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# The Heroic Transformative Journey of Aeneas, Hero of the Trojan War

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## THE HEROIC TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY OF AENEAS, HERO OF THE TROJAN WAR

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*“He would say that when your mind is telling you you’re done,  
you’re really only 40 percent done.”*

– Finch (2017)

When a person thinks that they have exhausted all of their energy and that they’ve got nothing left to give, they have truly only burned through forty percent of their “tank”. This was a common philosophy that the Navy SEALs called the forty percent rule. When all of the tiny voices inside your mind band together and unanimously call out that enough is enough, that you have no more give, your body is capable of doing things you never witnessed before. This explains why people can achieve extraordinary physical accomplishments and actions some would deem impossible to complete. A 100-mile long race, held in San Diego, was typically run in teams consisting

of six men. As impressive of an accomplishment as this is, it is even more impressive when another man runs it alone. David Goggins, a 260-pound retired Navy SEAL, completed the entire race alone, breaking several small bones in his feet and suffering kidney damage along the way. This man figured out he had more to give, and then tapped into his reserve energy.

Aeneas was the protagonist character in the epic story, *The Aeneid*, written by the ancient Roman poet Virgil. The storyline takes place in ancient times that scholars believe to be roughly 1250 B.C.E. Aeneas was widely known as a classic “mythical hero” of that era. The story of *The Aeneid* is told from the point of view of Aeneas, and it captures all the graphic details of his life as a Trojan soldier. The city of Troy was overtaken by the Greeks, which forced Aeneas to flee and build a “new Troy”. His journey to heroism begins with his departure from Troy.

Aeneas had a mindset very similar to the retired Navy SEAL. He was given plenty of reasons to quit. Temptation after temptation lured him away from accomplishing his heroic deeds, and yet he managed to navigate his way back toward his goal. The following chapter seeks to answer the following questions: How does Aeneas break through his “40 percent” limit to accomplish his goals? How is Aeneas’ journey different from what Joseph Campbell (1949) refers to as the “monomythic journey of the hero”? What distinguishes Aeneas’ heroism from other heroes in the ancient world?

#### LINEAR OVERVIEW OF AENEAS’ JOURNEY

The structure of the hero’s journey was described by renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949). After researching thousands of heroic stories from around the world, Campbell concluded that all of these stories tended to share a common structure. This pattern is what is referred to as “the monomyth of the hero’s journey” (Campbell, 1949). The heroic structure consists of the hero beginning their journey by being called away from their homeland, either by their own choice or some other force pulling them from the comfort of their home. Upon leaving, they will encounter numerous trials and impediments blocking their way toward ultimately accomplishing their goal (Campbell, 1949). Amidst

the suffering from these impediments, the hero recognizes their missing dispositional quality. This missing attribute is what hinders the hero from truly becoming “heroic”.

Another common theme within the monomyth structure is the hero encountering a wise mentor or some sort of aid. This aid will help lead the hero to their transformation by providing them with wisdom. Upon acquiring their missing quality and triumphing over numerous challenges, the hero undergoes a personal transformation that forever changes them. Possessing this new quality enables the hero to continue their journey and ultimately overcome their villains and other oppositional forces. The hero finally returns to their homeland triumphant and transformed, using their transformation to alter society and essentially give back to the world.

Aeneas’ journey to become a hero differs somewhat from what Campbell (1949) calls the monomyth of the hero. The details of this monomythic form of heroic transformation consists of the hero being called away from their present home, an event known as the departure stage. This calling can derive from one of three different sources or some combination of sources. A person can be drawn away by a transcendental force, which is a force acted on a hero by a power greater than themselves; they can depart for the greater good of some entity; or they can be drawn away because of a particular purpose or meaning associated with the departure (Dik et al., 2017).

