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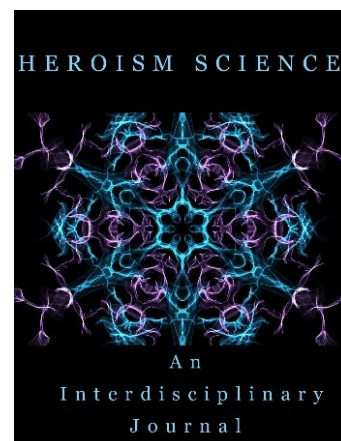
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Enduring Heroism in the Face of Inequality and Injustice: Who Steps Up and Why?

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ABSTRACT: Enduring heroism defined as persistent efforts to confront inequality and injustice is the focus of this article. Six exemplars are considered: Harriet Tubman, Crazy Horse, Jane Addams, Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X. Similarities and differences in their pursuits are considered and linked to the larger literature on heroism. They are also contrasted with enduring anti-heroes to elevate roles of virtue and benevolence in long-term efforts to correct societal ills. What motivates enduring heroism is a central question. A hypothesis put forth is that distinct dimensions of eudaimonic well-being – especially, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth – may be key elements that fuel efforts of enduring heroes. A final section underscores the need for such individuals in our era, drawing on wide-ranging evidence that inequality and injustice are worsening and have been exacerbated by major historical events (Great Recession, COVID-19 pandemic). Now more than ever enduring heroes are needed to help redress the enormous suffering around us.

KEYWORDS: *enduring heroism, inequality, injustice, motivation, eudaimonia, virtue, benevolence, contemporary suffering*

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1 INTRODUCTION

This essay examines a particular kind of heroism – those who engage in persistent efforts to redress major societal problems. The central interest is thus with long-term commitments to make the world a better place by confronting challenges such as inequality and injustice, often tangled up with racism. These tasks require engagement and action in the face of serious obstacles including personal danger. Past exemplars of enduring heroism are considered to illuminate this kind of heroism, particularly when juxtaposed with heroes engaged in short-term, dramatic acts to save others. Enduring heroes are also contrasted with enduring anti-heroes to elevate distinctions between deep life commitments that are virtuous and benevolent in nature from those that are malevolent.

A key question is what motivates enduring heroism? The objective is to better understand what fuels the activities of those who devote their lives to righting particular wrongs. What sources do they draw on to persist in the face of great obstacles? A hypothesis put forth is that high levels of eudaimonic well-being may partly inform who becomes an enduring hero. To illuminate the idea, the meaning of eudaimonic well-being is explained and scientific research around it briefly noted. Key dimensions of eudaimonia are then described and linked to the work of the enduring heroes put forth as exemplars. A final section underscores the need for enduring heroes in our era by bringing into high relief varieties of societal problems that are worsening around us. Enduring heroism is essential during such times of great human suffering. It is the juxtaposition of dramatic human capacities to help in the face of profound need that is of central concern.

2 EXEMPLARS OF ENDURING HEROES IN THE FACE OF HUMAN SUFFERING

History offers innumerable examples of those who devoted their lives to noble causes. Six such individuals are described below, arranged chronologically by year of birth. They were selected based on the interest they hold for the author of this essay. Included are leaders who confronted terrible injustices inflicted on indigenous peoples as well as those who were enslaved. In the background of some are the traumas of colonialism. Most were themselves victim of unjust treatment, though one was a person of privilege who devoted her life to caring for disadvantaged immigrants. Following a brief description of each hero, the messages, common and unique, that emerge from their lives are considered.

2.1 HARRIET TUBMAN (1822-1913)

Born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland, Harriet Tubman was beaten by her enslavers as a child, although she went on to become a major American abolitionist and social activist (Clinton, 2004). In 1849, Tubman and her brothers escaped from slavery but ultimately were forced back two weeks later. Tubman then escaped again without her brothers, traveling northeast along the Choptank River through Delaware and then north into Pennsylvania. She was guided by the North Star. She saved money by working odd jobs and eventually returned to Maryland to guide away others slaves including those from her family. Tubman subsequently made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, using a network of activists and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. Some she led all the way to Canada.

Tubman had a Methodist upbringing and was devoutly religious. She was nicknamed “Moses” for her efforts to free enslaved people, alluding to the prophet who led the Hebrews to freedom out of Egypt. She met and was greatly admired by Frederick Douglass for her

efforts to serve enslaved peoples despite peril and hardship. Beyond bringing many to freedom, Tubman worked as a cook and nurse for the Union army during the Civil War. She received little pay for her military service and her humanitarian work kept her in a state of poverty. In her later years, she fell prey to swindlers, but ultimately became an American icon after she died. Harriet Tubman hoped to become literate so that she could write her own memoirs, but neither aspiration was achieved.

