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Monomyth, Transformation and Inspiration: The Hero's Journey in the Extreme Fitness Exercise Infomercial

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ABSTRACT: The monomyth or hero's journey is often described as containing the stages of journey, transformation and return. Less attention has focused on a fourth stage, called inspiration, which discusses how the hero can then motivate and mentor a new generation of heroes. The present paper describes how the success stories of people profiled in extreme fitness infomercials can be understood as conforming to the structure of the monomyth. The way in which the infomercials document how the success stories can also be used to motivate and mentor future heroes illustrates the role of inspiration as the final component of the fitness hero's journey. Ways in which modern technology and social media provide platforms for publicizing stories of fitness transformation are also considered.

KEYWORDS: exercise, heroes, hero's journey, inspiration, *Insanity*, monomyth, *P90X*, transformation

In their analysis of heroes, Allison and Goethals (2011) note that heroes represent an important construct in most human beings' conception of the world. People are readily able to generate both fictional and real heroes who inspire and influence them. Although heroes can be categorized in terms of their willingness to take on either physical or social risk (Franco, Blau & Zimbardo, 2011), Allison and Goethals (2017) argue that heroes can be understood in terms of two distinct but related functions: transformation and inspiration. Not only do heroes transform themselves but they can also inspire others to transform.

The role of transformation as a key process in the creation of a hero is highlighted by the seminal work of Joseph Campbell (1949) in his classic volume *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell (1949, p. 30) defined the *monomyth* as the "standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero" containing the three elements of journey, transformation and return. Campbell (1949, p. 30) described the chronology of the monomyth as, "A hero ventures forth

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from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

The purpose of the present paper is to explore a fourth stage of the hero’s journey not generally considered by heroism scholars. This fourth stage, which can be considered *inspiration*, sends a message to observers that they too can attain the status of hero. In other words, heroes provide an energizing function by serving as aspirational models (Allison & Goethals, 2016). Although there is some debate regarding necessary and sufficient characteristics of heroes (Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou, 2015), inspiration is viewed as a central element despite receiving less scholarly attention than the transformational component. Campbell (1988) recognized the role of inspiration in his book *The Power of Myth* where he compared the hero’s journey to the developmental process involved in human growth. Although he felt that the hero’s journey was open to everyone, he cautioned that “the big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure” (Campbell, 1988, p. 43).

One form of inspiration is to act as a mentor for someone. According to Allison and Goethals (2017), mentoring is part of the hero’s journey. After becoming a hero, often through the intervention of a mentor, that hero can then become a mentor for someone else (Rohr, 2014). As noted by Allison and Goethals (2017), the idea that carrying forward a heroic message is part of the hero’s journey is embedded in the underlying philosophy of transformative self-help programs. In Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, a key element is to carry forward the sobriety message by mentoring others (Smith & Wilson, 2013).

The figures Campbell (1949) used to introduce the monomyth include Prometheus, Jason and the Argonauts, the Buddha and Jesus Christ. Contemporary scholars have applied the monomyth to well-known movies such as *Star Wars* (Gordon, 1978; Mackay, 1999; Sherman, 1979; Tiffin, 1999), *Star Trek* (Palumbo, 2013) and *The Terminator* (Palumbo, 2008) and classic fiction novels such as Alfred Bester’s *The Stars My Destination* (Palumbo, 2004) and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (Palumbo, 1998).

