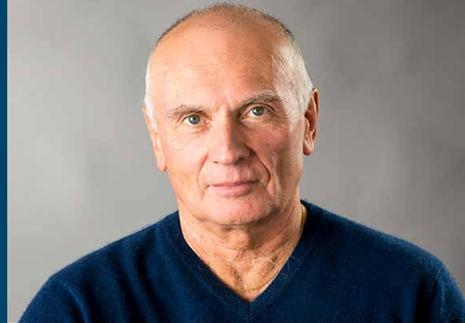




# Grace and Limits for the Family Hero

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



There are several roles that children can take on in a family. The more stress in a family the more rigidly children cling to one role, which leaves the advantages of the other roles unavailable to them. The most popular role is identified as the Hero. Inevitably, this child will receive the most positive attention, encouragement, and praise. It is a coveted family role, often reserved for the oldest or an only child.

There are several favorable qualities associated with the hero role. Heroes know how to read and respond to the expectations of those holding authority. They tend to be very willing to take on responsibility for a task. Heroes are typically steadfast and reliable regarding their work ethic. They are regularly willing to take on a measured risk. They are often quite clear about their values and what it means to live in integrity.

However, when the role is taken on inflexibly, not refined by the features of other roles, beneficial characteristics, as well as more harmful heroic tendencies, can easily be carried into adulthood. These children easily become leaders and helpers, such as doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, clergy, teachers, consultants, and executive coaches. Let's look at the characteristics of this role that need repair.

## Prominent Characteristics

**Loving and being lovable are organized and defined as achieving** – The dilemma is that the Hero will feel

condemned to endless manifestations of success as demonstrations of self-worth. They can't imagine someone loving them simply because of who they are, as they constantly attempt to prove they are lovable by adding to their resume.

**Excessive striving** – Heroes are constantly striving to get life right. This strenuous effort places a serious prohibition upon living with peace and joy. Perfectionism easily becomes a way of life. Taking up lodging in the idyllic house of perfectionism condemns the hero to a gnawing sense of not being enough.

**Have trouble feeling satisfied with their achievements** – The demand for perfection won't allow for feelings of gratification and fulfillment. Living with the gravitas of severity becomes familiar with a mitigated level of joy.

**Weaknesses are easily denied** – Heroes can be highly attached to what I call a shiny persona, an investment in looking good. They turn to their strengths again and again. A typical strength for a hero is intellectual acuity, which leaves their emotional intelligence ignored and underdeveloped. They easily lose sight of their developmental edge.

**Compulsive self-reliance** – As the need to see themselves

as accomplished expands, so does the need to see receiving assistance and support from others as unnecessary. This exaggerated independence can greatly hamper a capacity for collaboration and collective problem-solving. They easily believe that if they want something to get accomplished, then they should do it. It also disables an abiding ability to be relational as their independent persona leads others to believe they have nothing to offer the hero. They possess an undeveloped capacity to receive from others.

***Emotional isolation*** – One consequence of heroic self-reliance is the absence of genuine rapport, where they would feel known, understood, and loved. Such isolation has heroes possessing an undeveloped capacity to receive from others, which includes a tendency to suppress their needs. If an unsuppressed need reaches the surface, then heroes will likely view the need as an expression of failure.

***Identity can be trapped in a high-achieving role*** – Heroes often do not know who they are beyond the scope of their professional roles. There's confusion about what they love, fear, need, and the range of their losses. Their myopic view of themselves measured by high achievement easily morphs into a haunting self-righteousness.

***Easily generate the illusion that they can save others*** – To bolster their much-treasured self-concept as highly capable, Heroes easily come to believe they can save others. This illusion easily shifts into resentment as others appear not to respond favorably to heroic gestures of saving. Heroes can easily remain distracted by their

saving efforts, thereby neglecting the only person they can save, themselves.

### **Healing for Heroes**

More than any other family role, Heroes deny that they need help. Consequently, it can be very challenging for them to get the support that they need to outgrow the debilitating aspects of the role. However, if they can find enough humility and courage as well as a resource that is not seduced by their level of success, then the following interventions can go a long way to restore Heroes to the fullness of their humanity.

***Letting go of achieving as a measure of love*** – Achieving condemns Heroes to conditional self-love, leaving them condemned to proving that they are okay repeatedly. They can at least approach living with unconditional self-love by committing to living with more humility. If we understand humility as the gracious acceptance of personal limits, then Heroes can gradually shed the need to demonstrate their worth. They can live with compassion and acceptance for all of themselves, and not just the part of them who succeeds. As a result, what makes them lovable to others is their authenticity, a capacity for compassion, generosity, and gratitude. Heroes tend to give others the power to confirm their personal value by being excessively attached to being impressive. Watching such an attachment and interrupting it is a wonderful way for Heroes to reclaim the power to confirm their own worth. A recent conversation with a recovering Hero demonstrated the spiritual practice of tracking and interrupting an attachment to being impressive. "I've been tracking my need to impress for some time.

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### **Heroes tend to give others the power to confirm their personal value by being excessively attached to being impressive.**

Recently, I noticed that not only do I want the listener to be impressed with my varied performances, but I also want whoever is listening to be impressed with the subtlety with which I deliver my declarations.”

***Interrupting excessive striving*** – As Heroes begin to accept who they are now, the need to prove their worth is mitigated, allowing for unnecessary endeavoring to subside. It becomes especially important for Heroes to learn how to reclaim a lightness of heart. Learning how to play non-competitively, taking walks with family and friends, finding permission to sing and dance, finding a way to express themselves creatively and noticing and feel what touches and moves them emotionally.