2.2 CRAZY HORSE (1841-1877)

Tasunke Witco, also known as Crazy Horse, was born a member of the Oglala Lakota division of the Sioux nation and lived in present-day Wyoming (McMurtry, 2005). Over the course of his life, he took up arms against the United States government to fight against encroachment of white settlers on Native American territories. In the 1860s, due to the discovery of gold along the Bozeman Trail in Montana, General Sherman built multiple forts in Sioux territory. Crazy Horse participated in attacks on these forts, including acting as a decoy to lead many white soldiers to death in an ambush. A treaty signed in 1868, after which soldiers left the forts, gave the native populations ownership of the Black Hills. In the 1870s, Crazy Horse battled multiple times with General Custer and General Crook along the Yellowstone River and into Montana. The Battle of the Little Big Horn, known as Custer's Last Stand, took place in 1876. More than 1,000 warriors flanked Custer's forces, which went down to disastrous defeat. Crazy Horse later surrendered, incapacitated by harsh winters in which his people were starving. Arrested after threatening to leave the negotiations, he was stabbed by a soldier and died at age 35.

Remembered for his courage, tenacity of spirit, and leadership in the face of near-impossible odds, Crazy Horse is a poignant hero from a long-vanished epoch. His memory is celebrated at the Crazy Horse Memorial not far from Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills.

The giant sculpture and grounds receive more than a million visitors each year. In 2022, a film titled “Lakota Nation vs. United States” reviewed the 150-year clash of these two entities. It is a tale treaties repeatedly violated as well as of the physical and cultural violence inflicted on the Lakota with their deep connection to the Black Hills. The monument to white supremacy, Mt. Rushmore with its massive faces of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, was constructed on their sacred lands. In 1980 the U.S. Supreme Court heard the Lakota case and granted remuneration for the lost land. The Lakota people refused the money and continue to do so, even as the settlement value has increased to more than \$1 billion. They are fighting for the land itself.

2.3 JANE ADDAMS (1860-1935)

Born into a prosperous family, Jane Addams became famous as the founder of Hull House in Chicago, which provided social services to poor immigrant families. A voracious reader as a child, the works of Charles Dickens inspired her interests in the poor, along with watching her mother’s kindness toward those in need. She wanted to become a doctor but health problems prevented her from completing the degree. She was nonetheless well-educated and well-traveled. Visiting a settlement house in London’s East End gave her the idea of opening a similar house in an underprivileged area of Chicago. Along the way, she became a pioneer in the field of social work.

Money raised from well-to-do families created Hull House where the sick were nursed, children cared for, food and activities provided, and an employment bureau helped find jobs. Addams’ commitment to civic responsibility led to her appointment to Chicago’s Board of Education as well as several national charity initiatives. She was an ardent feminist before the days of women’s suffrage. In 1907, she published a book, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, and subsequently became an international leader on world peace and women’s rights. She

opposed America's entry into World War I, but subsequently led efforts to provide relief supplies of food to women and children of enemy nations, something she wrote about in *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (1922). She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Addams was influenced by the pragmatism of John Dewey, and as noted above, the literature of Charles Dickens depicting the suffering of those in poverty.

2.4 MOHANDAS GANDHI (1869-1948)

Gandhi was raised in a Hindu family in coastal India. He was a shy student with no interest in games; his companions were books. He entered an arranged marriage at age 13. After graduating from college, he went to London for legal training and then moved to South Africa where he lived for 21 years. Upon his arrival, he faced severe discrimination due to his skin color and heritage – he was not allowed to sit with European passengers on the train and was kicked into a gutter for walking on a footpath reserved for the privileged. He was deeply humiliated by prejudice from British people against him and his fellow Indians. Nonetheless, Gandhi recruited many Indian volunteers to support the British during the Boer War. At a mass protest in Johannesburg in 1906, he adopted a nonviolent protest for the first time.

He returned to India in 1915 and took leadership in the Indian National Congress where he began demanding independence from British colonial rule (Dalton, 2012). He became active in agitations related to floods, famine, and taxes imposed on the peasantry. Using non-cooperation as a technique, he initiated a campaign where peasants pledged non-payment of revenue. The government gave way and relaxed conditions of tax payments until the famine ended. He then broadened his civil disobedience and began working toward Hindu-Muslim cooperation, underscoring that if Indians collectively refused to cooperate with the British, their rule would collapse.

Gandhi expanded the nonviolent platform to include boycott of foreign goods, especially those that were British made, while also railing against the viceroy's salary, which was over 5,000 times India's average income. His salt march campaign involved walking 240+ miles over 25 days, speaking to huge crowds along the way. Thousands joined him; many were seriously injured in passively accepting violence from British authorities. Such campaigns and boycotts gave Indian women a new self-confidence and dignity in public life. Gandhi distilled that Western civilization driven by "brute force and immorality" while Indian civilization was driven by "soul force and morality."