Despite the fact that many of the examples of heroes Campbell (1949) and others have used to make their arguments are larger-than-life and literally superhuman, Campbell felt that everyone had the potential to be a hero, partly because heroic behavior was a component of the transformative process of human development. In keeping with this ‘everyman’ or ‘everywoman’ perspective, in the present paper I consider a cast of characters much less renowned than Greek gods, religious prophets, astronauts, Star Fleet officers, or Jedi masters of the force. I propose that the narratives contained in exercise infomercials tell stories of transformation composed of a journey, transformation and return. As noted by Hope and Johnson (2004), the infomercial is a “misunderstood” and “under-researched” element of television and “the success of the infomercial as advertising and recognition as a cultural marker indicate that serious enquiry is overdue.” In understanding the hero’s journey expressed in infomercials, it seemed more appropriate to adopt the model of transformation and inspiration presented by Allison and Goethals (2017) rather than the perspective advocated by Franco et al. (2011), given that following a rigorous exercise program does not seem to entail real physical or social risk such as might be taken on by war heroes or police officers.

Narratives of change in infomercials do more than describe the hero's journey; they also express how a hero relates to the stories told by earlier heroes. The viewer witnesses how a hero's adventure can inspire a new hero to seek a path of journey, separation, and return, and, by extension, perhaps become an inspiration to yet another possible hero in a potentially endless recursive chain. As such, infomercials represent an effective context to study this fourth, inspirational stage.

Campbell talks about the boon that the hero provides to mankind on his (or her) return to the conventional realm. What is the boon the exercise infomercial hero provides? At first pass, it would seem the boon is fitness. In reality, I suggest the boon is the message to viewers that they too can attain the status of hero. The exercise infomercial has become a hero manufacturing machine. The idea that individuals can take steps to create heroes has been recognized by Zimbardo (2011) with the Heroic Imagination Project, and it is also consistent with the idea of "making heroes" championed by Goethals and Allison (2012).

I was most interested in infomercials that sell a legitimate exercise product positioned as very difficult to perform, often called "extreme fitness" or "high intensity" workouts. My fascination with extreme fitness products stemmed from the way they contradict tropes of infomercials that emphasize fun and ease (Stern, 2009) but are consistent with the idea of rigorous trials that lead to transformation as part of a hero's path. Perhaps the best examples are *Insanity* and *P90X*, two workout systems marketed by Beachbody. Despite their difficulty, they have been very successful. *P90X* is credited with selling over 3.5 million copies and earning almost \$500 million since its release in 2005 (Helliker, 2012). By comparison, the original workout DVD from the *The Biggest Loser* television show was considered a success after it had sold 200,000 copies (Ives, 2006).

P90X and *Insanity* follow the same basic formula. Each system contains a set of different workouts led by a celebrity trainer that are supposed to be followed in a particular order for a specific length of time. The workouts range from about 40-60 minutes and are billed as very demanding, so to follow the plans diligently requires a significant commitment.

My assertion that these products have become an important outlet for the hero's journey stems from the degree to which they have entered into our collective awareness. *P90X* received a huge boost in its media profile in 2012 when it was publicized that Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Paul Ryan did the exercise program on Capitol Hill and encouraged other members of Congress to participate (Martin, 2011). *P90X* has been mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and *US Weekly*. *Esquire* magazine included a discussion of *P90X*'s effectiveness as a weight-loss tool (Chiarella, 2011). *Insanity*, which is advertised as the "hardest workout ever put on DVD," and its creator, Shaun T., have been featured on Conan O'Brien, the *Tonight Show*, *The Dr. Oz Show*, the VH-1 show *Big Morning Buzz Live*, *The Tyra Banks Show*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and *The 700 Club*.

Currently, estimates place the number of obese and overweight adult Americans (over the age of 20) at about 70% (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden & Curtin, 2010). The trend toward greater obesity in our current society has made it possible to cast the extreme exerciser as a hero of mythic proportion. The very fit have become the ideal to which we all aspire. The stories of these fitness heroes, which follow the course outlined by Campbell with regard to classic and modern

heroes, relates to conquering the fattening effects of a sedentary culture that glamorizes cooking and emphasizes the rewards of eating (McBride, 2010). Despite their heroic nature, these fitness warriors also possess a mundane element. These run-of-the-mill commoners are neither royalty nor blessed by the fates. They achieve greatness through their own hard work and by faithfully following the dictates of their chosen workout plan. They are modern day Puritans, with their faith in Beachbody products replacing their faith in God.

