

**“Accidental Heroes”**  
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“I volunteer. I volunteer as tribute.”  
“If the wind hasn’t changed, then I’ll preach on Sunday.”  
“No, I will not get up from this seat.”

There is a moment. The moment when someone steps into the stream of forces through which they become a hero. I call it their decisive moment, the deciding moment that transforms them from being just a part of the crowd into being a significant contributor to the forces of change.

Before Katniss Everdeen volunteered to be a tribute in the Hunger Games, she was just a member of district twelve, dissatisfied with the capitol and the games but with a priority on survival and hunting for the food her family needed. But at the moment she volunteered to take her sister’s place, she became a contender in the games and ultimately a force in the growing rebellion.

Venturing from his ship that had run aground on its way to America from England, Universalist John Murray was just trying to make a new life. He had left his preaching behind in England and certainly didn’t expect to be taking it up again. But when chance brought him to the pulpit in Thomas Potter’s church, then he took his place in Universalist history in America.

And when Rosa Parks was arrested for keeping her seat on the bus, she became one of the two people whose names kids are most frequently taught about the Civil Rights movement.

Heroes. Many stories have them. They are usually the main character, at the center of the action, players who not only influence the end outcome but are among the most crucial agents in the story. It may be against some adversity or force of evil that they are acting, or else they are engaging on a grand quest. Or both!

One subtype of heroes that I’m particularly fond of is the accidental hero. An accidental hero is someone who just happens to get swept up into the action and adventure. Often they struggle with some reluctance or even protest being able to be that kind of leader. I find I can relate to accidental heroes a bit more – they don’t have superpowers or destined births but are more just average people who happen to be at the right time and place to make a difference and get dragged along into the action.

That’s just what happens to Katniss in the hunger games trilogy. In this dystopian series, the struggle depicted is the seemingly all-powerful Capitol against the districts that provide its resources, districts whose people are controlled by fear induced by shows of force and primarily by the annual tournament called the “Hunger Games.” For the games, each district loses two children to the competition, and

only one of the 24 emerges alive. Katniss was not a player before her year in the games, only a competent hunter and gatherer who focused on feeding her family and caring for her sister and friend named Gale. But when her sister is chosen by chance for the games, Katniss volunteers to take her place. This is when she steps into the forces forming around her.

But as she enters the games, the forces begin to propel her. Here's what happens after her young ally in the games is killed:

"Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol are no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fry against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol, is there? Then I remember Peeta's words on the roof: "Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games." And for the first time, I understand what he means. I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I. A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeds of some sort, but they have blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Rue's side. Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers." (The Hunger Games, 236-237)

Then, at the close of her games, Katniss threatened to deprive the Capitol of having a victor, another arm of their control. She reflected: "All I was doing was trying to keep Peeta and myself alive. Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental. But when the Capitol decrees that only one tribute can live and you have the audacity to challenge it, I guess that's a rebellion in itself."

Through her reflexive actions, she becomes an accidental hero and ultimately the mascot of the growing rebellion as it develops through the series.

Another accidental hero in our own Universalist history is John Murray. Perhaps you have heard the classic story. Murray had been a Universalist preacher in England but had left in search of a new calling besides preaching. But then his ship was stranded during a storm off the coast of New Jersey. Some of the stories even say the place it was stranded was called "Good Luck Point." So Murray came ashore in search of assistance and met Thomas Potter. Potter had dreamt of a church with the Universalist message and had built the church just waiting for the right man to arrive. A whole Field of Dreams, if you build it, they will come, sort of thing. So as the story goes, Murray and Potter found one another, Potter asked Murray to preach, Murray declined – the reluctance, remember – Potter insisted, and Murray finally agreed to, if the ship was still stuck. Of course, the ship remained stranded and he preached. On that fateful day, Murray reflected that: "Visitors poured into the house; Potter took each by the hand. "This is the happiest day of my life," said the transported man: "There, neighbours, there is the minister God promised to send me; how do you like God's minister?" I [continues John Murray] ran

from the company, and prostrating myself before the throne of grace, besought my God to take me, and do with me, whatever he pleased. I am, said I, I am, O Lord God, in thine hand, as clay in the hand of the potter. . . . Immediately upon my return to the company [in the house], my boatmen entered the house: “The wind is fair, sir. We will depart.”