Gandhi opposed helping the British war effort in World War II on grounds that fighting for democratic freedom made no sense when such freedom was denied to India itself. Churchill criticized Gandhi, seeing him as "alarming and nauseating, posing as a fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the regal palace" (Herman, 2008, p. 132.) When partitioning of India along religious lines unfolded, thousands were murdered in massacres. Gandhi's fasting protests were credited for stopping the religious riots and communal violence. Less than two weeks, after breaking his fast, he was murdered by a Hindu nationalist on his way to a prayer meeting. Gandhi was mourned around the world.

Gandhi's many writings were simple and precise (Gandhi & Fischer, 2002) and his religion was multifaceted (Jordens, 2012). His concept of nonviolence had long history in Indian religious thought and was viewed as the highest dharma (ethical value/virtue).

2.5 NELSON MANDELA (1918-2013)

Mandela was born in a small village in South Africa's Cape Province. Both parents were illiterate although his father was a local chief and councilor to the monarch. His early life was dominated by Xhosa customs and taboos, but Christianity was also significant; he attended services every Sunday. In high school, he took up sports and began his love of

gardening. He then found work in the mines, followed by various other jobs. He completed his BA through the University of South African and began studying law.

Because South African elections allowed only whites to vote, he became a leader against apartheid as a member of the African National Congress. He was arrested various times – for treason, for leaving the country without a permit, for sabotage, and ultimately was imprisoned for 27 years. There he was verbally and physically harassed by white wardens and forbidden to wear sunglasses while breaking rocks into gravel. His eyesight was permanently damaged. Mandela was guided by a vision conveyed in a speech in 1964 – “I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.” Prison became a place of learning – at night he studied through correspondence with University of London. Eventually he became Class A prisoner, which allowed him greater visitors and letters. He enjoyed gardening, but the damp conditions contributed to his tuberculosis.

In 1990, Mandela was released by President F.W. de Klerk and the two of them worked together to negotiate an end to apartheid. In the 1994 multiracial election, Mandela then leader of the African National Congress became President. He led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights abuses and encouraged measures for land reform and to combat poverty. An icon of democracy and social justice, Mandela received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and then published his autobiography (Mandela, 1995). Despite opulent surroundings, he lived simply and donated a third of his annual income to Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund. He tried to reassure South Africa’s white population that they were protected in the rainbow nation so they would not leave. Nonetheless, Mandela inherited country with huge disparities in wealth and services between white and black communities. Although many saw improvements in quality of life, there were insufficient responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He stepped down as ANC President

in 1997, but continued his activism and philanthropy until 2004. Mandela died in 2013 at age 95.

2.6 MALCOLM X (1925-1965)

Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, he was the 4th of 7 children (Marable, 2011). His father, an outspoken Baptist speaker, was harassed by white racist groups. After his father's death, viewed by some as murder, and his mother's hospitalization, Malcolm spent his adolescence in foster homes. A white teacher told him his aspiration to become a lawyer was unrealistic for a nigger. He dropped out of high school and began engaging in various crimes (drug-dealing, gambling, burglary, larceny). In early adulthood, he was sentenced to 8-10 years in prison. There he met an educated man who began teaching him to educate himself.

His brother told him about the nation of Islam, which saw white people as dishonest, unjust, greedy, and hateful. In 1948, Malcolm wrote to Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. After his release from prison, he joined the Nation of Islam and became a prominent minister. During this period, he replaced his last name of Little with X because the former was the name of the blue-eyed slave master in his history. He preached in several cities, becoming a key leader in Harlem where he rapidly expanded membership of the Nation of Islam. He was a skilled speaker, handsome, humorous, and charismatic. He married Betty Sanders and had six daughters.

Malcolm X was outspoken about unjust beatings of African Americans by police and was critical of the civil rights movement, which was fighting against segregation, while the Nation of Islam called for complete separation of African Americans from Whites. He publicly broke with the Nation of Islam after discovering the sexual misbehavior of Elijah Muhammad who was impregnating young girls serving as Nation secretaries. Malcolm was

subsequently intimidated and received death threats. He was assassinated on February 19, 1965, when he received 21 gunshot wounds while delivering a speech at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom.

Though accused of preaching racism and violence, Malcolm X is credited for raising the self-esteem of Black Americans and reconnecting them with their African heritage. Some believed he better articulated fundamental problems of inequality than the mainstream civil rights movement. Delivering the eulogy at his funeral, the actor Ossie Davis (1965), capturing the competing views of this "shining Black prince":

There are those who will consider it their duty, as friends of the Negro people, to tell us to revile him, to flee, even from the presence of his memory, to save ourselves by writing him out of the history of our turbulent times. Many will ask what Harlem finds to honor in this stormy, controversial and bold young captain—and we will smile. Many will say turn away—away from this man, for he is not a man but a demon, a monster, a subverter and an enemy of the Black man – and we will smile. They will say that he is of hate – a fanatic, a racist – who can only bring evil to the cause for which you struggle! And we will answer and say to them: Did you ever talk to Brother Malcolm? Did you ever touch him, or have him smile at you? Did you ever really listen to him? Did he ever do a mean thing? Was he ever himself associated with violence or any public disturbance? For if you did you would know him. And if you knew him you would know why we must honor him.... And, in honoring him, we honor the best in ourselves.