An infomercial is a 28-minute commercial designed to appear to be a television program (Hawthorne, 1998). The content of an infomercial takes on two forms, at times appearing to be what it actually is: a persuasive message intended to sell a product. The commercial segments of the infomercial contain traditional elements such as a statement of product benefits, a toll-free number to order the product, a money-back guarantee, and price. At other times, the infomercial appears to be creative content, with documentary-like segments profiling individuals who have suffered hardship from being overweight, not feeling attractive, and lacking energy. These individuals become testifiers whose stories fit the form of Campbell's monomyth and are the basis for my analysis.

The hero's journey begins with a call to adventure (Campbell, 1949). In some cases, the hero may initially refuse the call. Often, the would-be hero is provided with assistance in the form of a supernatural helper. Through a series of trials and victories of initiation, the hero is tested and transformed by a series of tasks and, ultimately, obtains some kind of gift or boon as a result of his or her efforts. The third stage involves the hero's return and reintegration to society. Unlike his or her prior existence, the hero now possesses a higher purpose: sharing his or her gift with the rest of the world. The goal of the quest may involve the capture of a physical artifact, such as the Holy Grail—the cup Jesus Christ used at the Last Supper.

Satisfied and physically and psychologically transformed customers are heroes with stories that fit the stages of Campbell's (1949) monomyth. Ordering the exercise DVD is testifiers' first step in their departure from their current world. The workouts in the DVD catapult the testifier to a new, magical realm where he or she is required to work on fitness in a structured manner on a daily basis. The celebrity fitness instructor is the supernatural aide who leads the hero through a series of trials which manifest as demanding and rigorous workouts. Programs have clearly demarcated beginnings and endings and last either 60 or 90 days. At the end, the endorser reports being changed. Physical changes are documented with before and after photographs. Testimonials also speak to psychological and spiritual changes coinciding with the physical transformation. The endorser's role in the infomercial completes the third stage of the hero's journey. He or she has returned to this mundane world to tell of his or her successes. The fourth, inspiration stage occurs because the hero, by telling his or her story in the infomercial, then inspires a new generation of heroes to join the transformation.

The Nature of the Hero

According to Campbell (1949, p. 37), the hero can manifest himself (or herself) in many ways; the hero may be a person of "exceptional gifts" or someone "unrecognized" or even "disdained" by society. The *Insanity* and *P90X* infomercials present heroes as common people with no special ability save their willingness to undergo the trials associated with the advertised workout system. Both the hero and the world the hero inhabits may suffer from a symbolic deficiency. Chris said, "I started *Insanity* because I was unhappy with the way my life was

going...I was ready for a change.” Scott said, “I woke up, looked in the mirror, didn’t like the way I looked, saw an infomercial for *Insanity*, bought *Insanity*, because I didn’t like looking like this...I could do better than that.” Testifiers in the *P90X* infomercials told similar stories. Matt said he was “disgusted by what I saw.”

The word “real” plays an important element in the infomercials. The idea that the people appearing in the infomercials are “real” people as opposed to actors is reiterated in *P90X* and *Insanity* infomercials. In the *P90X* infomercial, fitness trainer Tony Horton focuses on the appeal to average people with the comment, “I think a lot of folks that are flipping channels, looking at infomercials, they stop at the *P90X* infomercial because they see that maybe this is the first one that’s actually real...there are people standing next to you...*P90X* is happening to people in communities and cities all around them.” The emphasis on real people as opposed to actors has direct bearing on the message of the hero’s journey. By eschewing experts or professionals, the infomercials open up the possibility that anyone can be a hero.

