

## **What Makes a Superhero?**

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Courage is a central part of our everyday lives. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (n.d.) states that courage is “that quality of mind which shows itself in facing danger without fear or shrinking; also meaning bravery” (4a). I like to think of courage as the ability to deal with uncomfortable situations or overcome challenges in our lives. Courage is the ability to change and grow, even when it may not be the easiest thing to do. The media portrays courage in multiple different views. We have all heard of the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* and how he gained the courage to be king of the forest. *Harry Potter* fans like me can recall the moment in the sixth movie, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, when Harry successfully convinced Ron to take Liquid Luck and all the good that came from it. These movies are just a few examples and have successfully reached many different age groups. Then there are the children’s cartoons. Some teach us life lessons like how to be a good friend by using relatable and ordinary characters, while others demonstrate values through fantasy characters with supernatural abilities. All of them in one way or another provide us with images of what courage can look like. What most people don’t seem to understand is that everyone has courage and that is what makes them capable of being their own superhero. Whether that means saving the world, fully understanding what makes us special or winning the smaller victories like speaking up and advocating for ourselves and those around as Malala Yousafzai does.

When I was growing up, I watched lots of cartoons on the TV. Starting with *The Secret of the Sword*, whose main characters were Heman and Shera, *Ben 10*, and *Kim Possible*. I remember looking up to the characters in awe, once believing that, if I tried hard enough, I could be a superhero too. I would be saving people with ease by using my muscles and supernatural ability that I would develop by my next birthday. When I would babysit my younger brother we

would watch his favorite cartoons, most of which also revolved around heroes, including *Lego Ninjago*, *Scooby Doo* and, more recently, *Teen Titans Go!*.

In my teenage years, I have encountered the *Marvel* superheroes. From the *Ironman* series to *Infinity War*, I have watched and fallen in love with them all. I don't know exactly what it was that drew me in. A part would be the fantasy aspect of the storylines; however, I feel like I could also resonate with these characters and their backgrounds. I have gone through many challenges in my life that have altered my path, like how each hero had their own story. To me, courage was in the form of a hero or heroine who had the bravery to stand up against the enemy with their powers. Today I feel as if this is misleading. Children will believe they cannot be what their heroes are because they don't have powers, or at least not any that were developed in a lab or happened in a horrific and tragic accident. So where and what are our superpowers? It may be hard to believe, but we can all be superheroes with our ordinary strengths, even without the supernatural powers.

How do we find these strengths? Sometimes it comes from self-reflection, and other times we must overcome tall obstacles. One of the best real-world examples of courage that I can think of is a young woman by the name of Malala Yousafzai. She was born in Mingora in 1997 (The Nobel Prize, 2014). To most, this name is already known worldwide. Yousafzai is a real-world superhero. At 15 years old, Yousafzai found herself as an advocate for education for all. She also had the courage, even at that young age, to stand up to the Taliban. She managed to survive being shot. She could have grown silent in fear for her life. Instead, she continued to speak up and publish her thoughts and feelings under a pseudonym. She was punished for her actions but continued to be an activist and voice for those who had less than her. She went on to win the Nobel Prize at 17 years old. In her acceptance speech she claimed, "This award is not

just for me. It is for the forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change” (The Nobel Prize, 2014).

Yousafzai has many superpowers including communication, compassion, determination, and courage. She only wanted to serve as proof that change can happen. Now Yousafzai spreads her message and continues to use her powers to encourage others to demand what they deserve and advocate for what they believe in (The Nobel Prize, 2014).

I consider Yousafzai to be one of my many heroes because of her work. Her story hits home to me because the thought of not being able to have an education based on something that we cannot control, like race, gender, or where we live, is surreal. The fact that it is actually happening in places worldwide is scary, threatening, and sickening. Education needs to be a right, and to strip innocent humans of that is insane. I am a female who also loves to learn, and I cannot imagine living in a world where I couldn't go to school. Education should be for all.

I want to be a teacher, so this is directly related to my future. I know some of my students will say that education is boring or that they don't want to be forced to attend and learn something they don't have interest in. To that, I will take the chance to remind them of their privilege and opportunity they have to be able to attend school. I am aware that the American public education system needs work. We need to close the achievement gap and make schools safer and more inclusive. I would rather deal with a flawed education than none at all. I will advocate for Yousafzai's cause as well as those like hers. I will not let the voiceless continue to be silenced. I have the courage to stand up for what I believe in. Yousafzai has shown us that we need to have the courage to ask questions and speak up because there will be people who think and feel the same way. I plan to continue to advocate for what I feel is important and let Yousafzai's courage help me become the person I want to be.

Natalie Kusz (2001) in “Ring Leader” describes the progression of her journey to self-acceptance and how she had the courage to embrace her true self. Kusz (2001) narrates:

Somehow now, the glances of strangers seem less invasive, nothing to incite me to nunhood; a long look is just that- a look- and what of it? I’ve invited it, I’ve made room for it, it is no longer inflicted upon me against my will. (p. 2)

Kusz encourages us to confront our flaws and fears to become more accepting of ourselves. She details how it may not be easy and that it often takes a long time. Some mechanisms that worked for her included allowing herself time and space in her mind to think about those insecurities and fears. Yousafzai has made room for the critics and continues to do her work of advocacy. She has accepted herself for who she is and what she believes in. Similarly, I am still working on finding myself, but I can assure everyone that I have made room for the judgments and the critique. Yes, even the haters have their own corner in this room. Keep in mind, this room is not big. It is not the whole house but rather a pace in between rooms. That way I must face it every day, instead of shoving it away in the basement. However, I only let myself dwell on it for a little bit, almost as long as it takes to be passing between rooms or walking down a moderately long hallway. When heroes confront their enemies and their weaknesses, they end up winning in one way or another. This shows everyone watching that there is a reward for making ourselves uncomfortable and that is growth. Even if the heroes lose the battle, they win the war. They still leave stronger than before.

