



CHAPTER TEN

“Now He Belongs to the Ages”: The Heroic Leadership Dynamic and Deep Narratives of Greatness

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We have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

—Joseph Campbell (1949), *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*

When legendary South African president Nelson Mandela passed away on December 5, 2013, the world responded with an outpouring of heart-ache for the loss mixed with reverence for his heroic leadership. Foremost among the tributes to Mandela was a statement made by US president Barack Obama, who observed that Mandela “no longer belongs to us. He belongs to the ages” (Parnes, 2013). Obama surely was aware that his words mirrored those made a century and a half earlier by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton upon the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Of Lincoln, Stanton is said to have uttered, “Now he belongs to the ages,” although some claim that Stanton actually said, “Now he belongs to the angels” (Gopnik, 2007). Whether ages or angels, Stanton’s meaning was as clear as that of Obama. When extraordinary, transformative leaders perish, we construct rhetoric to ensure that their life legacies transcend the small time period in which they lived. Our language forges great leadership in eternity.

The human tendency to bestow a timeless quality to heroic leadership is the culmination of a pervasive narrative about human greatness that people have been driven to construct since the advent of language. In this chapter, we argue that these narratives fulfill important psychological



needs for both individuals and collectives. Narratives that detail the lives of legendary heroes provide ageless wisdom and inspiration that allow humans to survive and even thrive. We begin our analysis by tracing the evolutionary source of the human need to construct heroic tales.

Narratives of Greatness

Most scholars of human evolution agree that Thomas Hobbes (1651, 1988) was only slightly exaggerating when he described the quality of life for early humans as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Robertshaw & Rubalcaba, 2005; Stearns & Koella, 2008). For our hominid ancestors, an early death was the norm, either from disease or from danger. Human tribes were wracked by hunger, sickness, injury, and fatigue. Evidence indicates that at the end of each day, tribe members huddled around fires for warmth, safety, and security (Balter, 1995; McCrone, 2000; Wuethrich, 1998). While fire satisfied many of the physical needs of early humans, tribe members gathered around fire for a social activity that fulfilled equally important psychological needs. This activity was storytelling.

Good stories were a salve for tribe members’ psychological wounds. In addition to nursing physical ailments, early humans no doubt experienced as much fear and emotional distress as modern humans, and perhaps more (Solomon, Greenberg, Schimel, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2014). Our early ancestors gathered around the fire each night for stories that would bring them some understanding of their misery, some sense of meaning to buoy their spirits. The earliest known human stories that healed and inspired the ancients were stirring accounts of the exploits of heroes and heroic leaders (Kerenyi, 1978). These ancient hero stories from around the globe included the tales of Hesiod, Su Wu, Vishnu, Gilgamesh, Etana, Sundiata, Beowulf, Samson, Thor, Leonidas, Guan Yu, among others (Durant, 2002; Hamilton, 1999).

After examining thousands of mythic tales of heroes from around the globe and across different periods of human history, comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949) found that all ancient hero tales follow a clear and predictable pattern. This universality prompted him to refer to the classic hero narrative as a *monomyth*, a single hero story to which all humans resonate. The monomythic hero story begins with an ordinary person, usually a male, who is called to leave his safe, familiar world and must enter a special world fraught with danger. At the outset of the journey, the hero is missing some important quality, usually self-confidence, humility, or a sense of his true purpose in life. The hero journey is always a journey toward vast personal discovery and transformation. Receiving assistance from enchanted and unlikely sources, the hero shows remarkable cunning, courage, and resourcefulness to triumph. Once successful, the hero returns to his original familiar world to bestow a boon to the entire community.

As early humans soaked in these hero stories, they became transformed in profound ways. Hero narratives allayed their fear, nourished their hopes, and underscored important values of strength and resilience. Life now had greater purpose and meaning. We believe that contemporary humans are no different from their ancient counterparts in deriving essential psychological benefits from narratives about heroes and heroic leaders. Lifespans are longer and general health is better today than millennia ago, but there seems little doubt that people today still seek out powerful hero narratives as a tonic for their anxieties and fears.

