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- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Submit](#)
- [Meet the Editors](#)
- [Issue 23-
Spring
2022](#)
- [Previous Issues](#)
- [Join Our Team](#)

[back](#)

Fiction

[The Definition of a Hero](#)
By: Tom Cropper

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Submit](#)
- [Meet the Editors](#)
- [Issue 23- Spring 2022](#)
- [Previous Issues](#)
- [Join Our Team](#)

[back](#)

The Definition of a Hero

By: Tom Cropper

When I started my freshman year of college I felt liberated, like I was finally able to have a fresh start with new people. And even though the friends I grew up with are all at different schools, I was glad that they are finally free from the labels that they were given in high school. I hate labels. Most of the time the labels we are given are unfitting, just like how people called my best friend a "thug" just because he wore flat-bill baseball hats. Well that thug is now studying nursing. Another reason why I hate labels is because when you overuse a word, the real meaning of the word becomes watered down. I think that we all should think a little more about what we are saying before we go and call somebody a thug, or slut, or even something positive, like a hero.

I hardly ever use the word hero. I don't think that most people who are called heroes are worthy of the title. And anybody who sees themselves as a hero probably isn't one. Its like I said, people need to think about what they say before the actually say it. That's why I was so glad during week two of my introduction to literature course when my professor began a lesson on heroism. The professor began his lesson by asking the class to name qualities of a hero. The results were exactly what I expected: honest, brave, loyal, strong, trustworthy, motivated, wise, caring, selfless, and responsible.

The professor wrote all of these qualities on the white board and said, "Okay, now we are going to participate in a little class activity so everybody stand up. I am going to name off a few different types of people. Based on these definitions, if you think that person is a hero then move to the left of the classroom and if you think that the person is not a hero move to the right. Your first question is your mother a hero?" In the class of 30 people, 25 moved to the left. Five people weren't very fond of their mothers. The professor then proceeded to ask, "Is a U.S. soldier fighting overseas a hero?" That vote was unanimous; everyone agreed that the soldier is a hero.

Then the professor asked the class if a cancer fighter was a hero. Twenty-nine faces immediately turned red with anger when one boy moved to right side of the classroom. That boy was me. "Young man," the professor said to me, "why do you say that the cancer fighter is not a hero?"

"They don't fit the definitions," I replied.

"Are they not brave?"

"They try to be, but it's easy to be afraid when you're faced with a life threatening illness."

"Dishonest?"

"I've heard of cancer fighters who lied about how they were actually feeling."

I could see that many of my classmates were still disgusted with me, but I had gone too far to change sides. Plus I was just basing my answer off of the definitions that the class decided upon. Still trying to change my mind, the professor looked at me and said, "Think about the intense treatment that these people go through. Aren't these people strong?"

"Chemotherapy weakens their bodies, makes them feel tired and fatigued," I replied.

"Well isn't there wisdom that comes with fighting cancer? Think about the life lessons learned."

"True, but the treatment is controlled by doctors. The victims don't survive because of a life lesson they learned. They survive because a doctor worked hard and went to medical school. If anything the doctors are the heroes."

Anger still filled the room. Everyone in the class thought that I was the biggest jerk they had ever met. At that moment I looked at the professor who was failing to intimidate me with his glare and I knew that I was being labeled. To the professor and the rest of the classroom I was nothing but an asshole, which wasn't true, and I had enough of unfair labels.

So I stood and said, "What? Do you have some kind of problem with me? Take a look at yourself. It's not enough that a cancer fighter literally has their life on the line, and then they become a hero to someone like you. All they want is for their lives to go back to normal. To sit in a classroom or go to work like an average Joe would be a huge win. But even when they are healthy they still don't get to go back to normal; they have to be heroes for all of you. You want them to hand out life lessons and put everything into such perfect perspective for you. I am the only person here who is actually relating to a cancer fighter. The rest of you are just painting pictures in your mind of the brave cancer fighter so you don't have to feel so sad when you think about them. Well guess what? Cancer is scary; it makes you feel afraid and weak. You have to lie about how you're feeling for the sake of your family. It requires selfishness. You have to miss your brother's basketball game because you might catch a cold. You might have to skip your best friend's birthday party because the chemo left you feeling too weak. So stop with your judgments about me and about cancer survivors and start to think about yourself."

I could tell that I had changed a few minds, but not the professor's who said, "You have made quite the impression of yourself, young man. You should really work on how you present yourself."

"And you should stop making assumptions about something that you know absolutely nothing about."

"Something that I know absolutely nothing about? What makes you the expert? Have you ever even known a cancer survivor?"

I then lifted my left sleeve, revealing the purple ribbon tattooed on my arm with the word "survivor" written underneath and said, "Yeah, I knew this one guy. He was a real asshole."