Brené Brown (2018), author of “Living into Our Values”, mentions the importance of shortening our list of values to truly embody them. She writes:

There’s no magic in three or four behaviors—it’s just enough to force us to think beyond what’s easy and not so many that we’re just making a list. The best way to do this is to

think through some arena moments when you either did or did not show up in a way that felt aligned with your values. (Brown, 2018, p. 2)

We live our values when we are honest with ourselves. When this happens, it can make life seem easier or at least more enjoyable. By being able to make connections to our values in our lives, it is easier to act in ways we deem acceptable and feel better about ourselves. I have found that acting with courage makes me feel free and independent. I feel more confident in my work and the way I carry myself. I force myself to speak my mind, even if that is not the easiest choice or the one that would get me the most popularity. Superheroes are known for being popular and well liked, but they still have their own conflicts. Any *Marvel* fan could describe how heroes don't always get along because of their conflicting values and approaches to saving the world. In the end they get a reward of some sort. In our case, it is happiness and possibly even the recognition of others.

The Cowardly Lion was a hero to Dorothy and the rest of the crew throughout the movie, although he never truly realized it until his friends told him. He knew that it was his destiny to be a good leader to all the forest animals; however, he was not prepared. The Cowardly Lion had no confidence that he could be king. He felt sorry for himself when he appeared to not be dangerous and fearful to Dorothy. He was more afraid of Toto than Toto was of him. Through his support system and new friend named Oz, he obtained courage and went on to be the king of the forest (Lowne, n.d., para. 5). Throughout both the *Marvel* and *Harry Potter* series each influential character has some sort of support system. In the *Marvel* universe, that group is known as the Avengers. In *Harry Potter* there's the Golden Trio (the three main characters: Harry, Ron, and Hermione), and the Marauders (the friend group of the generation before Harry). Sometimes a support system is all that is needed to realize someone's powers. In Yousafzai's situation, it was

her family, especially her dad, that kept her going. He was also an educator and wanted the best for his daughter (The Nobel Prize, 2014).

I live by “act (reasonably) first, overthink later,” and I find that this approach works best. I have had many obstacles that I have had to overcome in my lifetime. Some were more major than others. For example, I have sustained many injuries from sports and continue to feel the effects of them today. I continue to be active in athletics because it is the best way for me to release stress and I really love volleyball. On the other hand, sports also add another level of pressure. All I want is to perform well. If my performance is not up to my standard, I will get extra reps then proceed to go workout in the weight room. This shows my determination but not necessarily the best judgement. I don’t feel it in the moment, with my adrenaline racing, but there have been moments where I wake up the next day stiff and sore. I have the courage to continue to get up and try again, despite my previous history with injuries and constant worry about never being able to play again. I will continue to have the courage to give everything I do all my effort.

I struggle with my appearance and how other people perceive me. I am working on not caring so much, but it still takes time. I take a second before answering questions presented to the class for a few reasons, one reason being that I don’t want to be wrong and get embarrassed. The other is that I don’t want to seem like I know it all. I was worried about my salutatorian speech when I really should have been over the moon at the opportunity. The reality of the accomplishment didn’t hit me until after I had sat back down from giving my speech because of how focused I was on not stuttering while also keeping the audience engaged. I wish I soaked it in more while at the podium. If an assignment isn’t done to my liking, there is a strong chance I will start over. It has already occurred this semester with an art project. I didn’t like it, so I

started over and threw out the first attempt because I could not stand to look at it. I still struggle with being able to stand up for myself, but I am getting better at it. From now on, instead of trying to limit myself from fear or to seem to fit in, I let myself answer the questions and take the opportunities presented to me, no matter how different. I have the courage to make mistakes.

Some of the best experiences in my life have come from this change of mindset. I got to travel to Spain when I was 14 with two teachers, a handful of chaperones and older students I didn't know. I have jumped off waterfalls, climbed rock walls and other obstacles, led classes, made many new friends, and found out the person I wanted to be. My mom teaches younger kids, and I volunteered in her class after my final exams. She told me some of her students have told her that I am their hero. When I found that out, I was overjoyed to have such a positive impact. I wouldn't change a thing that has happened in my life, even the times of anxiety and fear beforehand. I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. I am so grateful and happy that I chose to be courageous and speak out for what I wanted. All those moments led to me having the courage to continue to be myself, and it is what has brought me to be where I am now.

It is difficult to face challenges, especially alone. We may feel weak or powerless, but the good news is that we all have our own superpower deep down. It is called courage. It helps us make our life decisions and act the way we want. It is a value that will constantly reassure us that everything will be okay and that we should make ourselves uncomfortable, because if we don't, are we really living life to the fullest? Every superhero that I have ever read about or watched on TV has had to overcome some sort of challenge. If they didn't, they wouldn't be the main character. In the end, it doesn't matter so much if it was a success or failure. All that matters is that we took the risk. When we think about what makes a superhero so super and then apply that to our lives and we can all be the hero. Yousafzai has showed us the power of courage. The



Cowardly Lion and the Golden Trio demonstrated the importance of self-confidence and a good support system to give us that reassurance when our courage is lacking. Natalie Kusz and Brené Brown urged us to look deep within ourselves. When we do all of this, our lives become much happier and more successful. In the end, we could be our own superheroes. All we need is some courage, confidence, and faith.

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