In this chapter, we introduce the term *Heroic Leadership Dynamic* (HLD) to describe the ways in which heroes and hero stories nourish the human mind and spirit. The HLD illuminates the myriad psychological processes implicated in our drive to create heroes in our minds, in our storytelling, in our behavior, and in virtually every crevice of every human culture. Central to the HLD is the idea that hero stories fulfill important cognitive and emotional needs, such as our need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and growth. The HLD includes the term *dynamic*, along with its multiple meanings, intentionally. In its noun form, dynamic refers to an interactive system or process that unfolds over time. Used as an adjective, dynamic describes a system or process that is energizing and always in motion, a system that drives us toward rising heroes or away from fallen ones. We frame the dynamic as *heroic leadership* rather than as simply heroism because we argue that although not all leaders are heroes, all heroes are leaders (Allison & Goethals, 2011, 2013; Goethals & Allison, 2012). The HLD describes how our most basic human needs can account for our thirst for heroic leaders, and how these needs explain why we are drawn to heroic leaders, how we benefit from them, why we stick with flawed ones, and why we repudiate heroes only after they have outlived their psychological usefulness.

Psychological Benefits of Stories

Over the past two decades, a growing number of scholars have begun to recognize the significance of narrative storytelling for both individuals and collectives (Bennis, 1996; Boje, 1995; Cajete, Eder, & Holyan, 2010; Gardner, 1996; Jameson, 2001; McAdams, 1997; Sternberg, 2011). Stories crystallize abstract concepts and imbue them with contextual meaning (Boje, 1995). Gardner (1995) and Sternberg (2011) point to numerous examples of effective leaders using stories to win the minds and hearts of followers. Stories are not just tools of social influence directed toward others; they also can precipitate self-change. McAdams (1997; this volume) has argued that personal self-narratives play a prominent role in determining our life trajectories and the maintenance of our subjective well-being. Stories are vivid, emotionally laden capsule summaries of wisdom for which the human mind was designed (Haidt, 2012; Wyer,

1995). Price (1978) has gone so far as to claim that “a need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens*—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter” (p. 3).

A core principle of the HLD is that hero stories fulfill two principal human functions: an *epistemic* function and an *energizing* function. The epistemic function refers to the knowledge and wisdom that hero stories impart to us. The energizing function refers to the ways that hero stories inspire us and promote personal growth. We examine these two functions below.

The Epistemic Function of Hero Stories

Stories of heroic action impart wisdom by providing mental models, or scripts, for how one could, or should, lead one’s life. Ronald Reagan and Winston Churchill are striking examples. Both felt destined for greatness, and were immensely informed by heroic accounts they read as young boys, stimulating them to aspire to ascend to comparable leadership positions (Hayward, 2006). At the same time, tales of heroic leadership provide a way for those who are disposed to be followers to relate to such leaders through their admiration or awe.

Heroic narratives also teach us how we should behave in crisis situations (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goethals & Allison, 2012). Consider the wisdom imparted by the heroic actions of Wesley Autrey, a construction worker living in Harlem. In 2007, Autrey received international acclaim when he rescued a complete stranger from an oncoming New York subway train. Autrey was with his two daughters, age four and six, when he witnessed the victim of an epileptic seizure fall on the subway tracks just as a train was approaching. Realizing he had no time to move the man from the tracks, Autrey lay down on top of him in-between the rails as the train passed over them both. Only one-half inch separated Autrey from severe injury or death. Soon after performing this heroic act, Autrey received hundreds of letters from people thanking him for showing them how to live their lives and how to respond in emergency situations (Kolker, 2007). In short, Autrey provided a script for heroic action to millions of New York citizens hungry for such a script. Heroes such as Autrey are role models who perform behaviors that affirm our most cherished world views (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2014; Solomon et al., 2014).