2.7 MESSAGES FROM SIX ENDURING HEROES

What can be learned from brief distillations of a handful of widely known heroes whose commitments to make the world a better place endured over time? A first observation is that all but one were *themselves victims of grave injustices* in their own lives. As a child, Harriet Tubman was beaten by her slave owner, Crazy Horse lived through multiple battles and deprivations inflicted on Native Americans by white soldiers and settlers, Gandhi faced brutal discrimination in South Africa due to his skin color and heritage, Mandela grew up under the exclusionary policies of apartheid and was brutally beaten by white wardens in prison, and Malcolm X was subjected to the horrors of the Ku Klux Klan in his own family as

a child. Thus, being on the receiving end of profoundly unfair and brutal mistreatment likely shaped the resolution and courage to seek significant societal change to prevent such occurrences for others. Jane Addams, in contrast, was privileged by background, but nonetheless had a genuine concern for the poor likely emanating from her childhood reading of Dickens and observing her mother's caring behavior toward those in need.

A second observation is that all six exemplars were *deeply aspirational* – that is, they were motivated to do something significant and lasting with their own lives, be it freeing other slaves, battling soldiers trying to take over Indian lands, ministering to the deprivations of poor immigrants, freeing India from British rule, ending apartheid in South African, or elevating the self-regard and assertiveness of African Americans. This “calling” aspect of their lives will be revisited later in examining how eudaimonic well-being, which includes the lifelong commitment to become one's best self, might illuminate what fuels enduring heroism.

Third, in some of these preceding lives, especially Mandela and Malcolm X, there is the theme of educating themselves. Both became autodidacts during their time in prison. Mandela read fiction including from South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer, but also Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Malcolm X read about abolitionism, the collected works of Gandhi, and the writing of Nietzsche. Gandhi received formal university training and went to law school in London, but also drew deeply on Hindu philosophy, especially Vedanta as enumerated in Sanskrit texts focused on devotion, knowledge, and liberation. He was a prolific writer, publishing over ten books. Jane Addams published multiple books during her lifetime. In contrast, Crazy Horse and Harriet Tubman were both illiterate; she lamented never being able to write her own memoirs. *Educational opportunities, or lack thereof*, is thus an interesting contrast in the lives of these enduring heroes.

A final observation pertains to whether their long-term commitments to alleviate inequality and injustice involved *working within extant social systems and norms, or involved violent activities to defeat oppressors*. Crazy Horse personifies the latter, fighting as he did on the battlefield, including leading white soldiers to their death in ambush. At the other extreme is Gandhi's nonviolent-resistance, such as during the salt campaign, where his followers were subjected to violent treatment by the British without lifting a hand to defend themselves. Nothing in the slave-freeing activities of Harriet Tubman appears to have been violent, though many such slaves had been recipients of brutal treatment from their slave masters. Mandela believed fundamentally in the equality of all people, which required overthrowing the system of apartheid in South African, but he did not advocate for violence. Addams was explicitly anti-war but nonetheless provided food and shelter to victims of the war. Malcolm X, the most controversial on this issue, was seen by some as advocating for violent change, while others, including his eulogist, challenged that characterization and brought attention to his goodness and warmth. Diverse strategies for affecting social change thus constitutes a notable theme among the six exemplars.

2.8 LINKS TO EXTANT STUDIES OF HEROES

How does enduring heroism in the face of societal problems relate to the larger field of heroism studies as detailed by Allison (2024)? For starters, enduring heroes are clearly distinguished from fictional heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus, written about in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Virgil's *Aeneid*, or Campbell's (1949) depiction of the journeys of these mythical heroes. Enduring heroes are actual, real-life human figures. That realm is vast, encompassing artists and writers, intellectuals and philosophers as well as taxonomies that distinguish military heroes who engage in bold and dangerous acts to save others from civil heroes (often bystanders) who perform emergency rescues as well as social heroes who

preserve community standards and values (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). The enduring heroes depicted herein are distinctive from many of these in that their life-long commitments focused explicitly on correcting systemic forms of inequality and injustice.

