Malala Yousafzai: How One Girl’s Heroic Transformation Forever Changed the World

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A 15-year-old, Pakistani girl was being jostled about on a tightly packed van filled with her classmates on the way home from school. She was sitting next to her best friend, chattering aimlessly about only the most important things in a 15-year-old girl’s life: exams, friends and boys. The girl knew the route the van took that winded about the lively streets of Pakistan from school to her home well, as she took it faithfully every day. However, on that particular day she was so engulfed in conversation with her best friend, she did not realize how the roads became oddly quiet nor how her bus slowed to a screeching halt in the middle of one of the patchy, dirt roads. Today she does not remember the man jumping aboard the van and repeating her name; demanding to know which seat she was occupying, nor
him firing three shots directly into her skull. Three bullets that should have left both her and her campaign for girls’ education, dead. But she did survive, and instead of death the bullets brought her resilience and growth. She found clarity and purpose in her life and underwent a transformation so monumental that she impacted society forever.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an analysis of Malala Yousafzai’s transformation, drawing from the literature of heroism science. In doing so, the chapter will explore elements of Malala’s heroic traits, calling, suffering, and journey, with an emphasis on how these elements transformed her mentally and emotionally. This chapter will also discuss the implications of being a hero as a woman. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Malala’s overall impact on women’s rights and the feminist movement.

MALALA’S HEROIC TRAITS EXHIBITED FROM EARLY LIFE

While all heroes possess many attributes that make them heroic in nature, studies have found that there are eight traits that heroes have that are viewed as heroic in the eyes of the public. While it is unlikely that a single person may possess all traits, most heroes have a number of these attributes, which have been coined, “The Great Eight”, and they include the traits of smart, strong, resilient, selfless, caring, charismatic, reliable, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Through inspection of Malala’s life, it is evident that from both an extremely young age and through her actions now, that she exhibits a number of these traits.

As a young Muslim girl, Malala would frequently tell her parents she planned to defy Muslim culture and not wear a hijab covering her entire face. While she did intend to follow the culture to an extent and dress modestly, she said she would never cover her face as, “her face was hers, and she could do with it what she pleased” (Yousafzai, 2013). Furthermore, Malala outright refused to conform to the stereotypical Muslim women role and stated she would never stay in the home to cook and clean. Rather, she would always continue to learn and grow and reach her full potential. To defy an entire culture in a way as blatant as Malala did categorizes her as strong. As a child, Malala was strong minded and firm in her decision to defy Muslim culture and refused to settle for anything
less than what she believed was fair and just, which is why she never felt compelled to conform to gender roles. This behavior has carried over into her activism today, as she continues to be strong in the face of challenge and fights for education rights tirelessly.

Additionally, Malala’s attributes of selfless and caring can be seen as early as her elementary school days as well. In one particular incident, Malala recalls seeing young children roughly her age picking through the trash in a Pakistani dump. Upon realizing these young children must sacrifice attending school and receiving an education for rummaging through garbage to help their families, she vowed to help (Yousafzai, 2013). It was at that point in her early life she understood how fortunate she was to have the opportunity to attend school. Although as a child there was not much she could do yet, her pledge to aid suffering children at such a young age is characteristic of a hero. This immense compassion is illustrated today as Malala has followed through on her pledge. It is her mission to ensure no children face the heart wrenching reality of picking through the trash.

Malala is an intelligent young woman and even early on she exhibited her wit and resilience as she organized peace rallies and “spoke out to anyone who would listen” (Yousafzai, 2013). Despite her message not being taken seriously at first, and the size of her audience in her middle school auditorium being notably smaller than her platform that reaches millions today, Malala fought tirelessly for what she believed in with intelligence, leadership and meticulous planning. These traits have carried over into her life today except now, instead of planning school wide peace rallies, she uses her intelligence and fighting spirit to organize world wide fundraisers.

Malala focused on the character traits she felt she were most prevalent in herself and worked to make those her most deep-seated attributes. This has allowed her to develop her heroic traits in such a way that she was able to transform herself from a girl with admirable traits into a political activist. Because of this work and these specific heroic character traits that Malala possesses, she has been able to use the great eight traits of heroes and her self-transformation to make a significant and positive impact on society as a whole.
Malala’s Heroic Calling

Still, the fact that Malala simply exhibited many of the great eight traits as a young child did not necessarily make her a hero. Instead, she had to find a calling. All heroes, at some point in their life, receive a “calling” to heroism. Whether it is a literal call to help others or a figurative call, all heroes have some form of summoning that stimulates their heroic potential. There are three different, yet widely accepted, types of calling: transcendent summons, purpose and meaning, and greater good (Dik et al., 2017). Malala Yousafzai has arguably received all three of these types of calling at some point in her life, and they have all fueled her activism.