Hero stories are far more than simple scripts prescribing prosocial action. Richard Rohr (2011) argues that effective hero stories feature an abundance of *transrational* phenomena, which he defines as experiences that resist or defy rational analysis. Transrational phenomena contained in hero stories reveal truths and life patterns that our limited minds have trouble understanding using our best logic or rational thought. Examples of transrational experiences that routinely appear in hero stories include *suffering, sacrifice, meaning, love, paradox, mystery, God, and eternity*. The ultimate transrational phenomenon may be the eternal battle between good

and evil, a theme that pervades all of human literature and is a universal characteristic of the human condition. Transrational phenomena beg to be understood but cannot be fully known using conventional tools of human reason. Hero stories help unlock the secrets of the transrational.

How do hero stories help us understand transrational experience? We believe that heroic narratives and their meaningful symbols serve as metaphors for easing our understanding of complex, mysterious phenomena. Over the past two decades, scholars have accumulated an abundance of evidence supporting the idea that metaphors facilitate learning (Lakoff, 2003). According to Leary (1994), “all knowledge is ultimately rooted in metaphorical modes of perception and thought” (p. 2). William James himself claimed that the use of metaphor was characteristic of all human understanding. Heroic narratives may bring transrational phenomena to life by providing, in James’ words, “similar instances” which operate as “pegs and pigeonholes—as our categories of understanding” (James, 1878/1983, p. 12). We believe that hero stories promote wisdom in at least three ways: Hero stories (a) reveal deep truths, (b) illuminate paradox, and (c) develop emotional intelligence.

Hero Stories Reveal Deep Truths. According to Joseph Campbell (1949), hero stories reveal life’s deepest psychological truths. Truths are considered deep when their insights about human nature and motivation are not only profound and fundamental but also hidden and nonobvious. Campbell believed that most readers of mythic hero stories are oblivious to deep truths, their meaning, and their wisdom. Deep truths contained in hero myths are difficult to discern and appreciate because they are disguised within symbols and metaphors. As a result, readers of mythology underestimate the psychological value of the narratives, prompting Campbell to observe that “mythology is psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology” (p. 219).

One way that hero narratives reveal deep truths is by sending us into *deep time*, meaning that the truths contained in stories enjoy a timelessness that connects us with the past, the present, and the future. Rohr (2011) notes that deep time is evident when stories contain phrases such as, “Once upon a time,” “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” and “they lived happily ever after.” As noted earlier, Barack Obama forged Nelson Mandela in deep time by proclaiming that Mandela “belongs to the ages.” By sending heroic leaders into deep time, hero stories reinforce timeless values and ageless truths about human existence.

Hero stories also reveal *deep roles* in our human social fabric. Moxnes (2012) has argued that the deepest roles are archetypal family roles such as mother, child, maiden, and wise old man or grandparent. Family role archetypes abound in classic hero tales and myths, where there are a wealth of kings and queens, parents, stepparents, princesses, children, and stepchildren. Moxnes’ research shows that even if hero stories do not explicitly feature deep role family characters, we will project these archetypal roles onto the characters. Moreover, in a process much like Freud’s

transference, we tend to project these deep family roles onto others in our social environments (Moxnes, 2007). Moxnes' conclusion is that the family unit is an ancient device, still useful today, for understanding our social world.

Hero Stories Illuminate Paradox. Another epistemic function of hero stories is their ability to shed light on meaningful life paradoxes. We believe that most people have trouble unpacking the value of paradoxical truths unless the contradictions contained within the paradoxes are illustrated inside a good story. Hero stories are saturated with paradoxical truths, such as those mentioned by Joseph Campbell in one of his best-known quotes that opens this chapter. Let's unpack each of the paradoxes in that quote:

* *Where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god.* Carl Jung is known for his apocryphal edict, "what you resist persists," which cautions us to question our avoidance of the people and issues we fear most in life. Campbell (1949) notes that every human being encounters painful challenges in life and that they are an integral part of our own individual hero journeys. "Where you stumble," wrote Campbell, "there lies your treasure" (p. 75). Hero stories teach us that only by confronting our dragons can we sow the seeds of our redemption.