The prior literature on heroism further describes heroes as cultural symbols that reflect the values and aspirations of a society: “They embody the ideals and virtues that a culture admires and that a society encourages its citizens to emulate” (Klapp, 1954, in Allison, 2024, p.10). The enduring heroes sketched above clearly reflected cultural values and aspirations, but again with an explicit focus on historically disadvantaged segments of society. Klapp (1954) asserts that societies need heroes “because they provide a sense of identity, purpose, and inspiration. Heroes serve as role models, representing the traits and behaviors that culture considers commendable” (from Allison, 2024, p.10). The six exemplars described above clearly illustrate identity, purpose, and inspiration, albeit for subgroups of society that have suffered longstanding discrimination and injustice.

Finally, the extant literature details actual characteristics of heroes at great length (Allison, 2024; Kinsella et al., 2015), including such terms as bravery, courage, valor, moral integrity, fortitude, conviction, honesty, and unselfishness, along with traits of intelligence, strength, reliability, and resilience. Interpersonal qualities, such as being caring, charismatic, and inspiring are emphasized as well as qualities of empathy and altruism in acting for the good of others, often at significant risk to oneself (Kohen, Langdon & Riches, 2018). Many of these terms seem relevant descriptors of the six enduring heroes presented above. That said, such detailed adjectives do not go to the heart of heroic action, thus underscoring distinctions between the *characteristics that heroes have* versus depictions of *what they actually do*. Some qualities have been noted, such as a kind of heroism that is “long-term” and involves a “deliberative commitment to a noble cause” or includes acts that “deviate from

social norms” (Allison, 2024, p. 23). For the most part, however, the actions of enduring heroes are not prominent in the prior literature on heroism.

Finally, though it is difficult to take issue with the idea that “heroism encapsulates a range of profound goals and reflect humanity’s highest ideals” (Allison, 2024, p.24), it is also the case that high ideals are often controversial and conflictual, particularly when they challenge the status quo. Ubiquitous social hierarchies nurture good lives among the privileged, but often leave others notably disadvantaged and excluded. Stated otherwise, the heroism of underrepresented groups as a generic topic is largely missing from the extant literature on heroism. Before moving to the question of what motivates enduring heroism, a brief look at enduring anti-heroes is provided to elevate themes of virtue and ethics in considering what enduring heroes do.

2.9 ENDURING ANTI-HEROES: MALEVOLENT LIFE PURSUITS

Heroes have been previously distinguished from villains (Allison & Smith, 2015) on grounds that heroes are social unifiers, whereas villains are social dividers, often glorifying one group of humanity while harming another. Some of the most evil leaders of the 20th century (Steenkamp, 2023) are briefly sketched below to underscore that human history includes tales of enduring malevolence often enacted under the guise of building better societies. Such evil stands in marked contrast to enduring heroes seeking to correct grave social inequalities and injustices. Of interest is what factors distinguish beneficent enduring heroes from major historical figures who sought societal change through enduring horrific action (mass murder).

Adolf Hitler came to power democratically in 1933, and by 1941, most of Europe was under his heel. He committed suicide in 1945 and Germany unconditionally surrendered. The country was in ruins, six million Jews had been killed, and more than 55 million died in

World War II. Hitler's enduring pursuits were rooted in hate, racism, xenophobia, and megalomania. Mao Zedong, another major figure on the historical stage, began as a guerrilla fighter against Japanese invaders and the corrupt government of Chiang Kai-shek. In 1949, he proclaimed the People's Republic of China and in the 1950s launched purges that killed millions of peasants and intellectuals. His social engineering abolished private property and demanded communal life, after which production plummeted. The Great Chinese Famine that followed cost the lives of 45 million. In 1966, Mao launched the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" that led to the public humiliation, imprisonment, torture, and execution of millions.

Joseph Stalin rose to power in Russia in the 1920s after the death of Lenin. He initiated a succession of Five-Year Programs that industrialized the country at unimaginable costs. Forced collectivization of agriculture led to widespread famine, while the "Great Terror" purged the party apparatus and society through forced labor camps and death. Nearly all senior Red Army officers were gone before Hitler attacked, ensuring horrific losses in World War II. Stalin deliberately killed about 6 million, with another 3 million dying from his policies.

The Belgian King Leopold II acquired Congo at a conference in Berlin in 1885. His objective was to extract the maximum wealth from the colony. Around 10 million Congolese inhabitants, including children, were mutilated, killed or died from disease during his rule. Failure to meet rubber collection quotas was punishable by death. A century later, Idi Amin, dictator of Uganda, launched a military coup in 1971, after which he expelled all Asians, handing over their businesses to his cronies, which led to collapse of the economy. He violently persecuted rival Ugandan tribes. The death toll from his regime was about half a million in a population of 10 million.

Why sketch five horrific anti-heroes? One reason is to underscore that enduring life pursuits seeking major societal change are sometimes profoundly evil. A second reason pertains to deeper questions about how such atrocities can occur, including the roles played by others. The bureaucratic authority of such leaders, sometimes combined with charismatic qualities, have been put forth as explanations (Steenkamp, 2023), but there is also the “banality of evil” written about by Hannah Arendt (1963) regarding Adolf Eichmann who was responsible for major atrocities against Jews, Gypsies, gay people, the disabled and ill. She emphasized his obedience, lack of critical distance, and failure to think – the crimes had become so routinized, there was no moral revulsion.

