The Hidden Conditions of Heroism

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THE HIDDEN CONDITIONS OF HEROISM

When I first saw the film *Hidden Figures* advertised, I determined to take my sixteen-year-old daughter to see it. As the white father of a biracial daughter (a father who remembers the days of the “Math is hard” Barbie), it was something I thought I should do. Too few films feature minority women as the stars, and too few tell of the importance of minority women to American history.

*Hidden Figures* does both these things. It fights many battles my wife and I are fighting as we raise our daughter.

For instance, central to the film is the work Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson does at a chalkboard. When the film opens, a very young Katherine works out an equation for older black students, who look on amazed. This moment foreshadows a scene later in the film when the adult Katherine Goble Johnson (Taraji P. Henson) works out an equation on the chalkboard at NASA, in the midst of the space race with white men in ties and white shirts looking on agog. We can definitely use more images like that in our culture, and seeing Johnson—a smart, strong, black woman—at the chalkboard feels like we’re recovering something from history.

Which we are.

But *Hidden Figures* isn’t so much a historical drama as it is a superhero movie. I don’t mean this as a knock on the film; we need superheroes to remind us of ideals and to move our horizons. We need to know some people will transcend time and space simply because they are so supremely talented.

This is Katherine Goble Johnson. Right after the first chalkboard scene, when Katherine is but a child, her parents are counseled that they must move so she can have the opportunity as a black student to go to high school. This is roughly akin to the realization in any superhero movie when the parents are told by some analyst, “This child isn’t normal.”

Coleman’s parents take the hint. The next time we see her, Katherine Coleman Goble is on the way to work at NASA with Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe). Simple recognition was all Katherine Coleman Goble needed to achieve a meteoric rise—pardon the pun—from humble beginnings all the way to NASA’s inner workings, where she verifies the launch equations for John Glenn himself.

This last fact alone—that John Glenn asked for Katherine Goble Johnson by name to verify his coordinates for reentry on one of his space flights—seems like the stuff of Marvel.

Except for the fact that it really happened.

So, yes, *Hidden Figures* is a feel-good movie, as it should be. I definitely want my daughter to see Katherine Goble Johnson at the chalkboard at NASA with white men looking on. In a country where math and engineering majors still trend male, that’s an image we could use more of.

However, superhero movies also tend to reinforce the status quo. We don’t make superheroes; they just arise when there’s a need. All we have to do is wait for their appearance. The danger of *Hidden Figures* is that it vindicates the rest of us. “See?” we can say from the comfort of our theater seats. “If you’re really a genius, you will rise to the top no matter what.” It allows us to wash our hands of all sorts of achievement gaps and wealth gaps and gender gaps. It allows us to pretend political will is not a factor in creating more Katherine Coleman Goble Johnsons.
Hidden Figures caused me to tell my daughter another hero story, one that will never make the big screen.

In February 1981, nine Asian refugees stumble out of an airplane in flip-flops, shorts, and T-shirts. They’re in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and it’s below zero outside. But the group of white sponsors there to welcome them is ready with coats and hats and boots. For the refugees, this is a different reality beyond just the weather change. The white sponsors are part of a church group who have responded to a request by the U.S. government, which is actively seeking to resettle refugees after a war in Southeast Asia went bad. Yes, actively seeking—the sponsors responded to a newspaper ad paid for by the U.S. government.

One of these refugees, a girl of six, immediately begins kindergarten. The church lines up tutors for this child, who quickly learns English from these tutors—and TV. As she grows, the church members monitor school friendships, while the girl code-switches between home and school. The girl, though Buddhist by family tradition, attends a Christian high school on the church’s tab. There, a teacher takes the girl, now a struggling adolescent, under his wing and prepares her for college in a host of ways she doesn’t realize.

Oh, there’s plenty of room in this story for adversity. The young woman wants to become a physical therapist and goes off to a big university, where she fails organic chemistry and has to retake it, barely passing with a C. But the big university also knows a thing or two about privilege and worthiness. When she applies to physical therapy school, affirmative action policies at the school weigh in her favor. She gets in as the second alternate.

Let’s not forget the woman’s own genius. She gets in. She passes classes. She walks on to the basketball team of a Big Ten university. (She’s five feet four and a half.)

And let’s not forget what it takes to break in to the inner-circle privilege. After course work, the woman will begin clinical rotations in hospitals and other professional settings. Her first clinical supervisor requests that she begin her first rotation under him early, in the summer. This man, her supervisor, is apparently tired of being a physical therapist and so will be going into a law program in the fall. (In some universes, you can just change white-collar careers when you feel like it.) It may seem like a minor request, but remember that the woman cannot fall back on her family for knowledge about navigating this white-collar world. She now depends on her classmates to make sense of what they are all experiencing, but they won’t be beginning clinicals until the fall. Though hesitant to work without this safety net of community, of course the woman bows to the will of the powerful man.

She fails the clinical. The man doesn’t like how fast she moves the ultrasound wand. The man says she’s not assertive. The woman in charge of the program attributes her failure to the passive nature of her Asian culture.

(Ah, the old “attributes of your culture” trick, a classic line from the privileged to the unprivileged. Here’s the passive tradition the woman came from: When the woman’s mother was beaten by her husband, she told him she peed in his food; then she left both him and the country by crossing the Mekong river at night, dodging gunboats, with a four-year-old and two-year-old in tow.)

The woman has to retake that clinical. So she does. She passes the rest without incident.

She graduates. She gets a job. She becomes a well-liked therapist. She rises to director of therapy at her hospital for a time. This stability allows for all the measures of success we value most: disposable income, community involvement, and home ownership.

You might have guessed it by now. I tell my daughter this success story because it’s her mother’s story. And it’s a story that shows us the conditions it takes—some of which are unimaginable in America today—to create heroes from underserved or marginalized populations: U.S. government
advocacy on behalf of refugees; churches embracing members of a radically different religion; churches committing to long-term financial and social support of families from marginalized groups; state university affirmative action policies that do in fact level the playing field for the underserved.

We need superhero movies, sure. We need to know the stories of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, to marvel at them.

But we also need to know the stories of lesser heroes, heroes like my wife. We need to know that making heroes is within our reach. It only takes the will of a community.