* *Where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves.* When heroes face their greatest fears, they are entering the dragon's lair, and only when they defeat the dragon is their personal transformation complete. According to Campbell (1949), every human life encounters metaphorical dragons during the hero's journey. When we slay our dragons, we are slaying our false selves or former selves, thereby allowing our true heroic selves to emerge.

* *Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence.* In the opening act of every hero story, the hero leaves her safe, familiar world and enters a dangerous, unfamiliar world. Going on a pilgrimage of some type is a necessary component of the classic hero journey. Hero stories teach us that we have to leave home to find ourselves.

* *Where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.* The hero's journey is far from over once the dragon has been slain. Campbell (1949) observes that the now-transformed hero in myth and legend must return to his original familiar world and transform it in significant ways. The hero, once alone on his journey, becomes united and in communion with the world.

Hero Stories Develop Emotional Intelligence. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify, understand, use, and manage emotions (Caruso, Fleming, & Spector, this volume; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001; Salovey & Mayer, 1989). Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim believed that children's fairy tales are useful in helping people, especially children, understand emotional experience (Bettelheim, 1976). The heroes of these fairy tales are usually subjected to dark, foreboding experiences, such as encounters with witches, evil spells, abandonment, neglect, abuse, and

death. Listeners to these tales vicariously experience these dark stimuli, allowing them to develop strategies for resolving their fears and distress. Bettelheim believed that even the most distressing fairy tales, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, add clarity to confusing emotions and give people a greater sense of life's meaning and purpose. The darkness of fairy tales allows children to grow emotionally, thus developing their emotional intelligence and preparing them for the challenges of adulthood.

The Energizing Function of Hero Stories

Hero stories energize and inspire us. The recent work of Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues suggests that heroes and heroic action may evoke a unique emotional response which Haidt calls *elevation* (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003). Haidt borrowed the term elevation from Thomas Jefferson, who used the phrase “moral elevation” to describe the euphoric feeling one gets when reading great literature. According to Haidt, when people experience elevation, they feel a mix of awe, reverence, and admiration for a morally beautiful act. Haidt describes elevation as the opposite of disgust. His research team has demonstrated that exposure to stories about morally exemplary action triggers elevation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Participants in elevation studies describe the emotion as similar to calmness, warmth, and love. Importantly, elevation also includes a desire to become a better person.

Consistent with research on elevation, Kinsella et al. (2014) propose that heroes serve important life-enhancing functions. Heroes who “behave in ways that benefit others, sometimes at great personal risk, are likely to increase positive feelings towards the hero and others, reminding people of the good in the world” (p. 7). Heroes take risks that inspire us. Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) argue that this risk-taking component differentiates heroism from altruism, with heroes taking risks and making self-sacrificing decisions in ways that altruists do not. In fact, Zimbardo (2011) calls altruism “heroism-light.” Franco et al. argue that the risk-taking aspect of heroism is what makes heroism especially desirable and emotionally moving. We propose that hero stories energize us in three ways: by healing our psychic wounds, by inspiring us to action, and by promoting personal growth. We examine these ideas next.

Hero Stories Heal Psychic Wounds. Hero stories serve a healing function in several ways. First, storytelling is a community-building activity. For early humans, just the act of gathering around communal fires to hear stories established social connections with others. This sense of family, group, or community was, and remains, central to human emotional well-being (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Brewer, 1979, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The content of hero stories also promotes a strong sense of social identity. If the hero is an effective one, he or she performs actions that exemplify and affirm the community's most cherished values. The validation of a shared world view, told vividly in storytelling,

serves important healing and self-esteem-building functions (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Solomon et al., 2014).