Campbell (1949) then explains that once the hero has abandoned their home and journeyed to unknown territory, they will then be “initiated” by encountering oppositional forces impeding their path to success. While trying to circumvent these impediments, the hero will often find a “friend” or wise advisor who will help them along their journey. The hero learns of their own weaknesses and strengths, and through their journey they will acquire ways to eliminate their weaknesses. Ultimately the hero should defeat their villains, and with their newfound knowledge and strength they will return to their homeland and use their knowledge to better society. This boon to society lies at the heart of what Campbell (1949) refers to as the final “return” stage.

## The Hero's Departure

Aeneas' departure came very abruptly in the middle of the night when the Greeks infiltrated his city and laid ruin to the once beautiful Troy. Aeneas' first motive for departing was for the greater good. Had Aeneas stayed and fought, he would not have been alive to lead the refugees who were looking up to him for answers. Although it might not have been the classic "heroic" method to stay and fight for your land or die trying, Aeneas recognized that the greater good of his fellow Trojans lives were at stake, which inspired him to leave (Dik et al., 2017).

Another motive for fleeing Troy was an outside force. In a dream Aeneas had the night before the Greeks broke into Troy, he was told that he must flee from Troy and take the survivors with him. He was informed that he was destined to build a new city in Italy. This type of calling falls under transcendental forces, because he was urged by a spirit in his dream (Dik et al., 2017).

## Element of the Underdog

During Aeneas' departure from Troy, his underdog status became apparent. An underdog is a person or party that is disadvantaged in some way; they are placed against an opponent who is advantageous, thus greatly diminishing the odds of the underdog succeeding (Vandello et al., 2017). Aeneas was compelled to flee Troy because the Trojans were completely and utterly dominated. The Greeks held the element of surprise, they had the man-power, and they possessed superior weaponry. The Trojans were beaten in all facets of war, which made them an underdog.

Interestingly enough, Vandello and his colleagues give four main reasons why people tend to support underdogs and why people revere successful underdogs. We want the underdog to win because we believe it will balance the scales of justice (Vandello et al., 2017). The Greeks dominate the Trojans across the board, and a Trojan victory would engender greater equality with the Greeks. We also root for the underdog because we relate to and identify with the underdog more easily (Vandello et al., 2017). We know what it is like to be disadvantaged and we want an underdog to win because we ourselves desired to win under

similar circumstances. Another reason why we want an underdog to win is because of the “thrill of the unexpected”. The odds of the Trojans winning over the Greeks were severely small, so a Trojan victory would give us an emotional charge. Finally, we root for the underdog because a victory from them brings us hope (Vandello et al., 2017). If the advantaged party always wins, why even try? When an underdog emerges victorious, we are injected with hope for the future.

### Beginning Impediments

Even during Aeneas’ initial departure he encounters impediments. Many of his friends are killed in the battle, which can demoralize a hero. His wife, who was with him while Trojans fled, died amidst the chaos. These elements of suffering hold potential benefits, however. Of the ten benefits to suffering, the most pertinent to Aeneas is that pain and suffering can prepare you for glory by giving you a divine purpose. Although this idea is derived from the scripture, the point is valid for almost all heroic suffering (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Suffering can instill a purpose or meaning into the life of the one who experiences suffering. For Aeneas, it is crucial that he must use suffering to discover his purpose in life.

Villains also emerge as Aeneas leaves Troy. Juno, wife of Zeus, favors the Greek side and poses as Aeneas’ most consistent and dangerous villain throughout his journey. Parks (2017) describes numerous purposeful types of impediments that a hero might face, one of which is enacted because the impediment aims to gain a competitive advantage (Parks, 2017). By impeding Aeneas’ progression through his journey, Juno gives the Greeks an advantage.

