



# Heroism

AMY LAURA HALL

I was left speechless in two classes this week. In a class on Christian love, we were discussing Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping*. Robinson plays on the words House, Home, and Mother in her books of fiction and nonfiction. A young woman said these themes relate to books by popular evangelical author John Eldredge. I did not know young people were still reading John Eldredge. The second time I was speechless came two days later. This was in an undergraduate seminar on "Global Health," and we were talking about images in the mainstream media in the United States. How do photographs in glossy magazines shape definitions of "health"? The cover of the October, 2015 *GQ*, known as *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, carries a promise to help men discover "How To" in different endeavors: "Eat Better! Dress Better! Have Cooler Hair! Travel Lighter! Be More Productive! Not Be Evil! Have Lots and Lots of Babies!"<sup>1</sup> The last promise is the one that left me speechless.

Eldredge's book *Wild at Heart* was a new hallmark in Christian publishing. It was shared and sold first around September 11, 2001, and was a bestselling Christian book for years after. I had told myself Eldredge was a fad, and that he had been replaced by the less graceful (and now disgraced) Mark Driscoll. Driscoll was the designated spokesman for a neo-Calvinist church-plant movement called "Acts 29," a movement that considers Eric Metaxas, Tim Keller, and John Piper to be key theologians. Books published and lectures circulated under these names, and their

<sup>1</sup>Front Cover, *GQ*, October 2015.

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ideas about masculinity, are influencing how many people who listen to Christian radio stations or who shop at Christian bookstores are thinking about a good man or a good woman. I did not realize Eldredge was still, to this day, promoted in evangelical schools across the country. His books *Wild at Heart* and *Captivating* are, as I found out just this week, now considered Christian “classics.” Eldredge and Driscoll, Metaxas, Keller, and John Piper—all of these men promote a form of Christian ethics I would charitably term “complementarian.” These writers promote an idea that men are created by God with certain “wild” marks that distinguish them as masculine. Women are created by God with feminine marks that mark them as “captivating” and able to tame men in marriage. These distinguishing marks are sufficiently distinct to mark certain men as clearly men and certain women as clearly women. What is wrong with this Adam and Eve version of, well...not even Adam and Eve? This version of human beings does not fit real human beings.

This brings me to the intersection of this month’s *GQ* and the *Wild at Heart* I had hoped was passé. Was *GQ* going to promise to teach men how to eat, dress, be cool, travel, produce, be good, while attentively tending to all of the baby girls and boys they were being encouraged to be proud of siring? Is *GQ* going to come out with another issue in three years explaining to *GQ* readers how to wash dishes, braid hair, clean soccer uniforms, and be very, very patient after reading *Curious George* for the third time between 5 and 6 a.m., while others in the household sleep for another precious hour? I am guessing not. But I can pray so. Martin Luther said that marriage is a school for forgiveness. I hope marriage for evangelical readers can be also a school for being a little bit better, day by day, at refusing a lie about being a man who is a hero. Heroism needs to be redefined, again, again, and again. Heroism requires a version of the word “hero” that involves the daily work of caring for real bodies. Jesus recommended washing feet for practice.

#### FOLLOWING RUTH

The pastor who baptized my first daughter chose as the day’s text a reading from the nineteenth chapter of Judges. This is the section in the book of Judges that includes the dismembering of a young woman and the cycle into violent chaos that ends Judges. This reading was not in the assigned lectionary. About seven years prior, the pastor and his wife had endured the death of a young son to cancer. In this little church—a struggling downtown merger between an African-American and Anglo Methodist congregation—the pastor named each baptism as also a kind of death. For him, baptism and death were intertwined in his memory. The sacrament of new life in that church, under his leadership, was intertwined with the fragility of life. He reminded everyone during baptism of the fact that to be a parent is to allow your heart, as they say, to walk around outside your body.