The hero, a “man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations” possesses “an extraordinary capacity...to face and survive such experience” (Campbell, 1949, p. 327). *Insanity* and *P90X* infomercials stress the dedication required to complete the programs. In the *Insanity* infomercial, the announcer describes the test group as “regular people just like you who pushed through the pain and survived 60 days of *Insanity* and have amazing results to prove it.” Anthony (who also appears as a performer in the actual workouts) said, “You got to be dedicated. These are for people who feel the pain and don’t run for it.”

The Journey Begins with a Call to Adventure

According to Campbell (1949, pp. 51, 91), the call to adventure “rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth” and can lead to an “awakening of the self” also described as a “form of self-annihilation.” Darren said, “I didn’t realize it at the time. But when I clicked that “Yes I want to take the *Insanity* challenge” button, right then and there my life changed forever. Mentally I’m a new person with a new confidence. And I know I can go out there and tackle anything now because *Insanity* brought me to that point.”

Satisfied customers often speak of a moment of insight or self-revelation where they realized they must take a significant plunge to change their lives for the better. Taylor explained that doing *P90X* was a “life changer but you have to be ready to change your life.” Jeremy, who weighed 370 pounds when he started *P90X*, said that he was “afraid that another man would have to raise my kids.”

Campbell noted that heroes often initially refuse the call to action. Similarly, testifiers may take a while to work up the courage or feel sufficient despair to accept the extreme workout challenge. The announcer in the *P90X* infomercial said, “The plan starts whenever you finally make that decision and regain the fitness you’ve lost or achieve the body you never had.” Chastity actually encouraged people to refuse the *Insanity* call if they were not ready. She said, “If you’re ready to take the challenge, it can happen. If you’re not, go home.”

It took Odysseus ten years to complete his journey after leaving Troy, far more time than the 60 or 90 days required by *Insanity* and *P90X*, respectively, for fitness heroes to complete their journey. By specifying a fixed period of time, the infomercials conform to the norms of their genre (Stern, 2009). “Only 60 days” or “only 90 days” fits the infomercial easy-use motif, simultaneously contradicted by the repeated warnings about the workouts’ difficulty. By making the hero’s journey short-term, it is possible to quickly solicit the testimony of heroes which can then be used to inspire future generations of heroes. The heroes of one infomercial become the heralds of later infomercials and inspire future heroes by their stories of change.

Supernatural Aid

A supernatural helper can aid the hero by acting as a mentor who can alert the hero to dangers and provide insight into how to overcome them (Campbell, 2004). In exercise infomercials, the aide takes the form of the celebrity trainer charged with the task of teaching the hero to achieve his or her potential by physically transforming his or her body. Celebrity trainers promote themselves as an instrumental component in the quest for fitness. *P90X* celebrity trainer Tony Horton said, “Your body is the fitness machine, and I’m going to show you how to use it.” The *Insanity* announcer described Shaun T. as “a trainer who can push you farther than you ever knew you could go.” Celebrity trainers warn of the potential difficulties in store for fledgling heroes. During one workout, Shaun T. said, “I’m not trying to hurt you, just trying to make you better.”

Rather than supernatural in origin, the aide’s power stems from science. The *P90X* announcer said, “...a breakthrough fitness program that if followed for 90 days turns the ordinary into the extraordinary and almost literally turns back the clock. Sounds like a miracle, but it’s actually science.” Science is the new magic when it comes to transforming the body. The infomercials carefully explain that the effectiveness of their workout systems is based on what is promoted as revolutionary concepts in exercise science.

Allison and Goethals (2011) found that when asked to identify their heroes, a large proportion of people named a mentor who inspired a transformation. Testifiers are quick to point out the essential role that the celebrity trainer has in mentoring them on their hero’s journey. For example, Mario said that although he did the workout, Shaun T. inspired his performance. Sean credited Shaun T. with encouraging him to dig deep into his soul to find the inner resources to accomplish his transformation.

Initiation

The hero’s journey consists of tests and ordeals. In the context of extreme exercise, the ordeals are the workouts, which must be carried out in a precise order. The announcer in the *Insanity* infomercial stated that to succeed, “What you do need is willpower and lots of it...*Insanity* is going to test your limits physically and mentally...But if you can stick with it for 60 days, you’ll end up with the hardest body you’ve ever had.”

