

Code Girls Essay

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As a society, we often find that we place an impractical view on our heroes to be flawless individuals who make headlines -- after all, it's what we've grown up seeing in comic books and TV shows. In reality, a true hero's archetype doesn't pertain to a particular set of values, and may not necessarily fulfill everyone's expectations of perfection. However, they may profoundly impact a specific aspect of a person's life. In addition to advancing women empowerment, author Liza Mundy effectively changes the generic hero stereotype in *Code Girls*. This, in addition to my own personal hero, allows us all to further examine the acknowledgement we provide to the people in our lives.

Among the revolutionary, influential women detailed in the novel, Agnes Driscoll, a 28-year-old high school math teacher in Illinois, differentiated herself from the rest. The witty young woman was swiftly assigned to the Navy's code and signal section and went on to initiate unprecedented advances in code-breaking.

Agnes took little time for leisure. She deciphered enemy machines, breaking messages previously deemed "unbreakable" (p. 76). At a time where decoding seemingly impossible Japanese messages proved crucial for American wartime advancement, Agnes discovered the hidden intricacies to their systems, diagnosing their technique of "columnar transposition" (p. 80), which involved patterned code group transmission. Her consistent intelligence was a breath of fresh air; her serious mentality and determined spirit brought upon a re-amped work environment. Agnes's success was then described as "the most difficult cryptanalytic task ever

performed,” the scale of her contribution “spectacular” (p. 81). Her visionary nature became clear as she quickly established herself as a frontrunner.

Agnes’s spotlight was not unfaltering, however. Elizebeth Friedman, a “restless Midwesterner” (p. 58) who later went on to become a successful cryptanalyst, took an immediate dislike to the strong-willed woman. From the very beginning, she saw Agnes as “a person who thought only of furthering herself,” scorning her “overweening ambition” and “lack of loyalty to public service” (p. 77). The competitive instincts between the two also exacerbated their divide. Agnes did, in fact, have “overweening” ambition and confidence. For instance, after observing a puzzled trainee, she told him, “The reason you’re not getting anywhere is because this is a new code” (p. 81), then initiated the “bulk of the work” (p. 81) in cracking that newly-changed Japanese system. She established a strong presence in the workplace, where her straightforward instruction was rarely called into question. The immense improvements in their abilities demonstrated that this was ultimately worth it. Agnes later trained major male naval code breakers who “became famous for their World War II exploits” (p. 77-78), exemplifying the scale of her competence and influence.

I have an Agnes in my own life. Just as the women detailed in Mundy’s novel were immersed in their code-breaking world, my decade-long classical music journey has always been a big part of my life. When I first auditioned for my current violin teacher, my hands shook by my instrument as she’d asked why I hadn’t memorized my music. She honestly and directly critiqued me immediately after coming across an inconsistency in my playing. On the contrary, my previous teachers had been gentler, their expectations more flexible.

Initially, I was largely unaccustomed to this sharp contrast; I couldn’t wrap my head around my teacher’s frank assessment of my playing. This later changed. The more time I spent

in that small, rustic house of hers, the more I realized the improvements in the ways I responded to criticism in the lesson room, treasuring the way I applied them to other aspects of my life. I came to appreciate her astoundingly astute, quick ability to attach to the slight imperfections of my intonation or the incorrect style of my phrasing. The dynamic of our relationship improved as I grew accustomed to our weekly lessons; receiving praise from my teacher became the ultimate validation for my playing, not easily earned. Over time, I developed the ability to embrace the constructive criticism of others as I focused on improving myself rather than earning quick praise.

Many similarities can be drawn between Agnes and my teacher. In Agnes's time, the idea for any woman to legitimize herself to the extent to that she could truly influence the opposite gender was nearly unfathomable. The immediate response to any strong female was bound to be resentment, yet somehow she managed to win the respect of her coworkers. Agnes had imperfections, nevertheless, one of which included an "aloof" personality (p. 79). Despite her atypical nature, she was greatly esteemed. Situations with my teacher share striking similarities; many are not accustomed to her personality, and thus reluctant to approach her. However, among the people who have grown to know her, she is loved and appreciated. Through her, I have changed my mindset and the way I view the people of this world.

My parents have said to me, "Those who point out your greatest flaws are the ones who care about you the most." Thus, Elizebeth was flawed about one thing: Agnes's behavior and contribution proved she was the last person who would think "only of furthering herself." Additionally, she "did not get any public credit" (p. 78), revealing the genuine nature of her motives. Agnes and my teacher both refused to let others alter the way they conducted themselves, and for this, they never let go of themselves. Though they have lived during different

eras, the actions of these two phenomenal women have demonstrated the ever-expanding capacity of not only their gender but also of humankind. Agnes was a hero by any real-world standards; my teacher has shown me what it means to have an impact on someone else's life. Through her, I have taken great inspiration to apply the perseverance I've developed as a violin student to my outside endeavors. I have strengthened the belief that the tools I have been given in that lesson room will allow me to eventually impact the vast world that we live in.