauer, this initiation featured the death of everyone he got close to, the countless terror threats he put down, and being imprisoned by the Chinese for three years. Ultimately initiation ends when the hero slays "the dragon" (Campbell, 1949). This is not a literal dragon, but rather an enemy that encompasses the trial one needs to overcome to fulfill the heroic transformation. Part of the dragon theory is that a portion of the hero lives within their dragon, so when they destroy the dragon they are not only vanquishing their enemy but also vanquishing something that lives inside them to complete their transformation. Jack Bauer's dragon was president Charles Logan. Logan was a true sociopath willing destroy anyone to cement his legacy. Some of Logan's sociopathic tendencies lived inside Bauer, but in the moment when Logan is ultimately brought down by Bauer in the 8th season the distinction between the two of them is clear. Bauer is a hero fighting for the people he loved, while Logan only fights for himself.

Return

The final stage of the monomyth is the return, in which the hero uses the transformation they have received to transform society. It could be argued that Bauer's transformation of society didn't happen, or hasn't happened yet, as Bauer was never able to give what he gained back to society. Most people

probably wouldn't be able to relate to what Bauer learned anyway. In many hero's journeys, the hero returns to their world as the "master of both worlds.", and for Bauer this is not the case. Despite not achieving this dual identity, Bauer is still a hero because he spent his entire career sacrificing himself to save society, and thus it would be foolish to say that he is not a hero just because he did not fully complete Campbell's return phase of the journey. Every hero's transformation will differ in a multitude of ways. These deviations will be examined in the next section.

Characterizing Bauer's Transformation

No hero journeys are identical, and in fact there are ten common ways that journeys can differ: subject; scale; speed; duration; timing; direction; type; depth; openness; and source (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Bauer's Journey differs with a few of these characteristics. Arguably the most important is Bauer's type of transformation. Bauer's type of transformation differs because he is already highly competent and trained when the series begins. Bauer has already been transformed physically, motivationally, and intellectually. During the series Bauer will undergo a moral transformation and an emotional transformation. Bauer's moral transformation could ironically be described as an immoral transformation. His transformation was a paradox because he used unethical methods to save lives, and saving lives is usually considered ethical. In other words, Bauer needed to become immoral to do something moral, with his means justifying his ends. Bauer's emotional transformation is intriguing because it is a dynamic transition. When the series begins, Bauer is emotionally in touch with himself and the people around him. Bauer almost becomes a tragic hero and falls from grace emotionally after his wife dies (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Bauer is emotionally out of synch for a while, but as the series moves on and he forms new relationships, these insensitivities disappear and once again he is transformed emotionally.

There is no doubt that there is also a great depth in Bauer's heroism because there is nothing superficial about what he does. A hero who is superficial should not be considered a hero; the motivation should matter, as heroism cannot be a facade. For Bauer, heroism is not a pretense because he gains nothing and sacrifices everything. The speed of transformation is another characteristic

of transformation that is very interesting in the case of Jack Bauer. While Bauer's transformation ultimately takes roughly 15 years of time in the series (about two years pass between each of the 8 seasons), Bauer only transforms on the specific day that is the focus of each season. While the transformation happens over a long period time, it also happens in speedy clusters. This is not an unusual pattern in hero's transformations (Allison, 2015; Williams, 2018; Worthington & Allison, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Jack Bauer is a hero because he sacrificed most of his personal life to achieve aims that were much larger than himself. Critics argue that Bauer tortured people, and torture is never justifiable. This chapter has argued that Bauer's heroism demands a more nuanced understanding of his complex life. Bauer tortured a few lives to save millions, a fact that demonstrated Bauer's awareness of the bigger picture. When the going got tough and Jack Bauer had to make a tough decision with limited time and resources, he put ethics to the side. It is the "act now pray for forgiveness later" attitude. No human is perfect, which means no hero can be perfect either.

The series 24 has not been discussed much throughout this chapter, but there are some relevant aspects of the series that offer insight into Jack Bauer's character. Some series have multiple main characters, or a main character with really strong supporting characters, but 24 could be called "The Jack Bauer Show". Eight seasons and a reboot were all built around one iconic character. Many people who have never even seen the series know the name Jack Bauer because he is such a developed and dynamic character. People joke about his grumpiness, or his catchphrase "dammit" (you can't drop f-bombs on Fox), but at the end of the day everyone admired him. This is the only thing that matters in the debate over whether Bauer is a hero or not. There is no real objective way to define heroism. One can study the taxonomy, the attributes, the journey, and then transformation, but in the end the judgement of heroism is up to people's perceptions. If one is viewed as the hero, then that is the truth of those viewers; similarly, people who do not view Bauer as a hero are also

expressing a subjective truth. Heroism, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder (Allison & Goethals, 2017). If one concludes that Jack Bauer is not a hero after 15 years of devoting every shred of himself to the betterment of society, then heroism is not a quality that is attainable by humans.

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