

Harriet Tubman

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9-10 Category, First Place

"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person; now I was free. There was such a glory over everything. I felt like I was in heaven." - Harriet Tubman

Out of genocide and slavery, possibly the two most despicable acts of discrimination witnessed by the world, the extremes of the human psyche are revealed. The worst of man was seen through the extreme cruelty involved in the development of Hitler's "Final Solution" in the midst of World War II. On the other hand, humanity at its best could be seen by the selflessness displayed by a humble member of the Underground Railroad, risking his life every night for the sake of freedom for his fellow man. In humanity's darkest hours, and in its bleakest conditions, our heroes and martyrs have the most potential to display their inner greatness, or moral courage. One shining example of man's inherent capacity for benevolence is the legacy of Amarantha Ross Tubman, better known as Harriet Tubman.

Born into an African slave family in 1819 or 1820, Tubman witnessed the cruelty of slavery at a very young age. Perhaps revenge against her captors was a motive for an older Harriet to return and liberate approximately three hundred slaves in all, including many from her birthplace in Maryland. Or perhaps, an inner sense of justice had been imbued within her from birth. Her young rebellions had caused her to be the subject of many whippings, and at the age of twelve, she was struck by a miscalculated throw of an iron weight aimed at a fleeing slave whom she was attempting to save. She would never fully recover from the blow, suffering from the resulting narcolepsy for the rest of her life (Life of Harriet Tubman).

In 1849, Harriet fled her slave home in Maryland and connected with an existing Underground Railroad branch she had heard of from other slaves. Her route entailed following the North Star and she received assistance from white and black abolitionists and Railroad members until she arrived in Philadelphia. Almost immediately after securing her own freedom, she ventured back into Maryland to rescue her personal friends and family (Harriet Tubman Life). Dubbed "Moses" by many of the slaves she escorted north, she would continue to serve the Underground Railroad as a "conductor", guiding groups of escapees to destinations in many northern states and nearby Canadian cities. Within five years, she had already accumulated a \$40,000 bounty, and only halted her efforts to join the Union forces as a nurse, cook, and spy during the Civil War (Harriet Tubman).

After reading the amazing story of Harriet Tubman's moral courage, I was struck by the parallel with the moral courage exhibited by the heroes of the Holocaust. Like Thomas Wentworth Higginson's description of Harriet in 1859, "In point of courage, shrewdness, and disinterested exertions to rescue her fellow-man, she was without equal." The congruence between the stories of the rescuers of the victims of Hitler's Germany and of the victims of slavery in America is clearly evident, including Jews being covertly trafficked, hidden in secret rooms, and guided to safety much like America's slaves. Though there were subtle differences, like visas being issued to assist Jews in their escapes, and slaves finding sanctuary by simply crossing the border into Canada, the courage, values, and altruism involved in both scenarios are the same.

The fact that it takes great tragedy to reveal most men's moral courage brings me both inspiration and dismay; inspiration that man has the ability to carry out such selfless acts, but dismay that it often takes dire need to reveal man's capacity to stand up for what is just. I pray that it won't take a catastrophic event for me to reach out to others in need and to have moral courage in the face of adversity. While in my community there are not

presently social injustices of the proportion of the Holocaust or slavery, there are still injustices that even a teen can strive to correct, such as discrimination, poverty, and defending those that are abused, neglected, or bullied.

I aspire to be like Harriet Tubman and I believe that I share her values. I can incorporate her ideals into my daily life and practice them without waiting for a crisis to occur. While it is not likely that I'll ever be able to free hundreds of slaves, I can use my life to help others who are oppressed by society, and through my goal to be a doctor, those oppressed by disease. My personal goal is to save hundreds or thousands of patients from their bondage by finding a way to cure or prevent a disease like Alzheimer's. Even this long after her death in 1913, Harriet Tubman illustrates that no goal is too high if one is dedicated and courageous. From a traumatized, brain damaged twelve year old, she rose to one of the greatest examples of moral courage in American history. If I can touch or inspire even a fraction of the lives that she did, I'll have made a world of difference.

Works Cited

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