Group storytelling is not unlike group therapy in that it involves bringing people together to share stories about how to overcome traumatic, anxiety-provoking situations. We believe that hero stories provide many of the benefits of group therapy as identified by Yalom and Leszcz (2005). These benefits include the instillation of hope; the relief of knowing that others share one's emotional experiences; the sharing of information; the development of socialization skills; the acquisition of modeling behavior; the fostering of self-awareness; the building of group cohesiveness; the relief of stress; and the development of a sense of existential meaning about life. The anxiety-buffering role of heroic action is consistent with the tenets of terror management theory (Solomon et al., 2014). Moreover, many 12-step recovery groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, also promote healing through the open sharing of members' stories. Some clinical psychologists even use hero stories in their practice to help their clients develop the heroic traits of strength, resilience, and courage (Garloch, 2013).

Hero Stories Inspire Us. The classic mythic hero is often an underdog or "everyman" who is summoned on a journey fraught with extraordinary challenges. Our research on underdogs shows that we identify with them, root for them, and judge them to be highly inspiring when they triumph (Allison & Goethals, 2008; Kim, Allison, Eylon, Goethals, Markus, & McGuire, 2008; see also Vandello, Goldschmeid, & Richards, 2007). Kinsella et al. (2014) present data suggesting that the inspiring quality of heroes is what sets heroes apart from altruists, helpers, and leaders. Allison and Goethals (2011) asked participants to generate traits describing heroes and, using factor and cluster-analytic statistical procedures, found eight general categories of traits. Called *The Great Eight*, these trait categories consist of *smart, strong, charismatic, reliable, resilient, selfless, caring, and inspiring*. When asked which of the great eight are the most important descriptors of heroes, a different group of participants reported that the traits of *inspiring* and *selfless* are the most important (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Charisma's presence in the great eight underscores the idea that heroes are inspiring. As we note elsewhere in this volume, people are highly inspired by charismatic individuals, viewing them with reverence and awe (Goethals & Allison, this volume). Charismatic leaders are perceived to possess god-like characteristics, an idea conveyed by Weber (1924) who wrote that charismatic individuals are "treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Perhaps we should not be surprised by these deific attributions, as divine intervention on behalf of the hero is a central element of Campbell's (1949) hero monomyth. The hero in classic mythology is often summoned by a higher power to a great journey, and the catalytic agent of this journey is some type of deficit or wounding suffered by the hero. This wounding, divine in origin, emerges in countless stories of ugly ducklings, Cinderellas, and other underdogs who through magic

or the help of a deity turn their wounds into triumph. Heroes use their wounds to transform themselves and to redeem the world, much like the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. Unlocking the divine secret of our wounds is the surest path to heroism. With divine involvement so fundamental to hero stories, we should not be surprised that the trait of charisma—the “divine gift of grace” (Riggio & Riggio, 2008)—is so readily attributed to heroes.

We endow our most charismatic and transformative leaders with god-like immortality, as seen in Obama’s description of Mandela as belonging “to the ages.” Assigning immortality to heroes can assume many tangible and emotionally significant forms. We erect permanent monuments and shrines to honor heroes. Stamps, coins, and paper currency bear their likeness. Roads and buildings are named after heroes. Epic stories and poems are composed. Statues, cities, and children bear the names of our departed heroes. Martin Luther King, Jr., has almost 800 streets in America named after him. We tend to place heroes who die young on an especially high pedestal, and apparently there can never be enough physical reminders of these heroes in the form of memorabilia, films, plays, parks, and museums. The fact that there continue to be Elvis Presley sightings is a powerful reminder that we cannot seem to let go of some of our most treasured and iconic heroes (Simpson, 2013).