The United Methodist liturgy of baptism is based in part on the King James Bible translation of Rom 6:4: “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into

death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” By linking baptism to the book of Judges, our pastor reminded the congregation of the real danger to our equilibrium if we are fully to love mortal, incarnate beings. Through baptism, we were to know both our vulnerability and the urgency of the claim that we are raised, with Christ, and marked for new life. Make no mistake about it, he said, loving a real person, who can be ravaged by disease or humanly wrought violence, is not for the faint of heart. Baptism is a call to be marked for a courageous form of love.

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That was nineteen years ago, and the event has shaped how I teach political theology. It has shaped the questions I ask about how Christians think about vulnerability, masculinity, and violence in the United States. The refrain of the book of Judges runs in this sort of way: In those days there was no king in Israel... In those days there was no king in Israel... In those days everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The end of the book of Judges calls for a king to fill the void of chaos and order the future for Israel. A young woman has been dismembered and all of the land is in a cycle of violence. The refrain rises to a crescendo. Let God bring the people a king.

The ordering based on the Septuagint of the books in this section is jarring. In most versions that American Protestants know, the ordering runs from Joshua to Judges to Ruth. Instead of the buildup toward a succession of kings and prophets, immediately following the crescendo of Judges readers receive a foreign young woman named Ruth. What does it mean for Christian heroism to exist right in that gap between the terrorizing end of the book of Judges and the beginning of the book of Ruth? There is no way to explain the horror of Judges. The horror stands there unresolved. What might it mean to stay continually in this interval between a summons for a king and the story of a foolhardy, or remarkably courageous, Moabite woman?

When I first began teaching at Duke Divinity School sixteen years ago, we had a recurring joke that students may not know the Bible well, but most of them had read Alasdair MacIntyre’s 1981 book *After Virtue*. MacIntyre’s way of talking about theology seemed attractive to many of our younger men studying at that time. He begins his book with a “Disquieting Suggestion” that the Western world has seen a kind of cataclysm of meaning, where there is no common way of discussing anything of real importance with one another.<sup>2</sup> It is as if wisdom herself has been dis-

<sup>2</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 1.

membered, and what is needed is a heroic, all-encompassing account of reality to bring again a possibility of civil society and even meaning itself. MacIntyre suggests that all we have left is fragments, and he ends *After Virtue* by suggesting that we need a moral ruler. For the sake of civilization, we need someone who can come in and unify the language through which people in the West speak: “What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”<sup>3</sup> The writer of the book of Judges ends with a summons that the people should call for a king. The end of *After Virtue* ends the same way, and his call to be courageous in the midst of “the new dark ages” was compelling to young men, and some young women, eager to be heroic.

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But what we receive after Judges is Ruth. She is not a master theologian. She was a woman who stayed faithful. She and her mother-in-law have lost everyone except one another, and, in spite of Naomi’s bitterness, Ruth remains faithful, going with Naomi during a time of famine to find sustenance in Bethlehem. The word Bethlehem means House of Bread. Ruth is the paternal great-great-grandmother of Jesus. What does it mean to think of heroism in these terms? What does it mean to consider heroism alongside Ruth, before embracing the role of, say, Solomon or David, or even Amos? What does it mean to find hope during “dark ages” in a little town called House of Bread?

#### WE DON’T NEED ANOTHER HERO

When students first brought me John Eldredge’s *Wild at Heart* in 2001, I tried to reckon the book’s popularity by way of memories. I drew on stories from my father’s ministry in West Texas and sifted through my own growing ministry in the “New” South. Traditionally male jobs in North Carolina were being shipped elsewhere. Many jobs that remain are in an underpaid service sector or in brutally competitive marketing firms. With a high-school degree, you might find work at Arby’s; a college degree might secure you a job crunching data on women’s scent preferences for Procter and Gamble. Maybe men were looking for spiritually fulfilling work outside of the labor market, for clarity about what makes them men? Maybe men were being drawn to embattled evangelicalism to fill the void created by meaningless work? A few months after *Wild at Heart* came out, the terror of 9/11 happened. I sensed then a generalized sense of shame over national impotence. As Susan Faludi has written in her 2007 book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, the mainstream media churned out story after story