### Key Heroic Traits

Even at the outset of Aeneas’ departure, he displays some heroic traits. He is a natural born leader, commanding his men effectively and leading them into battle. He also demonstrates deep compassion for his own people. This is evident when he witnessed the death of the Trojan King, Priam, who was slaughtered on his own altar. Aeneas’ compassionate leadership is directed toward the good of his comrades and not for himself. He is naturally cooperative in

his social values, because while he fights for his comrades, he is also fighting for himself and for the fame he can acquire (Messick & McClintock, 1968). His actions are not entirely altruistic, a downside to Aeneas' heroic makeup.

Allison and Goethals (2011) coined the term, "The Great Eight", to refer to eight attributes that best describe heroes. The qualities that make up the great eight are intelligence, strength, reliability, resilience, care, charisma, selflessness, and inspiration (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017). Of the great eight heroic attributes, Aeneas at this point in his journey appears to lack wit. His resilience and bravery inspired him to stay in Troy to fight, and it wasn't until he was indirectly forced to flee that he "chose" to leave Troy. This shows that although he is both resilient and selfless, these traits are so abundant that they cloud his judgment and intelligent decision making. This will be Aeneas' missing heroic trait that he is destined to acquire during his journey (Allison et al., 2017).

#### THE JOURNEY, PART ONE

The story of Aeneas differs from the monomythic heroic adventure that seems most common for heroes (Fuhrer, N.D.). Aeneas actually undertakes two journeys to transform himself and society. He also never returns to his homeland after he departs from it, which differs from most traditional heroic journeys. There are two reasons for this difference. First, Aeneas' homeland is completely overtaken by Greeks, making his return there impossible. Second, a common practice in antiquity was to show *pietas*, which is strong devotion to the gods, your family, and country. With this in mind, Aeneas must obey the commands of the gods, and this prevents him from returning to Troy. In Aeneas' first journey, he develops more skills to help him during his second journey (Anderson, 2015).

#### Villains, Obstacles, and Allies

Juno continues to present a threat in Aeneas' life, even after he departs from Troy. As previously mentioned, Juno's intentions reflect the "competitive advantage purposeful impediment" described by Parks (2017). Juno conned the god of wind, Aeolus, to unleash a tornado of winds down on Aeneas' fleet. Many Trojans died as a result of this storm, which served as a formidable obstacle that

Aeneas had to overcome. This incident also threw Aeneas off his course into unknown lands, which compelled him to venture into an unfamiliar world. He is thrown out of his comfort zone and must find a way to lead his men to safety, magnifying his leadership qualities and molding him into a true hero. This first obstacle is also marked by Aeneas receiving his first assistance from an outside source. Specifically, help came from Aeneas' best friend, Ascanius, who offers clarity to Aeneas' emotions by providing unbiased facts to help Aeneas make decisions.

Aeneas did not truly know what his purpose was for enduring all of these events. Many of the friends and mentors described by Allison and Smith (2015) target Aeneas' lack of purpose directly. For instance, Aeneas' mother, the goddess Venus, comes down from Olympus and puts Aeneas in a shroud so that no one on the island can see them. This assistance helps them get into the city of the land on which the Trojans wrecked. Aeneas is thus better able to discern his purpose. Both Ascanius and Venus are examples of our hero receiving outside assistance, which helps trigger the transformation process. Another divine entity who assists Aeneas in his first journey is Jupiter, king of the gods.

While on the island, Aeneas becomes distracted by the Queen of the land and loses his will to continue his journey. Jupiter reminds Aeneas that his journey is meant for much more and he must not remain on the island. This given Aeneas temporary motivation and purpose for continuing his journey, and he thus regains his mental focus and leaves the island. All three of these characters offer assistance to Aeneas and without this help Aeneas may not have completed his journey to heroism. Another friend who aids Aeneas is a man named Nautes (Anderson, 2015). Later in Aeneas' journey, he was presented with a large decision impacting all of his fleet. Aeneas' lack of purpose makes him unable to come to a decision, and Nautes offers a solution. Aeneas adopts Nautes idea, and this aid once again demonstrates how assistance was necessary to guide Aeneas toward his ultimate transformation.