Hero Stories Promote Personal Growth. According to Stern (1966), “the evolution of human growth is an evolution from an absolute need to be loved towards a full readiness to give love.” This developmental trend is consistent with Erich Fromm’s (1956) classic view of love for others as first requiring self-respect and self-love. It also nicely summarizes the transformation that a mythic hero undergoes during the hero journey. Joseph Campbell (1949) believed that the hero journey paralleled human developmental stages. All young adults, according to Campbell, are driven out of their safe, familiar worlds and into the fearful real world, and “the big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure” (p. 43). Eric Erikson’s (1975) stages of development suggest a hero trajectory during the human lifespan, with young adults driven to establish competencies and carve out an *identity* for themselves. Older adults reach a stage of *generativity*, which Erikson defines as people’s desire to create things that will outlast them and to give back to the society that has given them so much. Hero stories remind us that we are all developmentally equipped to pursue a lifelong hero-like journey.

Campbell’s (1949) stages of the hero’s journey culminate with the gift, boon, or elixir that the hero bestows upon the society from which he originated. Both Campbell and Erikson believed that personal transformation is the key to reaching the generativity stage of development and, finally, the apex of *integrity*. In all good hero stories, the key to achieving transformation is the discovery of an important missing inner quality that has heretofore hindered personal growth. Good heroic leaders use the power of transformation not only to change themselves for the better, but also

to transform the world. Campbell (1988) describes the power of mythic transformation in this way: “If you realize what the real problem is—losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another—you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another” (p. 112).

This type of gift-giving is apparent in 12-step recovery groups, which require members to undergo 11 steps of self-discovery followed by a 12th and final step requiring them to “carry the message” to others in need. The co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, maintained that the key to the recovered alcoholic’s continued personal growth, and even his sobriety, is to carry the message of AA to other alcoholics (Smith & Wilson, 2013). Moreover, all 12-step programs underscore the importance of sponsorship. Healing and sobriety are not likely to be maintained unless one is willing and able to sponsor newcomers, a process that involves shepherding them through the 12 steps.

The journey of personal growth within the context of the hero narrative is consistent with Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development. According to Kohlberg (1969), children possess a preconventional, or Level I, sense of morality. At this level children are concerned with rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad. By the teenage years, children display Level II or conventional morality. At this stage teens consider what other people will think of them and what society and the law require. For example, people might mention a sense of honor as compelling them to steal food or medicine to save a loved one, or not wanting to be dishonest or criminal as reasons for not stealing. Finally, starting in late adolescence or early adulthood, some people begin reasoning at Level III, using postconventional morality. Here people become more concerned about following mutually agreed upon moral principles and their own ethical values. Their thinking revolves around abstract principles such as justice and equality. They might decide that stealing food to save someone is the right thing to do, even though it violates the law. With postconventional morality comes considerations of morality that transcend rules and take into account the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

There are two crucial points about Level III postconventional morality. First, it very much involves taking other people’s perspectives into account and thinking about the common good as well as one’s own interests. Second, not many people, even as mature adults, get to this level of thinking. Campbell and Erikson both acknowledge that not everyone completes the hero journey or achieves the goals of generativity or integrity. But we do encounter heroic leaders who illustrate this kind of moral growth. Princess Diana was jarred out of a conventional life dominated by conventional morality when she discovered Prince Charles’ infidelities and encountered disdain from the tabloid press, and even some of the royal family. She decided to concentrate on being a good mother to her

two sons, and working on causes that she independently believed to be important, whether they were conventional choices or not. Diana made commitments that reflect an emphasis on important moral principles, such as equality and the value of human life (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Level III postconventional moral reasoning is also vividly seen in President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 speech in which he rallied the nation behind his civil rights legislation. First, Kennedy appealed directly to the country’s conscience and morality. He explicitly asked “every American” to “stop and examine his conscience” and stated “We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people.” Invoking the theme of deep time, he argued that “it is as old as the Scriptures.” Second, he invoked principles of equality and justice, and values as fundamental as the golden rule. He reminded the nation that “it was founded on the principle that all men are created equal” and declared that “every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated.” He appealed to “a sense of human decency” and asked “who among us would be content with the counsels of patience and delay” in the face of injustice. Not every listener was prepared to think at this level, but as a leader Kennedy tried to raise the nation’s level of moral reasoning (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Temporal and Dynamic Components of the HLD