***Feeling deep satisfaction for a job well done*** – When heroes begin to mitigate the quality of job performance as a measure of their personal worth, they can begin to simply feel the reward of having optimized their efforts with desired results. Much is gained by celebrating accomplishments with friends.

***Carrying an internal bow*** – Carrying the metaphor of an internal bow allows heroes to embrace a realistic view of their humanity. The metaphor points toward what is larger than the individual Hero. It may be a support group, a team, Nature, a family, or a deity. The key is to remain in a relationship with something larger than one’s ego, holding the faith that whatever is larger can provide more than an individual effort. Coming back to holding gratitude repeatedly can greatly support the connection to something larger.

***Inventorying & accepting strengths and areas needing development*** – Heroes often know their strengths and tend either to be unconscious of or in denial about

areas needing development. Shortcomings simply don’t go with the role, which leaves heroes with a skewed self-concept. At its worse, heroes will feel shame about their limitations. It can be helpful to work closely with practitioners, coaches, and developmental assistants to canvas areas of development repeatedly as simply ways of growing and not a self-indictment. As mentioned earlier, Heroes typically have well-developed intellects and need to pay attention to their emotional intelligence. This becomes particularly important as neuroscientists remind us that emotions have a large impact upon the formation of beliefs and ensuing actions.

***Learn to empower others rather than attempting to save*** – Even when saving looks like it might be working, it enables the disempowerment of the person allegedly being saved. Efforts directed at saving do not affirm the competency, intelligence, and capability of people. Gestures of saving are simply displaying of the savior’s prowess. There’s always room for Heroes to become better listeners while helping others to identify both internal and external resources. In doing so, Heroes empower others, supporting the agency of those around them.

***Hero children loved their parents by performing academically and/or athletically*** – They offered their caregivers a pleasant distraction from the challenges they faced. Ultimately, these children become adults who need to reorganize and refine how they will love themselves and others. Their personal and professional empowerment greatly depends upon bringing qualities of forgiveness, compassion, humility, generosity, and gratitude to their evolving definition of love. This new vision can only manifest by a fervent commitment to live a self-examined life.

There are a variety of ways the personality of recovering Heroes might show up differently. We can see the notion of living more consciously manifesting cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. The expression of ideas happens with less urgency, replaced

by a faith that more will be revealed. There is less of a tendency to lean toward some contrived certainty, with a greater capacity to hold ambiguity. There is also a greater ability to welcome diverse perspectives.

On an emotional level, recovering Heroes can have a felt sense of emotional energy in their bodies. They can also name and verbally express emotions. This opens the Hero to welcoming the emotions of others, with empathy rather than offering a solution or some form of guidance. As emotional intelligence increases, Heroes begin to suspend the dynamics of 'win-lose' and 'right-wrong' in their conversations. People begin to see the recovering Hero as someone with whom they can expect to be heard and understood. The Hero is likely to be perceived as a muse for deeper collaborations and co-creation.

There are several behavioral benefits characteristic of the recovering Hero. The first is a diminished use of primitive psychological defenses such as domination, excessive adaption, and distancing physically and/or emotionally. These defenses are replaced by the employment of effective boundaries. (See my book, *Dare to Grow-Up* for a detailed account of effective boundaries.) Secondly, there is a diminished likelihood that authority is either abdicated or abused. Authority is held by an increased sensibility regarding whether a culture needs more encouragement and/or direction infused into it. Lastly, the recovering Hero takes joy in expressing appreciation for the commitment, efforts, and accomplishments of others.

Timothy came in to see me, feeling lost having just divorced his wife of 25 years.

"I guess I should have seen it coming. I mean Ann has not been happy for a long time. I know I spent too much time at work when the kids were little. But I thought as they went off to college, she and I could rebuild something meaningful but maybe it was too late," Timothy admitted, his tone carrying the weight of his nuptial defeat.

He became devoted to his therapy, never missing a weekly session, which proved to be one of the advantages of his heroic life. He never did anything

with a cavalier attitude. He knew how to get himself totally in regardless of the task. He detailed his childhood including a father who was a traveling salesman and seldom home. Also, he described his mother as frequently depressed, finding her in bed when returning from school. He attempted to parent his two younger siblings while not accepting anything other than academic excellence for himself. He ended up going to law school and taking a position in a prestigious law firm where he quickly became a partner.

It took some time before Timothy could feel the grief of his divorce and fractured family. These feelings were very new for him to access and talk about.

"Why do I feel like I don't really know how to be sad? I can't remember anyone helping me the way you do", he offered, his gratitude veiled by a whisper of being self-suspect.

"I want to hear how you feel about receiving my help," I added, hoping he might be willing to be a bit more transparent.

"Well, I appreciate it, but I guess I'm not sure what it says about me", he puzzled.

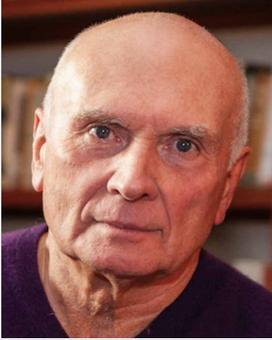
"I mean, shouldn't I be able to do this for myself", he stated, with his compulsive self-reliance showing its face.

"I want you to know that I was also a hero in my family of origin, and the gift of defeat also visited me, and my pride almost got in the way of getting the help that I desperately needed", I shared in the hope that he might bring at least, a small measure of acceptance for his willingness to get help.

"You needed help too?" he blurted, his disbelief possessing no subtlety.

"Yes, of course. Life is too big even for heroes like us", I rejoined as we both laughed.

Timothy remained devoted to his psychological work, joining a men's group and creating several lasting friendships. He often would pause in our sessions, smile, and reiterate with a sense of confidence and disbelief that a very painful defeat, the loss of his marriage, brought him home to himself.



**PAUL DUNION**, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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