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 244–245.

of men and women “cocooning” (her term) and surrounded the viewing public with images of uncomplicated, heroic “manhood” and vulnerable “womanhood,” a mix of old-school Walt Disney princess movies and Eisenhower-era automobile advertisements.<sup>4</sup>

In 2001, Eldredge had given an evangelical rinse to Robert Bly’s new-age spiritual tribute to manliness, *Iron John*, first published in 1990. But Eldredge turned out to be a showcased herald of a full celebration of muscular Christianity within white Protestantism. I started noticing a kaleidoscope of cultural cues posing femininity as the opposite of masculinity, and diagnosing gender confusion as the toxin poisoning both American men and failing congregations. The crisis, put bluntly, has to do with effeminate men and improperly employed, strong, smart, or pushy women. As this story goes, the problem is not an economy set up to exploit all workers, male and female, black and white. In fact, ways that working people at all levels are suffering in this global economy seem not even on the popular, white, evangelical radar. The problem, as the story goes, is sexual confusion writ large, complicating every aspect of a Christian man’s life. The call toward a newly muscular Christianity sounds more cacophonous than a univocal backlash against feminism, but voices from evangelicalism—mainline to hard right—do have key words in common: “crisis,” “leadership,” “gravitas,” “brotherhood,” “measure,” “fight,” “passivity,” “impact,” “feminized,” and “muscular.” In the years since 9/11, the language of mobilization has also led many of my beloved students to assume not only the justice of two prolonged wars, but that the pinnacle of Christian heroism is to serve in war.

My perspective on war and heroism is shaped by a backstory. Following the end of my marriage I was determined to learn the mandolin. The sounds I made were jangled, discordant—not at all like the Bill Monroe tapes my father used to play on car trips. After taking one lesson from an impatient teacher, I tried to learn online. When I told my mom the reason I was not going to give up, she explained something to me. I had been determined to play the mandolin because my grandfather had played the mandolin at home with his four brothers. I had told myself a story that he had also played the mandolin after he returned from war. I had told myself a story that he played the mandolin to heal from trauma. My mom, his daughter-in-law, explained to me that I had this wrong. My grandfather could not play the mandolin after he returned from war. Some wounds of trauma do not fully “heal” in the way that many people think about “healing.”

The false stories families tell themselves about war can be harmless, but some lies about heroism require correction. There is a 2010 documentary on the NFL hero named Pat Tillman, called *The Tillman Story*, directed by Amir Bar-Lev. Tillman was an All-American football hero who then became a war hero, and who

<sup>4</sup>Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007) 4. Faludi plays off of and criticizes a trend that Faith Popcorn had been encouraging right before and after 9/11 as “cocooning.”

then was killed in Afghanistan. The film follows how Pat Tillman's mother fights the US Defense Department to uncover the truth about how her son was killed. Pat Tillman's youngest brother Richard broke up the national, televised memorial service for Pat, saying that Pat himself was not Christian and would have been offended by the use of his death to mix together American patriotism and an assurance of divine providence. (Richard Tillman's words were more direct than that pretty sentence.) In a scene that may shape how Christians in the United States consider war and heroism, Tillman's mother tries to sort through why two of her sons had enlisted in the military soon after 9/11. The Wikipedia site about the documentary says the film "stars" Pat Tillman, but his mother, Mary Spalding, is the unrelenting truth-seeker in this story. Mary Spalding wonders, on film, whether the fact that she had framed photos of other men in her family in their military uniforms had shaped her sons' imaginations to consider the heroism of war. She wonders whether she had subtly made war a matter of heroism. While watching her words, what a viewer cannot escape is, even if this brave woman had not displayed the images of family warriors in her home, her sons might have still been swept up by the call for men to restore order to chaos—a call that led to almost unequivocal support among politicians and Christians for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To tell your sons and daughters a different story, in the last fourteen years, has required an almost impossible thirst for truth combined with a willingness to endure the derision of other Christians.