Malala has received multiple types of callings, none of which is more important than her transcendent summons, which is defined as a calling from a higher power. When Malala speaks about why she fights so hard for all children to have education rights, despite the risks that come along to her own personal being, she says, “There was no decision to make. This was my calling. Some powerful force had come to dwell inside me, something bigger and stronger than me and it had made me fearless” (Yousafzai, 2013). These words were spoken after Malala had been made privy to the fact that her name had appeared on a Taliban death threat list. Despite this intense and frightening realization, Malala felt protected and compelled by a higher calling, almost as if being the voice of those who could not have one was her destiny here on Earth.

By similar means, Malala is a part of the greater good realm of calling, which explains an individual’s inner desire to help others and serve society. While Malala did have a role model in her father, the principal of one of Pakistan’s only all-girls schools, there was no one telling her she had to do anything more than attend school and receive an education. Malala could have been the same as many of her other intelligent but soft spoken and introverted classmates. The other girls in the school kept their heads down and refused to start conflict, as they already knew in Pakistan girls attending school was conflict. However, Malala felt compelled to go beyond herself and her own education and help the greater good rather than merely reap the benefits she was receiving through her schooling. Finally, it is evident Malala is also a part of the purpose and meaning category of calling. One could argue that she is a member of this grouping of calling in a
less definite sense than the other types of calling. Purpose and meaning address calling through obtaining and using a certain skill set; in this sense, Malala can be included in this classification of calling. Speaking about her career goals, Malala states, “I used to want to become a doctor, but after everything we had been through, I began to think becoming a political leader was a better choice. Our country had so many problems. Maybe someday I could help solve them” (Yousafzai, 2013). This sudden shift in career paths caused Malala to begin studying even harder in school and focusing on skills that political figures need, such as public speaking and personal relations, to achieve her goal. Malala molded herself into the type of person that would fit the political job description of an activist and intended to become exactly that. She used her calling for a specific job and purpose in life to uncover and develop a newfound set of competencies to achieve those goals.

**Initiation**

These various callings in Malala’s life were her “initiation” into her hero’s journey. The initiation stage of the hero’s journey is defined as the point in which a hero encounters certain sets of challenges and obstacles (Campbell, 1949). Malala’s initiation did not occur when she was first exposed to the problems Pakistani girls face regarding education, but instead when she became compelled to change these circumstances. This was the beginning of her social activism and where she cultivated her ideas and image to become the hero that she is today.

**Malala’s Suffering**

Malala hero’s journey has been characterized by more suffering than most people experience in an entire lifetime. Regardless of whether Malala became a hero and embarked on this journey or not, as a young Pakistani girl she was already faced with an immense amount of hardships by simply attending school. At the time Malala was growing up in Pakistan, the reign of Maulana Fazlullah was just beginning. Fazlullah was a radio “voice” designed to inspire the people of Pakistan but promoted a total dictatorship over them and instilled fear in every citizen. As this figure joined forces with the Taliban the streets of Pakistan became war zones. Anyone accused of practicing “Western” culture was given a death sentence and the Taliban army regularly followed through:
killing innocent people in the middle of the night, hanging people from trees in the middle of town, and abusing average citizens on the streets for sick amusement (Yousafzai, 2013).

However, as discussed earlier, when Malala received her death threat for her advocacy of girls’ education, she was not frightened. Instead, her fearless and resilient nature was revealed as she took this pain and fear and not only refused to stop her fight for equality, but fought harder. She describes how in the face of Taliban violence she would not respond with abomination but instead, “fight with peace, dialogue and dignity” (Yousafzai, 2013). This peaceful and mature approach to the immense suffering she was faced with only demonstrates Malala’s heroism; it also proved that she alone could stand up to an army of hate with love.

Her spin of positivity from tragedy does not stop at just a death threat, as Malala was soon shot three times, nearly killing her. She had to relearn basic motor and speech skills like she was a child, her entire face became disfigured and she had to go through countless vital surgeries. Yet remarkably, Malala even grew and benefited from this massive tragedy.

There is an abundance of research that illustrates there are at least six benefits that arise from suffering. These benefits include suffering as redemptive, suffering as a crossover point in life, suffering encouraging humility, suffering stimulating compassion, suffering promoting social union and suffering instilling meaning and purpose (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). Malala, in the wake of her tragedy, took a positive attitude and a forgiving spirit and used this pain to make not only herself stronger, but also her cause stronger.