Returning to the six exemplary enduring heroes sketched above, it is important to underscore that all were driven by commitments to improve the lives of others, be they slaves, native Americans, black Americans, poor immigrants, or those living under the injustices of colonialism or apartheid. All sought social change to elevate the status and opportunities of people who suffered from systematic exclusion, exploitation, and discrimination. These efforts revealed the fundamental morality and virtue of their enduring pursuits. In contrast, the massive evil of the above anti-heroes emerged from deep immorality – a *mélange* of hate, xenophobia, and megalomania.

The next section brings psychological well-being to the inquiry to examine what motivates virtuous heroism. John Stuart Mill facilitates the transition. Regarding villainous life pursuits, he succinctly observed that bad men need nothing more to accomplish their ends than that “good men should look on and do nothing” (Mill, 1867). In *On Liberty* (Mill, 1959), he further reflected that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.” Reaching toward higher ideals, in his autobiography Mill (1893) wrote, “Those only are happy.... who have their

minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness, on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.” Despite his immersion in utilitarian philosophy devoted to promoting the greatest good for the greatest number, Mill understood there was more to life than running after happiness.

3 WHAT MOTIVATES ENDURING HEROISM? THE EUDAIMONIA HYPOTHESIS

Others in the field of heroism have called for more work on what motivates heroic endeavors (Becker & Eagly, 2004) and some have noted that if acting for the good of others is motivated by the desire for self-recognition, it is not heroism (Kohen, Langdon & Riches, 2018). With regard to enduring heroism, I previously suggested that eudaimonic well-being may be part of the motivational underpinnings (Ryff, 2023a). This thinking is elaborated below, beginning with a brief distillation of what eudaimonia is and how it has been previously studied. The separate components of eudaimonic well-being are then considered vis-à-vis the life pursuits of enduring heroes.

3.1 THE SCIENCE OF EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING

Over three decades ago, I put forth a new perspective on psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) rooted in ideas from clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic psychology as well as the writings of Aristotle. The model included tools to assess the various components of well-being that emerged from the above integration. Much scientific engagement followed: the measures were translated to 40 different languages and many new findings (1,500+ publications) were generated (see Ryff, in press; 2018; 2014; Ryff, Boylan, & Kirsch, 2021). Overall, the work stood in marked contrast to longstanding emphasis on

well-being defined as happiness or life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999; Ryff, 2024).

Broadly speaking, the scientific questions pursued encompassed three areas of inquiry (Ryff, in press). The first pertained to studies that examined well-being as an *outcome* – i.e., investigating how demographic variables (age, race, education, marital status, parental status) as well as experiences in work and family life predicted differing levels of well-being. Much of this work was conducted with a national longitudinal study of U.S. adults known as MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.) (www.midus.wisc.edu). Cultural influences were also considered via a parallel longitudinal study in Japan known as MIDJA (Midlife in Japan). Numerous publications from both studies are available on the MIDUS website.

The second major emphasis pertained to studies that investigated well-being as an *antecedent* – i.e., probing how eudaimonic well-being matters for biology and health (see Ryff, 2018; 2024; Ryff, Boylan, & Kirsch, 2021). Numerous findings showed that higher well-being was associated with better neuroendocrine regulation, lower inflammatory profiles, lower cardiovascular risk factors and better sleep. Findings from multiple studies, including large meta-analyses, showed that purpose in life, a key dimension of eudaimonic well-being, predicted extended longevity and reduced risk of disease.

The third category of studies has examined eudaimonic well-being as an *intervening influence*, or probed *underlying mechanisms* via neuroscience and genetics. Intervening pathway studies focus on well-being as a moderating or mediating influence. For example, well-being has been found to moderate (buffer against) the effects of low educational status on interleukin-6 (IL-6), an inflammatory marker implicated in multiple disease outcomes. Less educated individuals tend to have higher levels of IL-6, but eudaimonic well-being protected against higher IL-6 among those with limited education (Morozink et al., 2010). Other work showed that links between religion/spirituality and mortality were mediated by

purpose in life and social support (Boylan et al., 2023). Regarding underlying mechanisms (summarized in Ryff, 2018, 2024), well-being has been linked with sustained activation of reward circuitry in the brain that was further linked with lower levels of salivary cortisol over the course of the day. Genomic studies have also shown that eudaimonic well-being is linked with healthy gene expression tied to inflammatory processes.

Taken together, many scientific advances have grown up around the topic of eudaimonic well-being. Missing from the inquiry, however, has been the topic of heroism. The section below considers whether enduring heroism in the face of social inequalities and injustices may, in part, be motivated by different dimensions of eudaimonic well-being.