Murray, of course, remains with Potter as his ship leaves, a reluctant accidental hero, who then begins to spread the Universalist message in the region and ultimately becomes known as the “Father of Universalism in America.”

And no doubt you know the last seemingly accidental hero that I want to mention today, Rosa Parks and her part in the Montgomery bus boycott. In the classic story, the surface story, Parks is an accidental hero. She is portrayed as a seamstress who was just on her way home from work, just another day, and was too tired to vacate her seat for a white passenger on the segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Parks was arrested for her act, and because of outrage for her arrest, the next morning African Americans all over town began to boycott the buses, ultimately leading to the end of segregated buses in Montgomery.

But, of course, this is not the entire story about this accidental hero. My belief is that accidental heroes are not necessarily quite so accidental or even that they are not accidental at all. When we take a closer look, there’s more going on both within and around the hero.

Parks was not just a seamstress – that was her day job. She was also a trained activist and secretary of the local NAACP chapter. She had been put off of buses multiple times for not surrendering her seat. She did not act out of stubbornness or exhaustion but rather out of calculated effort and clear resolve.

Going beyond the often told surface story, the one my daughter was taught last year in school, we can find not only Parks’ convictions but also the community of which she was a part. It was not an accident that she acted. And the response of the African American community was not reactive but rather organized resistance that had been carefully planned and was waiting for the right person who could withstand the scrutiny and pressure to be the public face of the boycott. Because of her leadership in the community, Parks was that person.

There was also a community surrounding John Murray. First of all, Thomas Potter had already been exposed to Universalist thought here in America. It didn’t arrive with Murray. Potter was friends with a community of German Dunkers, these were Anabaptists who shared a theology of universal salvation with him. Potter built his own church and put out tons of advertisements for a preacher. He wasn’t just waiting. As the story goes in my mind, when Murray showed up wearing a preaching suit, I bet any person in town or even in neighboring towns would have been aware of Potter’s project and would have pointed Murray his way. I’m just imagining Murray’s confusion when Potter opens the door and says, “Oh, good – you’re here!” “Uh, here for what?” “Why, to preach of course!”

And Katniss, in the Hunger Games, was groomed and prepared for her role as the mascot of the rebellion. In the book, not the movie, her pin was carefully chosen by the mayor's daughter as a reminder of successes from the previous rebellion. As the rebellion grew across the districts, Katniss and her association with mockingjays were turned into symbols of hope. Her accidental role as hero meant stepping into that role, but it was created for her by others. Even her stylist in the games, Cinna, had already designed her Mockingjay clothes long before she ever agreed to officially be the face of the rebellion.

None of these accidental heroes would have become heroes without the communities that created them. Those with whom Thomas Potter had already connected and learned Universalist theology that motivated him to employ Murray as a preacher. The African American community in Montgomery that had already organized the bus boycott and was poised to act. These communities ARE the heroes. They may not make it into the popularized stories, but they are heroes just as much as the person in the face of the story is!

As we were reminded today in the child dedication, it takes a village to raise a child. Also, it takes a community to create and nurture a hero. What heroes will we create? Who in our midst can we nurture? Our children and youth? Those new to our community as well as longtime members? Anyone, really!

There were spontaneous heroes present in the UU church in Knoxville in 2008 when a man opened fire in the congregation. Greg McKendry, who was killed when he threw himself into the line of fire, and the other members of the congregation who subdued the shooter. In this tragic event, they were certainly heroes, but I also believe that it was their UU community and experiences and values there that helped give them the courage to act. It was because of practicing these values over time that they acted when the moment was upon them.

The community makes the hero. And even though the stories remembered may be of a single face, many are part of making the history and creating the changes that happen. I challenge us to nurture one another and ourselves so that we are ready to step into that change when it comes.