Earlier we noted that the dynamic component of the HLD refers to manner in which the psychology of heroism unfolds over time. The HLD and its temporal component can be viewed as a story itself. At the beginning sits our craving for heroes, borne out of a longing for an understanding of the vicissitudes of life. We’ve shown how hero stories fulfill our epistemic and energizing needs, and a key aspect of the HLD is the myriad ways in which heroes satisfy our ever-changing drives and motives. As people age, their needs shift in accordance with developmental trends. When young children are asked to name their heroes, they typically list people who show great competencies, especially athletic prowess (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Superman, for example, is idolized by young children for his ability to leap tall buildings and overpower locomotives, but in later stages of childhood Superman’s role as a crime-fighter is listed as the main reason for his heroism. As people develop more sophisticated notions of morality, their heroes evolve accordingly. Goethals and Allison (2012) have used the term *transitional heroes* to describe heroes that correspond to particular stages of development. These transitional heroes are placeholders that fulfill our need for heroes until better ones come along that meet different or higher-level needs.

The Johnny Carson Effect

In 1983, the legendary *Tonight Show* host Johnny Carson was embroiled in a contentious divorce from his third wife Joanna. The divorce turned

out to be a costly one for Carson, both emotionally and financially. One night, during his *Tonight Show* opening monologue, Carson couldn't resist making light of his difficult divorce. "I remember being a kid, age 7 or 8," he said. "Babe Ruth was my hero. Then when I first got into show business, Jack Benny was my hero. Now my hero is Henry VIII" (Carson, 2003). With this joke, Carson illustrates the need-based origin of heroism as well as the dynamic nature of heroic leadership. Our psychological needs dictate our choice of heroes, and as these needs inevitably shift over time, so do our preferences for heroes and heroic leaders. Johnny Carson's quip has inspired us to call our tendency to choose heroes that match our current needs the *Johnny Carson Effect*.

The Johnny Carson effect suggests that changes in our needs bring about changes in our choice of heroes. To provide evidence for this effect, we recently asked 85 people between the ages of 18 and 80 to think of a time in their lives when they faced a significant life challenge. We then asked our participants to list the people whom they considered to be their heroes during this period. The results showed a striking relationship between our respondents' needs and their choice of heroes. When they reported having a severe health problem, they chose heroes at that time who had overcome their specific malady. For example, a participant who overcame testicular cancer reported that his hero was Lance Armstrong, who is famous for triumphing over this form of cancer. Another participant overcame a severe depression and reported that her uncle, who also suffered from and overcame depression, was her hero.

We also asked a different group of participants to think back to a time when they had a hero whom they no longer consider to be a hero. These participants revealed that their former heroes helped them cope with difficult circumstances unique to that time in their lives. For example, many of our college student participants reported that the Power Rangers were once their heroes because the Rangers exuded skill and confidence when our participants lacked those qualities. Another middle-aged participant revealed that the famed soccer player Pelé was once his hero because, as captain of his soccer team, he felt pressure to excel at his sport. Our choice of heroes is dynamic, reflecting inevitable changes in our needs and life circumstances.

Hero Retention and Repudiation

Social psychologists have long been interested in what attracts us to people, and one of the most robust findings in the attraction literature is the observation that human beings are drawn to successful, competent others (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). In a classic study, Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, and Sloan (1976) demonstrated a phenomenon that they called *basking in reflected glory*, or BIRGing. People associate themselves with successful others to such an extent that another's success can become one's own success. We suspect that BIRGing can help explain how one's

identity can become psychologically attached to another's accomplishment and heroism. Cialdini et al. noted that these associations can shift as the fortunes of the target of our associations shift. This idea is consistent with the HLD in suggesting that our attachments to heroes come and go, but the HLD extends this idea by suggesting that these shifts reflect the ever-changing nature of our needs. We also suspect that people resist changing their heroes when such change threatens deeply held self-identities. How might this work?