### Transformation as Realization

During the first part of Aeneas' journey, his lack of wisdom and knowledge of purpose hinders him, making him dependent on the aid of outside sources.

The transformation and realization of his first journey occurs when he is in the underworld, visiting his father. This pivotal moment is the climax of the hero's journey (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Here Aeneas acquires wisdom. He witnesses all of the souls who have passed away and sees his comrades who died in battle. This builds his compassion for humans, as well as a stronger comradeship for his fellow Trojans. His most significant transformation occurs when he meets with his father, who tells him what his true journey will lead to, and what it is all for. Aeneas' first part of the journey was finding the intelligence, wisdom, and clarity of the purpose of his journey. This transformation is what Allison and Smith (2015) describe as being a mental transformation. Such a transformation targets Aeneas' mind and endows him and his men with a true purpose. Now aid is not needed to supply Aeneas with temporary purpose, as he now has generated a purpose for himself.

#### THE JOURNEY, PART TWO

The first part of Aeneas' journey was about finding his true purpose in his life, as well as obtaining insights and wisdom. Now that he has acquired these traits and transformed his mental state, he must now embark on a second journey to transform his land and people. However, where the typical monomyth of the hero would have Aeneas return to his homeland, Aeneas instead creates a new homeland that is much different from Troy. Some might argue that while he is in a different location, he still has the same men from his homeland, and thus essentially the same society. However, this is not quite true, as Aeneas gathers men from all around the region, making his society extremely heterogeneous. This journey is also Aeneas' final step towards his climactic entry into heroism (Anderson, 2015).

#### Villains, Obstacles, and Allies

In this part of Aeneas' journey, his goal of creating an empire is halted by a man named Turnus. This is Aeneas' largest mortal enemy and their rivalry, along with the aid of Juno, caused a massive war. The Ascanians were a group of soldiers that came to the aid of Aeneas when he was at war with Turnus. This type of aid is not a "mentoring" aid, because Aeneas has already undergone

his transformation; nonetheless, the Ascanians were crucial to Aeneas' victory over Turnus. Aeneas' mother also has her husband forge Aeneas new god-like weaponry and shields, which helps him in battle. Jupiter indirectly comes to Aeneas' aid by demanding that the gods remain neutral, and no longer intervene in the affairs of the mortals. Jupiter, the Ascanians, and Venus all are allies to Aeneas, and come to his aid on his quest to heroism; however, they do not represent the mentoring aid that Allison et al. (2017) describe as key to the hero journey.

A major obstacle that drives Aeneas away from his new goal is the death of one of his good friends, Pallas. Aeneas is devastated by the loss, and for a moment his old qualities return to him, as he becomes distracted and loses focus toward his goal. This type of impediment is more accidental, as it was not directly intended to pose as a purposeful impediment (Parks, 2017). However, his previous transformation enables him to overcome this setback, and he uses Pallas' death to fight harder and turn the tides of the war. This is a good demonstration of how Aeneas' first transformation helps him on his goal to completing his heroic quest.

#### Aeneas' Final Transformation

Aeneas' final transformation occurs at the very end of the story. Aeneas stands over Turnus' body and must decide whether or not to kill him. In a moment of weakness, Aeneas feels compassion towards Turnus and wants to spare his life. However, seeing Pallas' dead body draped in the battle field, Aeneas come to his senses and decides to kill Turnus. This pivotal moment completes Aeneas' journey toward heroism. Aeneas has finally defeated the Greeks and all his enemies, and he has realized his true purpose for coming to this new land.