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My grandfather was drafted into World War II while my father and his sister were small children. My grandmother, Ethel Mae Elliston Hall, had watched her own father die slowly from the trauma of World War I. In my family, no one could reliably make either of the two great wars seem glorious. One of my uncles by marriage has tried to do that, for his own complicated, personal reasons. But no one else in the family can stand the effort. War had taken a father away from my grandmother. War had taken a husband away from my grandmother. My grandfather had returned from WWII, and he was a beloved and deeply respected member of his community and of his extended family. But there was no mistaking that he suffered the rest of his life from being shot up nearly to death in the "War in the Pacific"—itself an unbearably discordant set of words. During my first year teaching at Duke, I heard some younger divinity students say that World War II was justified because the United States had entered in order to end the Holocaust. I have taught about heroism and the summons to mobilize for order against chaos in many classes since. I have done this in part to honor the memory of my grandfa-

ther. I have done this in part to honor the truth that my grandmother lived her entire life.

One of the reasons that you will hear the phrase “the ultimate sacrifice” again and again and again each Memorial Day (not just from *Fox News*, but from *MSNBC* and even *Democracy Now*) is that the words “ultimate” and “sacrifice” work on some part of the mainstream American psyche. I am still trying to sort out why those words are so salient. But I think it has something to do with what Southern author Susan Ketchin has called our “Christ-haunted landscape” (the title of her 1994 book by that title).<sup>5</sup> What Ketchin describes about the South applies in different ways across the United States. Something about the origin stories many mainstream Americans tell ourselves involves men making the “ultimate sacrifice,” perhaps to try to prove to ourselves that the ghost of Christianity is true, now, in a different way—the way of righteous heroism. But as one who follows Jesus’ great-grandmother, and who believes in Jesus Christ, I know that the real, risen Jesus Christ is the hope for real confession, the hope that allows my friends and family to see the lies of war for what they are.

By replacing Jesus Christ with the heroism of war, we not only commit heresy, we also commit a heresy that takes away the very truth that makes it possible to look at the truth of human lives. If part of what fuels our quest for heroism is the desperate hope that no soldier has died for “nothing,” then perhaps it is vital for Christians to relearn that the meaning of our lives and of our deaths—all our lives and all our deaths—is not held in a story of national meaning. Our lives and our deaths are created and recreated by God *out of nothing*. Our very creation and our re-creation in baptism are created out of the no-thing that is God’s grace.

This faith shapes how men see themselves and how women see men. Where I grew up, holding the door open for anyone was basic. Courtesy was not intermingled with chivalry—the idea that manners are ordered to one’s identity as a masculine man or a feminine woman. I also learned from my parents that love after war or during a recession requires everyone to drop any facade of chivalry and practice human decency. Male or female, we need one another to open doors and change diapers and wash dishes. And, if a man comes home from war unable to carry his beloved over the threshold, that does not make him less of a man. And, if a woman comes home from war too distracted by the trauma of combat to bake a cherry pie, then, well...Billy Boy had better learn to bake a cherry pie, and to share it with his family. This is the commonsense version of heroism that makes sense of the daily work of living.

## ON SUPERHEROES

My father is a pastor, and my mother has explained to him that he needs to keep up with popular culture, just so that he can have some idea what his younger

<sup>5</sup>Susan Ketchin, *The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994).

parishioners are putting in front of their eyeballs. Even if you do not like superhero movies, blockbusters end up being an assumed topic of conversation with friends and coworkers. After sorting through the nuances of each era's Superman, the various Batmans, the Spiderman from *Electric Company* to the Spiderman crawling up buildings today—I realized I was not going to find a superhero franchise that I like.