The *Insanity* announcer described some of the test subjects as thinking “they were already in great shape. It took about ten minutes into their first *Insanity* workout to dispel that notion.” The difficulty of the workouts, especially for people who were in good shape already, is presented as a blow to the ego and a means of weakening and then rebuilding the self-concept.

Rachel, one of the fittest and most determined members of the *Insanity* team, appeared in the infomercial and several of the workouts. She said, “Within the warm-up, I was struggling...that was such a shock to me that I’m fit, I’m athletic and I’m struggling in the warm-up and it really made me realize that I’ve got a ways to go, and now by the end of the program I’m just amazed at how far I’ve come.”

It would seem that workout programs like *P90X* and *Insanity* are exclusionary in that their self-professed level of difficulty makes them out of reach for the fitness goals of most potential customers. One hallmark of the infomercial is that the products are marketed as convenient and easy-to-use (Stern, 2009). This is decidedly not the case with extreme exercise infomercials. Although *Insanity* is repeatedly described as “the hardest workout ever put on DVD” across four iterations of *Insanity* infomercials, the concept of “insanity” is polysemic, shifting from mental instability to a sign of deep commitment and finally to a mark of rationality. Initially, the workout was billed as so difficult that a person would have to be insane to attempt it. However, in subsequent iterations, Shaun T. suggested that the extreme workout represented by *Insanity* is a time- and cost-effective method of exercise, to the point where it would be insane to *not* do *Insanity*.

The workout’s very name implies that to complete the journey an initiate must learn to see the world differently and take on the perspective of someone out of his or her mind. In the first iteration, testifiers endorsed the notion that to undertake the *Insanity* workout program was a sign of madness. Mario said, “This is beyond insanity. They need a new word for insanity. This is too crazy.” The second infomercial began to reconceptualize the meaning of insanity from madness to receptivity to a challenge. It described the free t-shirt customers can get for completing the program as a “badge of honor” and as an “emblem worn by the elite group of men and women who stood up to the *Insanity* challenge.” By the third instantiation of the infomercial, the meaning of doing the *Insanity* workout has shifted from an irrational to a rational act. The announcer stated, “*Insanity* is extremely hard. But that doesn’t mean it’s crazy. In fact if you ask any of the tens of thousands of people who’ve done *Insanity*, they’ll tell you it makes perfect sense.” The rationality of doing *Insanity* was maintained in the fourth infomercial. Shaun T. stated, “*Insanity* may be the hardest workout you’ll ever do. But it’s definitely the smartest.” One of the satisfied customers in the infomercial gave avid *Insanity* fans a name: “insaniacs.”

Transformation as Apotheosis and the Ultimate Boon

Although a few testifiers noted the health benefits of exercise, such as lower cholesterol or weight loss, infomercials focused on other, more spiritual changes. In Campbell’s (1949) view, by attaining the goal of the quest, the hero achieves the ultimate boon. With this accomplishment, the hero may undergo apotheosis and experience an expansion of consciousness associated with achieving a god-like state. Apotheosis may be triggered by physical injury or even death. Palumbo (2004, p. 360) identified transcendence as the “overarching theme of the monomyth.” To succeed you have to draw on metaphysical resources. Sean said, “what Shaun meant when he said dig is to dig deep, dig deep in your soul...to help you over that pain, that wall.”