#### SUMMARY OF AENEAS' HEROISM

Aeneas embodies most of the great eight qualities that Allison and Goethals (2011) claim that a hero should possess. He is a strong leader and courageous in the battlefield. He is selfless, and puts his life on the line, demanding the safety of his Trojans before his own. He is caring, as evident in the way that he reacts over any death that occurs within his army. Aeneas also demonstrates charisma in charming people with his voice. Aeneas even charms a queen into

falling in love with him, just by the way he carries himself. The queen even kills herself after he leaves because she has fallen so madly in love with him. Aeneas also represents resilience, reliability, and inspiration for his team, all essential qualities of a war leader. He would never abandon them, nor would he ever quit. The lacking missing quality that Aeneas must find is knowledge and wisdom. He shows intelligence in war tactics; however, he lacks insight about his true destiny as well as the ability to think for the group as a whole. This is the missing quality that Aeneas must journey to find and act upon later.

### Missing Character Strengths

From a more general character umbrella, there are 24 character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Of these 24, Aeneas seems to lack only two. He lacks self-control at times, which was evident after he saw Pallas' death and went on a rampage killing Turnus' soldiers. Moreover, Aeneas partially lacks forgiveness and mercy. He can display this strength at times throughout his journey, but he lets his other emotions diminish this strength when he experiences immense sorrow.

### Why Aeneas was Chosen as a Hero

Aeneas' bloodline gave him a head start to heroism over anyone else seeking such status. Having a mother as a goddess gave him help from the gods, which represents yet another reason Aeneas rose to heroism. A group will designate a hero based on its needs (Decter-Frain et al., 2017). In this instance the Trojans were in disarray and needed both a leader and a hero to drag them out of turmoil. Aeneas was made a hero by the way he commanded his forces. He pitted his troops against the enemy, banding them together and showing tremendous leadership. Aeneas did not need iconic paintings or any other form of media to demonstrate his heroism; his name spread through society on its own. Everyone heard of the great Trojan War, and news of Aeneas' heroism travelled across the land via social contagion, a term defined by Decter-Frain et al. (2017) to explain the spread of heroism.

## Heroic Transformation

Of the five types of major transformations, Aeneas' transformation would best be classified as mental or intellectual in nature (Allison & Smith, 2015). He gains knowledge throughout the course of his journey, both about himself and about his destiny. Once he transforms his weaknesses, he then uses his new insights to fulfill his prophecy.

## Effect of the Transformation

This transformation helps Aeneas experience personal growth, without which Aeneas would not have been successful (Allison & Goethals, 2017). His transformation also offers healing to him and his fellow Trojans. Being the underdog, they have been broken down by the Greeks. This transformation helps heal the loss that Aeneas has had to face by allowing him to enjoy victory over Turnus. Aeneas lost his home, his wife, and many of his men and friends; this transformation helps heal Aeneas' shattered soul. It also restores his hope, giving him knowledge that he is meant for much more than the present life. His transformation also brings unity and union to his society, another known benefit of transformation (Allison & Goethals, 2017).

Having possessed the knowledge that he needs to establish a magnificent empire, he and the other Trojans were able to band together and work better as a unit. This transformation also allowed Aeneas to advance a new society. With his initial transformation, he was able to gain back his mental focus and the fighting between the Trojans and their enemies. It was this exact transformation that saved Aeneas' society from destruction, in the sense of sparing them from further warfare.

*The Aeneid* comes to a conclusion after Aeneas stabs Turnus, and so we do not see the full extent of Aeneas' transformation of his society. However, as the Roman Empire will rise in stature to dominate much of antiquity, we know that Aeneas was successful in establishing a new homeland and giving the new society the same knowledge of their destiny that he was given (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Aeneas clearly had a transformative effect on the well-being of his army and his fellow citizens (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Aeneas was by no means an ordinary individual before his journey to heroism. He fought in the Trojan War and already held many qualities of a hero. What he did not possess was wisdom, as well as knowledge of a greater purpose. These deficits prevented Aeneas from becoming a true hero, as he needed to fully realize his true potential in life. Some would not classify Aeneas as a hero because he murdered many people on his way to achieving legendary status. This chapter has argued that Aeneas was a great war hero, with his actions helping to forever transform society and inspire millions of people for millennia and from all corners of the globe.

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