

One woman's drive for freedom

By Patricia Davis
NC News Service

Harriet Tubman was a single-minded individual whose only ambition was to lead her people to freedom. Her motto was: "We got to go free or die!"

And in leading her people out of slavery, Mrs. Tubman came to be known as the American Moses.

Like the biblical Moses, she too was born into slavery. It was around 1820 on a plantation at Bucktown on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

She learned about freedom early. At night, after laboring in the fields or in the "big house" all day, the slaves often gathered in a windowless cabin and whispered stories about people like Denmark Vesey. A free black, who taught that all were born equal, he was hanged when his plans for insurrection were discovered.

At 6, Harriet went to work for her first master, a trapper. Her next job was as nurse to a child not much younger than herself. Her master whipped her severely, permanently scarring her neck. At 10, she became a field hand.

Like Moses, she had no early ambition to be a leader. A single violent episode changed her life.

At a cornhusking bee, a slave ran away. The overseer caught the slave in a country store and ordered the girl to hold him so he could be beaten.

She refused and was struck in

the forehead by a two-pound weight. She recovered but remained disfigured and suffered from seizures the rest of her life.

In 1844 she married John Tubman. The value of cotton was falling and the danger of being "sold south," whether married or not, was increasing. But Tubman, though free himself, feared his wife's dreams of freedom and threatened to tell her master if she ran away.

In 1849 Mrs. Tubman fled alone. Her first refuge was at the home of a white neighbor who directed her to other stops on the Underground Railroad.

It was a hazardous 90-mile trip to Pennsylvania, a free state. Here, with freedom a reality for herself, Mrs. Tubman determined to take up her life's work. She worked as a cook in Philadelphia, saving her money to finance freedom trips back to what she called "the land of Egypt."

On the first of at least 19 trips south she helped a sister and her family escape the very day they were to be auctioned.

Later she helped her brothers and her parents escape to freedom. She also tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade her husband to go north.

The danger of these trips increased with the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law which ordered that runaways could be returned to their masters.

But the fearless former slave continued to guide her charges to freedom in Canada, encouraging them on the arduous journey with songs and bible stories. Realizing that noise could jeopardize everyone's safety, she gave babies medication to help them sleep and threatened the fainthearted with a pistol.

Despite a \$40,000 bounty on her head, she was never caught and never lost a passenger on the Underground Railroad.

Later she became adept as a speaker at anti-slavery meetings. Though she never learned to read and write, she was a wonderful storyteller.

After the Civil War she lived in Auburn, N.Y., where she established a home for aged and indigent blacks before her death in 1913.

This courageous 19th-century Moses had a kind of ambition I admire. Her ambition was for others, not for herself. In pursuing her ambition, she showed initiative and resourcefulness. And she had the ability to persuade others to join her cause — the anti-slavery cause.

(Ms. Davis is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C. area.)

FOOD...

...for thought

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

It seemed like an innocent enough query. But the 4-year-old boy with dancing eyes and straw-colored hair pounced on the question like a cat on a mouse.

"I want to be a worker who builds houses and stuff," he said gleefully.

Then he added, in a quick as lightning postscript: "And after I'm a builder I could be a jet pilot. And then I could be a policeman or a rescue-squad ambulance driver. Or I could be a fireman. I could be an artist. And I'd really like to grow up to be a dinosaur."

The boy's parents wondered about that last one, too.

This youngster, in his particular way, was expressing his first thoughts about ambition. A child's ambition, it seems, is a mixture of fantasy, desire and a romantic notion of the world.

But sooner or later this youthful desire to gain some objective will take a concrete form. This can raise interesting questions.

For a young person, how to handle ambition may be puzzling. People generally recognize that being ambitious is a very good thing. But they also know that being too ambitious can at

times injure others. It even can lead to one's moral downfall.

Where do you draw the line? How do you separate "good" ambition from "bad" ambition?

By no means is ambition limited to the young person embracing career or personal goals. Ambition is a necessary component for young and old alike.

Human beings face not only constant challenges but the constant need to be challenged. The drive, the determination to succeed, is essential if wishful thinking is ever to become reality, if humanity is to experience progress.

It also seems that ambition can spill over into an individual's relationships. Certainly a husband or wife can be intensely supportive of, and ambitious for, a spouse.

In any number of ways, parents can be ambitious for their children. Scholastics, sports, hobbies and even health can be objects of parents' ambition for their children.

Here again, questions are bound to arise.

What role should parents play in helping their children shape goals?

What can parents contribute when their child's desire to achieve means that difficult choices need to be made?

...for discussion

1. "Ambition" often is considered an ambiguous word. What is the first thing you think of when you hear that a person is ambitious?

2. What do you think children should be told about ambition?

3. Is there a place for ambition in your life as a Christian?

4. In Katharine Bird's article, *Nogbertine* Father Alfred McBride describes St. Catherine of Siena as ambitious. What was her ambition? What did her ambition lead her to do?

5. Can ambition lead people into activities they otherwise might hesitate to take on? Can you think of anyone, fictional or real, who did this?

6. What two forms of ambition did Dolores Leckey encounter during a trip to Ireland?

SECOND HELPINGS

"Simple Prayer," by Father John Dalrymple. Can a person be ambitious in prayer? To judge by Father Dalrymple's 118-page, easy-to-read book, the answer is surely yes. Praying, he says, is like developing a friendship with another person. At first, strangers communicate on a superficial level. But if they become friends, "a transformation takes place in their conversation. They begin to be able to talk about their real, deeper selves. They also begin to be silent with each other." Father Dalrymple explains that periods of silence, in communication with friends or with God, then become an "alternative form of communication." He offers some practical advice on how to advance in prayer through using the *Jesus Prayer* and spiritual reading, among other suggestions. (Michael Glazier Inc. 1723 Delaware Ave., Wilmington, Del. 1984. \$4.95.)

talents

with talents and capabilities God has given us on loan.

In Jesus' day trades were family affairs. Fathers handed on to their sons all the arts and skills of the business. Jesus reflects this in saying: "I solemnly assure you, the Son cannot do anything of himself — he can do only what he sees the Father doing...For the Father loves the Son and everything the Father does he shows him" (John 5:19-20).

Jesus was keenly conscious of his dependence on the Father and worked hard to vindicate his Father's trust. All of us are children of the same Father, who has given us talents and opportunities. He invites us to work with him and for him — not just for our egocentric interests.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)

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