Although we think of a hero’s adventure in terms of events that occur in the external world, for Campbell (1949, p. 8), the voyage of the hero includes a “desired and feared adventure

of the discovery of the self” which is accomplished by the “destruction of the world that we have built and in which we live, and of ourselves within it.” In the *Insanity* infomercial, Llyod spoke of his old self and new self as two different people. “It’s not until you put those two guys up side-by-side...looking at myself now, ah, man, I’d run circles around that guy.” It is interesting to note that Doug’s apotheosis involved returning to an earlier form. He said, “*Insanity* let the real me sort of come back out...back to being what I was like when I was in my early 20s...I am a different person now.” Those who complete *Insanity* achieve a kind of Nirvana in that they become masters of the world in addition to becoming masters of themselves. Consistent with this self-perceived mastery, Tom said, “I feel like there’s nothing I couldn’t do if I was challenged to do it.”

The Return to the Mundane World: Inspiration as the Fourth Stage of the Monomyth

Upon completing the initiation, the hero acquires a gift or “boon” in the process of reaching an apotheosis. Campbell (1949, p. 193) wrote, “The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.” What does the hero in an exercise infomercial bring back? At first, it would appear the prize is the secret method to attaining a supremely fit physique. The physical manifestation of the boon is the set of exercise DVDs that contain the necessary workout rituals. The DVDs would appear to be the Holy Grail. The problem with this interpretation is that the DVDs already exist in this world. If they didn’t, how could the testifier have used them?

What the hero brings back is himself or herself as an example of someone who successfully completed the workout system. The gift the hero brings upon his or her return is inspiration for a new generation of heroes. For the hero of the exercise infomercial, the return and the presentation of the boon consist of appearing in the exercise infomercial. In other words, the hero brings back inspiration for other potential heroes. In the *P90X* infomercial, Ewelina said, “Now I would love to motivate everyone.”

Palumbo (2004) noted that instances of the monomyth may contain a fractal pattern, i.e., the same pattern recurring at different levels. The *Insanity* and *P90X* infomercials are several generations old. The heroes of the first generation were inspired by the celebrity trainers. For subsequent generations, heroes of the first generation become testifiers and therefore heroes for the second, who, in turn, become heroes and testifiers for the third. Of course, any generation of hero can be influenced by earlier generations all the way up to the celebrity trainer. Although each iteration holds true to the central infomercial script, there are subtle differences between them. For example, having promoted *P90X* as an extremely difficult workout in the first infomercial, the producers of the second infomercial took pains to emphasize that it is possible to buy, use, and benefit from *P90X* even if obese or out of shape.

People, as self-aware beings, may recognize their role in the creation or maintenance of the repeated pattern. Testifiers in extreme exercise infomercials acknowledge the role testifiers in previous iterations played in inspiring them to become heroes themselves. It is this chain of inspiration which represents the boon of the extreme fitness hero. Brad said, “I see the infomercial, and it’s the first time I’ve seen any video that really looked like it would work.”

Reinforcing his spoken testimony are images drawn from the previous iteration of the *P90X* infomercial that influenced his decision to begin the program.

The chain of intertwined inspiration for the viewer has become long, variegated and reflexive. The infomercial itself represents a dual motivational attempt which integrates apparent narrative content with true commercial intent. In doing so, the infomercial links persuasive messages from the celebrity trainer, a disembodied announcer's voice, and the dramatized experiences of successful customers. Even as these sources exert their influence, the viewer is then exposed to images of a previous incarnation of an infomercial within the confines of a newer version of the same infomercial. The viewer hears and is perhaps influenced by Brad's testimony but also sees the images that influenced him. A viewer can then be inspired by the present hero or some aspect that inspired this hero (including being aware that this hero was in fact influenced by a hero in the previous incarnation).

Testifiers recognize the upward and downward directions of inspiration. Heroes whose stories are presented in infomercials refer back to the stories of heroes in earlier infomercials. Taylor said, "I had always seen the *P90X* commercials...there's just story after story, success after success." Hearing previous tales is what finally motivated Taylor to order the DVDs and ultimately become a hero in his own right. Just as they realize they have been influenced, they acknowledge that they can model behavior that can inspire others to become heroes. They directly address viewers to tell them that they should trust the infomercial and invest in *Insanity* or *P90X*.