To the extent that people's identities are enmeshed with another's heroism, we may see people remain staunchly loyal to the hero, even when the hero has fallen in the eyes of most others. The case of Lance Armstrong offers a powerful example. For years, Armstrong denied allegations of doping and even showed a vicious streak toward anyone who dared to make these allegations. Armstrong's supporters were people who, for many years, believed his denials and were inspired by Armstrong's ability to overcome cancer and win seven Tour de France titles. When Armstrong finally admitted using performance-enhancing drugs, he lost most of his admirers but, curiously, he retained a small but fervent fan base that continued to place him on a heroic pedestal. These followers could not or would not be deterred by Armstrong's confession of doping. They downplayed the significance of the doping (“everyone in cycling cheats”); they accused the cycling governing body of corruption (“they were out to get him”); they focused on Armstrong's heroic battle with cancer (“he beat the disease”); or they pointed to his charitable work (“the Livestrong Foundation raises millions”). Armstrong's supporters had shown such a personal investment in Armstrong's heroism and bore identities that were so deeply connected to his legendary status that they could not repudiate a fallen hero (Levy, 2012).

According to the HLD, the stories we tell about our heroes, even our fallen ones, are designed to impart wisdom and inspiration. We contend that stories about the rise of heroes, and even the fall of heroes, fulfill an important epistemic function by showing us paths to success as well as paths to ruin. In our earlier work on heroes, we discuss two types of heroes who can suffer a reversal of fortune—*tragic heroes* and *transposed heroes* (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Both of these hero types offer a cautionary tale of the fragility of human success. The wisdom we glean from such stories satisfies invaluable needs and inspires us to perform exemplary action in life. The ways in which people benefit from both rising and falling heroes are an integral part of the HLD.

Final Thoughts

Our human craving for heroes, our need for the psychological benefits that heroes offer, and our desires over time either to retain our heroes or to repudiate them, all comprise the constellation of phenomena that

we call the *Heroic Leadership Dynamic*. In this chapter we've identified a number of key psychological processes that are implicated by the HLD. These processes include the mental construction of scripts and schemas about heroic behavior; the processing of transrational phenomena in hero stories that defy rational analysis; the analysis of deep truths and paradoxes inherent in hero stories; the development of emotional intelligence, the healing power of group storytelling; the inspiring nature of charismatic leaders and triumphant underdogs; various mechanisms underlying personal growth and developmental health; and the psychology of associating with, and disassociating from, heroes and heroic leaders over time. A central driving mechanism underlying the HLD is the every-changing state of human needs. The Johnny Carson effect describes what we call need-based heroism—the human tendency to choose heroes based on one's current set of needs, motives, and drives.

We began this chapter by acknowledging the human tendency to cement our greatest leaders in deep time. We recently submitted the phrase “one for the ages” to a Google search and obtained hundreds of hits, all of which directed us to remarkable people and unforgettable accomplishments that are forever etched in time. In addition to Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, our “one for the ages” search yielded references to actress Betty White's career, Arnold Schwarzenegger's role in *The Terminator*, Jack Nicklaus's victory at the 1986 Master's Tournament, Michael Jackson's musicianship, Pat Tillman's ultimate sacrifice, Mark McGwire's home run record, and 100 slain NYPD officers honored by New York's mayor (Campanile, 2005). Because heroic leadership is so valuable to society, and also because it is so rare, human beings take steps—usually in the form of storytelling—to ensure that these heroic leaders never leave our collective memories. Our hope is that this chapter offers some initial insights and observations about the psychology of the human effort to immortalize our most exemplary leaders.

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