3.2 COMPONENTS OF EUDAIMONIA AND ENDURING HEROES

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (350 BCE; 1925) defined the highest of all human goods as activity of the soul in accord with virtue. He then asked what was the highest virtue, answering that it is achieving the best that is within us. The essential meaning of eudaimonia is thus about growth toward realization of one's true or best nature. As described by Norton (1976), Hellenic eudaimonism is an ethical doctrine wherein each person is obliged to know and live in truth to his daimon, a kind of spirit give to all persons at birth, thereby progressively actualizing an excellence consistent with innate potentialities. "Know thyself" and "become what you are," both inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, are the key messages (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Norton noted, however, that not all humans (e.g., slaves, women) were believed by Hellenic scholars to be invested with potential excellence.

My early scholarly work integrated Aristotle's eudaimonia with views of positive functioning from clinical, developmental, existential, and humanistic psychology (e.g., Allport, Erikson, Maslow, Rogers) to formulate a new model of psychological well-being

(Ryff, 1989). At the time, most work on well-being saw happiness as the ultimate outcome, also traceable to writings of the ancient Greeks about hedonia. Described below are the six key dimensions of well-being that emerged from the Ryff (1989) synthesis. Each is considered as a possible influence on the pursuits of enduring heroes.

Purpose in life draws heavily on existential perspectives, such as Frankl's (Frankl & Lasch, 1992) writings about the life-saving power of purpose in the face of horrible adversity, which for him involved enduring three years in Nazi concentration camps. Purpose is about finding meaning in one's life and having a sense of direction and goals to live for. These aspects of purpose may be particularly critical and beneficial when faced with awful or absurd life situations. All of the enduring heroes described above were driven by personal passions and objectives, be it helping others escape the bondages of slavery, protecting the land and way of life of indigenous peoples, throwing off the exploitation of colonialism, promoting decent lives for poor immigrants, eliminating the pernicious system of apartheid, and elevating the rights and self-regard of Black Americans. As noted above, all six exemplars were deeply aspirational in their long-term life pursuits. These goals and objectives likely emanated from a sense of calling in life, tied to Aristotle's eudaimonia – the idea of the daimon (inner spirit) and what it calls for. For all of the heroes considered, the meanings and content of their life objectives surely evolved over time, but the sense of being motivated by a strong sense of purpose was likely ever present.

Personal growth comes closest to Aristotle's eudaimonia in that it is concerned with the internal perception of becoming one's best self and achieving innate potentials. This aspect of well-being thus requires reflection about the journey, which the six exemplars revealed to differing degrees. Both Gandhi and Nelson Mandela wrote extensively about their own lives. Jane Addams commitments evolved over time from helping poor immigrants to promoting women's rights to objecting to war and rethinking the meanings of peace.

Malcolm X showed enormous personal growth from his early life in foster homes, to engagement in varieties of crime, to being imprisoned and then becoming a minister in the Nation of Islam. And, ultimately, to rejecting that world based on the misconduct of its leader. Both Mandela and Malcolm X nurtured their own personal becoming through the knowledge and learning pursued actively while in prison. Harriet Tubman's journey from being a slave herself to a free woman who actively engaged in freeing other slaves undoubtedly experienced much learning and personal growth on her journey. Crazy Horse showed great heroism on the battlefield and concern for his people, but his adult life had barely begun when he died at age 35.

Autonomy involves living according to one's personal convictions even if they go against conventional wisdom. It is about marching to one's own drummer, which requires self-determination and independence. Autonomous people do not look to others for approval, but move forward according to their own views of what they see as important in life. All of the enduring heroes described above revealed notable levels of autonomy, both in what they chose to pursue and in their persistence in the face of notable obstacles. None of them – Harriet Tubman, Crazy Horse, Jane Addams, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X – could have led the lives they did without having strong personal convictions about how to live their own best lives.

Environmental mastery is about choosing or creating environments that suit personal needs. It is a kind of person-environment fit linked to sense of control. This aspect of well-being was possibly deficient in the early lives of the exemplars – especially Tubman, Crazy Horse, Gandhi, Mandela, and Malcolm X. It may have been deficiencies in this aspect of well-being – tied to their early experiences of exploitation, danger, and discrimination – that propelled them forward with the aim of achieving a better life and supportive context. Prison, arguably the archtypical absence of environmental mastery, was part of the journey

for Mandela and Malcolm X, but such incarceration may have mobilized subsequent efforts to find a life path, including people, settings, and organizations that supported their personal needs and capacities. Even in the life of Jane Addams, her childhood health problems prevented her from becoming a medical doctor, but that experience may have heightened her commitment to create life contexts provided environmental supports to poor immigrants.