First, Malala used her tragedy to transform herself from a young girl with a cause to a mature woman with a fight. Her suffering was used as redemption within herself as she realized what truly was important to her in her life. As she says, “when you see death, things change. When you’ve nearly lost your life, a funny face in the mirror is simply proof you’re still here on this Earth” (Yousafzai, 2013). Malala used her tragedy to reevaluate the importance of life and to understand that things that had mattered to her before, things that matter to most teenage girls like appearance, were completely trivial. Now that
she was given a second chance at life, she was going to live her life to the fullest extent possible.

Furthermore, Malala used this suffering to further ignite her personal purpose and meaning (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2017). After her tragedy and recovery, she only became more passionate about the right to education and began to fight even harder than before. She states that, "out of violence and tragedy came opportunity. I never forget that" (Yousafzai, 2013). This personal realization of newfound purpose caused Malala to be able to transform society, as she now understood the opportunity she had been given amidst this tragedy.

Malala further transformed society due to her suffering as she took her tragedy and promoted social union. Instead of becoming afraid of the Taliban and backing down she became stronger: “The Taliban shot me to try and silence me. Instead, the whole world was listening to my message now” (Yousafzai, 2013). As despicable and heart-wrenching as Malala’s shooting was, she took it as an opportunity to grow her platform. If she had never got shot, she probably would have never attracted the attention of celebrities and political leaders in the United States who helped her promote worldwide education with donations and resources she could not have obtained herself. She was appreciative, and she knew exactly what to do with this newfound platform because of her personal transformation. Her tragedy transformed society as well, as her cause gained more attention and help than ever before and united the world for women’s education rights.

DEPARTURE AND RETURN

This stage in Malala’s hero’s journey, directly after being shot, can be considered a quite literal departure. The departure stage is typically when the hero leaves their ordinary world for the first time (Campbell, 1949). In Malala’s case, she is airlifted out of Pakistan, the place where her cause began, to a hospital in England to recover and escape harm. This literal departure can be seen as Malala leaving Pakistan and everything she knew to continue her fight on a worldwide scale, something bigger than just Pakistan. In Pakistan, there was
little she could truly do to promote worldwide education; however, upon being airlifted into the first world, Malala could truly begin to transform herself and society.

Every hero must then complete their journey with some sort of return (Campbell, 1949). Malala never makes a literal return to her home of Pakistan, as it is too dangerous for her to do so currently. Malala’s case is unique in that the young activist vows her journey of fighting for education will never stop. She will continue to grow herself and her cause by speaking out against injustices and until her mission is completed, yet it may never be safe for Malala to make a literal return to Pakistan. However, she has made a figurative “return” to her home country of Pakistan through her increasing presence there in social services projects for causes such as ending the domestic child labor of young girls in the Swat district and continually pursuing education for boys and girls alike in Pakistan.

MALALA THE MARTYR

Malala can be classified as one of many different types of heroes, but ultimately Malala is best categorized as a martyr. Martyrs are religious or political figures who knowingly (sometimes deliberately) put their lives in jeopardy in the service of a cause or to gain attention to injustice (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011). Malala clearly does exactly this, by continually risking her own personal safety to advocate against the injustices of the Pakistani government. This type of person, a martyr, is rare in society as within the social values diagram, most people typically fall within the “cooperative”, “individualistic” and “competition” categories. All of these categories, involve some sense of personal gain with varying degrees of helping and hurting others. Malala’s form of martyrdom involves helping others and hurting the self; Malala was shot in the name of education for complete strangers. This is a feat many cannot accomplish, as most humans are wired to want some amount of personal gain in any action they pursue (Parks, 2017).

Similarly, Malala can be viewed as both a civil and a social hero within the classifications of the martyr subtype of hero. A civil hero is a person who puts
themselves at risk without any formal code nor training and a social hero is one who makes serious personal sacrifice for the sake of others (Kinsella et al., 2017). These two types of heroes can be seen as specifications of a martyr, as they both involve making sacrifices for others, which Malala has done and will continue to do for the entirety of her life. Furthermore, as a teenage girl in Pakistan, Malala clearly had no training to campaign against the Pakistani government and the Taliban, but she also had no obligation to do so. Yet, she fought anyway, even when she realized this fight would involve making monumental personal sacrifices in the name of the cause. This status as a martyr proves how Malala transformed herself by giving up her entire being to fight for a cause she felt passionate about and transform society as a whole.