Superhero movies assume that people need a hero. As one current student pointed out, even the recent *Avengers* movie franchise, which features a team of heroes working together, creates a post-9/11 feedback loop. Each film shows teeming groups of humans, running around like scattered ants, on the verge of mass destruction, needing a team of superhumans to save us from the forces of chaos. It is as if we have indeed entered into MacIntyre's "new dark ages" and people want to watch ourselves saved from the rubble. This student astutely observed that our repetitive viewing of impending chaos keeps people trapped in a sort of trauma response to 9/11. He suggested that we end up stuck in feeling afraid, and saved, and afraid, and saved—usually by a man who can do something we are fundamentally unable to do. Merely mortals, without Batman's fortune or Superman's genes, we viewers watch ourselves saved from apocalypses. I suppose there are some viewers who leave the movie theater inspired to put on a superhero suit and save someone, but that is also a fool's errand. Trying to be someone else's savior is a very bad idea, however cute the suit and however pretty the damsel.

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Even in recent films that add some or other ironic twist, the superhero story remains intact. People cannot manage ourselves. Everyone has done what is right in our own eyes, and we need a leader—a king—a superhero. We are under threat from this or that form of villainy. We need a hero. This is a profoundly undemocratic way of seeing the world, and I am baffled that filmmakers get away with this. But they do get away with it, and the superhero story has gone over into other genres in the last decade. From Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr., historical dramas have offered filmgoers a grand story of a great man who was able to make history. In his January 2013 piece in *The New York Review* of Steven Spielberg's reconstituted Lincoln, David Bromwich sums up beautifully what is wrong with the false heroism in the film: "Any leader who adopts the posture of *seeing himself on the stage of history* is a glory to himself and a menace to all whom he must lead" (emphasis in the original).<sup>6</sup> Even Atticus Finch from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was not, it turns out, the Atticus Finch viewers had come to sanctify. Whatever

<sup>6</sup>David Bromwich, "How Close to Lincoln?" *The New York Review of Books*, January 20, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jan/10/how-close-lincoln/>.



one makes of the controversy around or the quality of Harper Lee's newly released (2015) *Go Set a Watchman*, the takeaway message is that Gregory Peck's 1962 cinematic depiction of the character satisfies because it lacks in subtlety. Life together is not a superhero movie.

Democracy depends on cacophony—on the discord of disparate voices. Hero narratives assume cacophony is a problem to be overcome, whether by a man in a cape or by a great speech given by a great man on a big stage or by a definitive spokesman for morality who can lead us out of the rubble of moral anarchy. Craving a leader who stands above me is an impulse I must resist, if I am going to be a citizen in a democracy or even if I am just going to be a constructively critical human being. Or, if I am going to remain Christian. Churches sometimes crave a hero for a pastor. When we do, we should read and read again the beginning of Acts, when the church receives a very different kind of power. People who were not supposed to speak to one another, or speak up at all, talked all at once. Writing during a time of famine, the Hebrew prophet Joel had seen a vision of a miracle whereby women and even servants would speak up. The beginning of Christianity depends on that vision. That is reason enough for me to resist the temptation to find a hero.

#### AGAINST BULLIES

Resisting heroism as a Christian may also help Christians to refuse the ways that masculinity can be used to stifle creativity or even reinforce domination in an everyday workplace. One of the many silly things I have heard on sports radio was from a commentator who said it is ridiculous to think that an NFL football player could be "bullied." Presumably, due to their size and strength, large men who routinely endure the impact of a refrigerator to their heads cannot be fazed by someone trying, through words, to mess with their heads. As a West Texas girl, I know football and, as a female professor at an elite university, I know men. Men are definitely capable of bullying and being bullied, regardless of how much weight they can bench press or how many fancy degrees they have. It has to do in part with wooden ways that masculinity and heroism are portrayed in popular and evangelical media.

A very wise older bishop commented about one manager we both worked with that he had never seen a man so effective at emasculating other men. It was this manager's basic way of dealing with a faculty meeting: control men by threatening them with bullying.