Testifiers become active creators of their own heroic success stories. The infomercials contain video clips created by the testifiers themselves and sent to Beachbody that recount their own success stories. Their sweat and breathlessness document that they are actually doing the workouts they are promoting. Often there is a paused screen image from one of the workout videos on a television in the background, a self-reference that helps affirm the genuineness of testimony. When a testifier references how a previous infomercial inspired him or her to work out, there will often be a quick cut-away to an image from a previous incarnation of that infomercial. Testifiers in later iterations acknowledge their role in the recursive nature of the infomercials' evolutionary process. For example, one said, "The first time I saw the *Insanity* infomercial was probably two years ago. Now here two years later, I'm standing in front of those same cameras doing the same infomercial. And I'm living proof that you can do it."

The presentation of the hero's return and sharing the secrets of his or her adventure further illustrate nuances of this fourth, inspirational stage. To appear on an infomercial, they need to document their transformation with before-and after-pictures. Before beginning an exercise program, individuals do not yet know whether or not they are destined to become heroes, that is, whether or not they will actually finish a workout program and demonstrate a physical transformation that mirrors an inner one. In addition to reflexive self-awareness, self-documentation also represents an action of confident optimism.

Beachbody encourages optimism about heroic potential. Workout DVDs come with instructions that advise people to take before, during, and after pictures of themselves to document their physical transformation, even suggesting the best poses to adopt. Beachbody rewards people who mail in before-and-after photographs with a free t-shirt and a suggestive hint

that pictures of their own transformation may be incorporated into later iterations of the infomercials.

People who complete the program but fail to make the grade for appearing in the infomercial will post their results to YouTube or Facebook in what they often title “My Transformation Journey.” Sometimes they will post videos of themselves doing an entire 40-50 minute workout. A Google search for the phrase “my transformation journey” yielded over 9,000 hits.

The extensive online presence that fans of *P90X* and *Insanity* create through blogs and posted videos can also be viewed as a form of heroic mentoring. Beachbody, the company that owns both *P90X* and *Insanity* also maintains a multi-level marketing affiliated business that operates much like Avon or Amway by encouraging customers to become coaches who work as both sales representatives and motivators. These coaches have their own websites, hosted through the main one for Beachbody, where they tell their own fitness-based heroes’ journeys illustrated with before and after photos as well as inspirational quotes.

Self-documentation creates an interesting nuance for the hero’s journey. Typically, we do not think of heroes telling their own stories. Doing so would make heroes seem narcissistic, spending too much time dwelling on their own accomplishments rather than living the adventure that makes them heroes or spreading the knowledge of their apotheosis and subsequent boon. Would the *Gospels* have been as compelling if they had all been written by Jesus, prior to his crucifixion, brashly talking about his own miracles? To do so would have contradicted Christ’s humility. Similarly, despite the hubris that can be viewed as his tragic flaw, it is hard to imagine Odysseus sitting in his captain’s cabin, spending his time writing the tale of killing the Cyclops (or in a more modern age, posting selfies of himself while standing next to the blinded Polyphemus). Such an effort was best left to the poet Homer while Odysseus lived the adventures of which lesser men would tell the tales.

Conclusion

In addition to demonstrating that the narratives contained in exercise infomercials conform to the structure of the monomyth, I have suggested that they extend the concept in a unique direction. I found evidence for the fourth stage of the monomyth where the hero inspires a new generation of heroes to also achieve what the hero has attained. This analysis of the role of heroism in infomercials is consistent with the perspective on heroes advanced by Allison (2015) and Allison and Goethals (2017), who focus on the hero’s ability to transform and inspire others to transform. This inspiration stage adopted by fitness warriors is made even easier by harnessing social media that allow heroes to recount their own stories. Just as Andy Warhol proposed that in modern times, everyone can earn his or her 15 minutes of fame, I suggest that the fitness mission that envelops modern society has created a path for everyone to achieve the title of hero.

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