Women Prejudice

Malala’s cause was not only about advocating for an education for girls, but also about achieving equality for women as a whole. However, as a Muslim, female, teenager attempting to be a leader, Malala had to overcome an immense amount of prejudice to even begin to establish a basis for achieving her goals. Since Malala has clearly exhibited many heroic traits and has continually stepped up and assumed a leadership position throughout her advocacy, it would be logical to assume her as a leader figure and hero in the movement of women’s rights. However, because of her gender it was difficult for her cause to be taken seriously and herself to be seen as a leader, even though her cause impacted primarily women and deserved to be led by a woman.

In her book, Malala describes a meeting with a United States ambassador in which she addressed him and said, “I request you help us girls to get an education” (Yousafzai, 2013) and the ambassador laughed in her face. Whether this prejudice was directed at Malala individually because she was a woman asking for change or if it was at the cause as a whole because it was only benefited women, Malala had to overcome the discrimination. It has been established empirically that women are more democratic leaders with better social values and more philanthropy; however, they are often seen as too feminine and not strong enough to be taken seriously as leaders (Hoyt, 2014).

Malala not only had to overcome gender bias within her struggle to gain education rights for girls but also had to overcome racial discrimination, as women who are not of Caucasian descent as widely viewed as even more unfit to be
leaders and heroes. These women are typically regarded as “invisible” and hold few leadership positions due to the superficially important combination of gender and race. Malala had to face this abundance of intolerance but she still did not let it stop her; instead she worked harder to achieve her goal for society. Today, Malala is regarded as a role model for young children worldwide. Along with campaigning for the education of young girls Malala is also contributing to the breaking of societal stereotype that only men can lead, as she is now one of the most influential heroines for young boys and girls alike to learn from and admire.

MALALA’S HEROISM AND THE HERO FUNCTION FRAMEWORK

Upon analysis of literature and empirical studies (Kinsella et al., 2015) the idea arose that the functions of heroes can be distributed into three categories. These categories, coined EMP, include enhancing the lives of others (enhancing), promoting morals and virtues (moral modeling) and protecting individuals from physical and/or psychological threats (protecting) (Kinsella et al., 2017). Malala functions as a hero in all aspects of this framework. First, with regard to enhancing, Malala has done enormous work to better the lives of complete strangers. She has started a project in Swat for girls suffering from domestic child labor, and she has arranged various trips to help Syrian refugees. Moreover, she has founded her own charity, the Malala fund, to work for a world where all girls have the opportunity to learn (Yousafzai, 2017).

With regard to promoting morals and virtues, Malala has promoted morality to such an extent that she became the youngest person ever to win a Nobel Peace Prize due to her activism and fight for equality. She promotes nothing but positivity and good morals and was rewarded for her efforts with arguably the highest honor possible. Malala states, “God has given me a responsibility and a gift: the responsibility to make the world a more peaceful place, which I carry with me every moment of every day; and the gift to be able to do so” (Yousafzai, 2013).

It is clear Malala takes her platform and work extremely seriously, which is why she only promotes peace and love and hopes to impact the lives of others by doing so. Finally, with regard to protecting individuals, Malala’s work protects those who do not have a voice every day. She has taken on the role of leader and feels it is her obligation to protect children from the streets, to prevent
them from skipping school out of fear and to encourage them to arise to their full potential. Malala works to change society, improve the world’s heroic well-being (Efthimiou et al., 2018), and protect all of those who must live with injustices.

CONCLUSION

Malala’s journey began as a young girl with a love for learning. She knew it was unjust that not everyone could receive an education and she knew she had to do something about the blatant gender discrimination in her society. At first, she did not know how to accomplish her goals. Her commitment to advocacy began in small ways, but enough to get her noticed. When tragedy struck, Malala used her suffering to transform herself as a person. She became a resilient, strong, heroine with a passion. It was through this self-transformation that Malala was able to pursue her fight to its fullest extent and in turn, transform society for the better. Malala is one of the most influential figures in both the fight for women’s rights and the feminist movement. As an impoverished, female, teenager living in a developing nation, Malala had to overcome an abundance of challenges.

Her fighting spirit is inspirational to women worldwide, in both privileged and underprivileged nations. It is because of Malala’s influence that many other women are reevaluating their personal abilities and places in society and becoming activists. With Malala’s guide there is no limits on what other strong, heroic females can do. With all she has accomplished, she remains a humble hero (Worthington & Allison, 2018). The world is thus left to wonder: Under Malala’s guidance, what other world issues will be brought to the limelight, challenged, and advanced? Malala is the epitome of a modern-day hero, as she has led remarkable movements in the world of women’s education, while also inspiring others to become activists worldwide.

REFERENCES