You cannot technically emasculate a woman. You cannot make a woman feel embarrassed for being a woman. A woman is a woman. One can be mean to women in all sorts of miserably effective ways. But you cannot intimidate a woman by accusing her of being a woman. A tried and true way to intimidate a man is to call him feminine. It is to strip him verbally of his capacity for a form of heroism that saves damsels in distress. A common epithet to use on a man is a derogatory

term for a part of a woman that designates her as female. Grown men can be intimidated to toe the team line or accept even a corrupt corporate line by creating a context where they are afraid of being shamed in front of others. A key way to intimidate men in the workplace is to hint that they are less than fully masculine. In my sixteen years of teaching, I have seen truly gifted, creative faculty colleagues wither under the subtle hazing of an administration that consistently labels their research “weak” or their writing style “shrill” or their scholarly output “small.” These words should be obvious and silly, but they work in discussions about theological scholarship in the United States.

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A boy growing up in the United States is carefully taught through a chorus of loud and quiet cues that he is supposed to be strong (not weak). He is taught that his developed voice is to be low (not shrill), and that the size of his body or some other measurable extension of his ego is to be “large.” Some men do not wither but harden in such a context, putting up a shell of stoicism and even keeping their distance from anyone vaguely vulnerable or anyone actually female. Here is the practical downside of even such a seemingly logical response. Stoicism requires, for most human beings, expending mental energy that would be much better spent on other things. Bullying through emasculation is bad sportsmanship and bad management in part because, while it may elicit compliance, it squishes any spirit of creativity, trust, and collaboration. A context of shame also rots camaraderie from the core. Within such a system, men sense that their dignity is precarious, as their teammates or coworkers may be asked to turn on them in order to protect themselves from being shamed.

A few football players I know were kind enough to talk to me about a bullying story concerning the Miami Dolphins, and one expressed dismay that the young man had kept such a long silence about the abuse he allegedly endured. Maybe his silence was in part about shame. In my experience as a teacher and as a pastor, I have learned that women or men who have endured abuse for any length of time are often embarrassed. It can be excruciating to go into detail about a pattern of prolonged bullying, enduring people’s well-meaning questions. The worst sort of response is one where a friend or colleague keeps asking questions about how in the world someone so brave, beautiful, or talented was able to be intimidated into conformity. Any form of truly Christian heroism needs to work from a position of brave confession, allowing ourselves to risk trusting others around us to see us as human, and beloved, even when a larger context subtly dehumanizes and separates us from one another.

It can be a tricky business pointing out to male colleagues that their conformity may be due to strategic bullying. Men do not necessarily appreciate being shown how they are being subtly controlled by men (or women) managing them. Rules about what makes a real man a real man intensify the pressure to pretend that nothing is happening. Domination through shame may seep like poison through church institutions as well as within a team or a business. Courage can also be contagious. A pastorally helpful question I learned to ask as a community organizer in the secular world is this: “Tell us a story about when you stood up for yourself.” Sharing stories about courage can help break the spell of stoicism or acquiescence. Think of this sort of work as testimonies to the Holy Spirit. After all, courage is a gift—a charism given to us through baptism.

My father has taught me lessons of both heroism and, perhaps inadvertently, how to be the right sort of woman. Here is a sweet story of heroism to end this essay. My father’s middle school team was the Palo Pinto Possums. As people tell the tale, the girls had outnumbered the boys in the vote for mascot. The boys wanted to be the Palo Pinto Panthers. The vote had come down to a tie, and one girl had been out sick when the vote was taken. The girl came back to school and cast the tie vote. (I love this story, for all the obvious reasons.) To be fair to the girls, possums are fierce, in their way. Have you seen a possum bare her teeth at any other creature? They are the unsung heroes of the West Texas prairie. But a possum’s best-known defense is to roll over and play dead. That is what these boys were playing against. My dad says those Palo Pinto, Texas boys played their hearts out, they were so determined to reclaim the humble possum for grandeur.

It is possible for boys and men to refuse to be divided and conquered through tactical emasculation and an overall context of false heroism. It is even possible for girls to make the team, and to help redefine heroism. May we each receive the courage in that space between Judges and Ruth, living into our baptism with courageous love and creative heroism. ⊕

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