Positive relations with others refers to having meaningful, supportive ties with others. This interpersonal aspect of well-being is universally endorsed across psychological theories, philosophies of the good life, and religions. Enduring heroism, because of the demands involved, likely requires, but also undermines deep personal connectedness. What emerges from biographical and autobiographic accounts of the enduring heroes is that their lives revealed interpersonal strengths and weaknesses. To be a major figure trying to orchestrate widespread social change likely demands much from their significant others (partners/spouses, children), who at the same time, may have greatly loved and supported their enduring hero.

Self-acceptance, the final dimension of well-being, is about seeing and accepting multiple aspects of one's self, both strengths and weaknesses. The ancient Greeks admonished that we should know ourselves – accurately perceive our own actions, motivations, and feelings. Many formulations of mental health (e.g., self-actualization, optimal functioning, maturity) called for acceptance of self. The Jungian idea of individuation gives particular emphasis to coming to terms with one's dark side (the shadow). This dimension of well-being is inherently reflective and thereby, least evident in behavior and action. Whether self-acceptance motivates efforts to affect significant social change that define enduring heroism is unclear. This aspect of well-being might be better construed as a foundational strength involving honest self-evaluation than a major motivator. Stated

otherwise, it is difficult to imagine enduring heroism emanating from a place of deep self-doubt or self-loathing.

To summarize, this brief look at the six aspects of positive functioning that define eudaimonic well-being leads to a more refined hypothesis. The proposed aspects of eudaimonia that likely play a major motivating role in the actions of enduring heroes are: (1) purpose in life, which delineates larger life goals and the sources of meaning they provide; (2), autonomy, which emphasizes belief in and the following of one's own convictions; (3) environmental mastery, which involves having the capacities needed to manage one's surrounding context; and (4) fourth, personal growth, the awareness of becoming and self-realization over time that likely affords confidence and courage for continued pursuit of one's dream. The two remaining aspects of well-being, positive relations with others and self-acceptance, may be important strengths on which enduring heroes draw, but are perhaps less critical in mobilizing their demanding life pursuits.

This eudaimonic motivational hypothesis is a speculative endeavor – definitive evidence has not, and perhaps cannot, be assembled. It is also likely that the above aspects of positive functioning are dynamic, waxing and waning over time. Nonetheless, the effort to articulate significant motivational influences is a useful query for those interested in understanding who becomes an enduring hero seeking to redress major societal injustices. The final section below concludes with why such individuals are essential in our own era.

4 THE CONTEMPORARY NEED FOR ENDURING HEROES

Numerous findings show that inequality is widening over time, particularly in the U.S. (Ryff, 2023b). Top income earners have privileged access to better education, jobs, income, and wealth as well as greater likelihood of stable marriages to successful partners, living in thriving neighborhoods, and practicing healthier lifestyles. The Great Recession that

began in 2008 compounded these problems, fueling increases in poverty and health costs due to job loss, unemployment, and financial strain. The MIDUS national longitudinal study, given its two national samples – one recruited in 1995 and the other in 2012 – brought attention to declining well-being. Even though educational attainment in the U.S. improved over this time period, the post-Recession refresher sample had less household income (after adjusting for inflation), lower financial stability, worse general health, more chronic conditions, higher body mass (BMI), more functional limitations, and more physical symptoms than the pre-Recession core sample (Kirsch et al., 2019). The post-Recession sample also had lower eudaimonic well-being (autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance) and lower positive affect and life satisfaction than the pre-Recession baseline sample. Other findings comparing the two samples showed that the worse mental health of the refresher compared to the core sample was concentrated among those with lower socioeconomic status (Goldman, Gleib, & Weinstein, 2018). The broader context of these findings includes the opioid epidemic, growing alcoholism, and increased rates of suicide, collectively referred to as *deaths of despair* (Case & Deaton, 2020). There is also growing evidence of acceptance of widening inequalities among the privileged (Mendelberg, McCabe, & Thal, 2017), and worse still that many in the U.S. now profit from those in poverty at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Desmond, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened this grim tale of woe showing that rates of housing insecurity, food insecurity, financial insecurity, and risk of being fired or unemployed were higher among the less educated compared to those with a college degree as well as among Blacks compared to Whites (Perry, Aronson, & Pescosolido, 2021).

These discrepant realities in the human condition cannot be ignored. High quality science needs to document the scope of such problems, but also needed are enduring heroes gravely concerned about ever-widening inequality and injustice. Called for is a new

generation of social leaders committed, enduringly, to alleviating these problems. The six exemplars covered in this work offer compelling examples of such individuals from the past. Over a century ago, Jane Addams (1907) called for a new humanitarianism that included collective action seeking to improve social conditions and human welfare across bounds of class, race, ethnicity, and geography. Given the enormous suffering unfolding out every day around us, her vision is gravely needed in our own era.

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6 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.