



TITLE: Harriet Tubman: A Battle of a Different Kind

BOOK: Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World

PAGE: 48

TIME TO READ: 7 minutes

TOPICS: **Making a Difference**

Following your dream

History—slavery and the Underground Railroad

Overcoming obstacles

AGE LEVEL: Grades 5 and up

SYNOPSIS: This is the story of Harriet Tubman’s dream to become free, and of her risks and sacrifices as she helped others find the same freedom.

NOTES TO TEACHER:

A wonderful ancillary story is that of the Freedom Riders in the early 1960s Civil Rights Movement. It is titled “A Risky Ride for Freedom,” and it can be found on page 132 of *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World*.

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World, **Harriet Tubman: A Battle of a Different Kind**

MIDDLE SCHOOL:

PRE-QUESTIONS:

Go back through history to make a list of causes where others have risked their lives for the cause (*e.g., war, slavery, ethnic cleansing, etc.*).

Is there anything so important to you that you would consider risking your life for it?

- If so, what is it?

Read Story

POST-QUESTIONS:

What age was Harriet when she was sent to the “Big House” to work?

What were some of Harriet’s tasks as a slave?

How did the Underground Railroad start?

- What part did Harriet play in it?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

Research causes and the people who gave their lives for them.

- Choose one that is meaningful to you and write a one-page report indicating its importance to you.

Have a month-long celebration of people who changed the world with their beliefs and their actions.

- Give speeches in class.
- Make posters to hang throughout the school.
- Honor their sacrifices.

Take turns being a “slave” to other classmates for a day or a week. (*Your classroom “masters” can have you carry their books, get lunch for them, sharpen their pencil, etc.*)

- Discuss what it feels like to be “ordered around, without gratitude, nor compensation.”

NOTES TO TEACHER:

Supervise this activity carefully, or set rigid guidelines to assure that student requests are reasonable and appropriate for school.

Harriet Tubman: A Battle of a Different Kind

*Since justice is indivisible, injustice anywhere
is an affront to justice everywhere.*

Martin Luther King Jr.

“If a fire is lit properly, it will burn,” her mother said.

“I know, Mama. And if it rains, there will be puddles somewhere.”

“I’m telling you, Harriet, some things don’t change, and they’re never going to change. Just like fires burning and water puddling. And being a slave!”

“Mama, you told me the story of my great-grandma being kidnapped and brought here to be a slave. She was free before she came here. I can’t change fires burning or rain falling, but I will change what I can change. I won’t always be a slave. I’ll be free some day.”

Harriet Tubman was no more than five years old when she was sent to work in the Big House. The house where the plantation owners—her owners—lived was very different from the shabby cabin in which she slept. Her jobs in the Big House began when the sun rose and ended when the sun set.

“Harriet! Why is that baby crying? You’re not rocking the cradle gently enough! Go help the cook prepare lunch.”

Harriet rubbed her own growling stomach as she went off. She hadn’t eaten since the night before.

Harriet was a slave because her family all were slaves. Her great-grandmother had come from Africa, but it hadn’t been by choice. She had been captured, put on a crowded ship, taken to a country on the other side of the globe and sold. She didn’t want to stay, but she no longer had her freedom, so she had to stay. By the time Harriet was born, ship captains had been bringing Africans to America for two hundred years, and more than 4 million black slaves worked on farms and plantations.

Harriet washed, scrubbed, rocked—and thought. And if she thought too much and her master didn’t think she’d worked hard enough, she was whipped. As she grew older, she always feared that if she didn’t please her master, she might be sold as her sisters had been. As a slave, she could be sold just like a horse or a piece of furniture. She knew she had to leave before that happened because if she were sold, it would be farther south and much harder to reach the North.

Harriet longed for freedom. She didn’t want to work in the fields without being paid; she didn’t want to be an unpaid servant. She wanted to be free. But escaping was not as easy as opening a door and leaving, because leaving was illegal. Harriet was a slave in the state of Maryland. There were other states that were slave states, and there were nearby states that were considered “free” states. In order to escape, Harriet would have to leave Maryland and go north to a state that did not allow slavery.

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Except for the early morning light peeking through the openings between the logs, Harriet’s cabin was dark. Harriet was sitting on her rag-covered bed of straw. Her mother looked over at her.

“What were you and your father talking about last night?” her mother asked.

“Well, Mama, we were talking about fires burning and rain puddling. You know, all those things that don’t change.”

“You were out there for a long time, Harriet. You were talking about other things besides fire and rain.”

“We were talking about something else, Mama, about something else that doesn’t change. We were talking about how the North Star shines. We were talking about how some things might change.”

“Harriet, you are looking for trouble if you are talking about the North Star. If you have been listening to all those folks talking about going north to freedom, you are just listening to them wishing they could. If you try following that star to the North, they’ll come hunting for you with dogs. They’ll put out a money reward. I’m frightened for you.”

“Mama, I’m afraid, too, but I have to leave. If I can escape and reach the North, I can find work, and I can help our people become free.”

Harriet made her escape in the middle of the night. Following the North Star as her guide, she traveled only under the cover of darkness until she reached safety in Philadelphia.

In the North, there were many people who wanted to help slaves leave the South. Harriet joined those people and became an important part of an escape route called the Underground Railroad. There were no trains on this railroad, but there were stations. The stations were hiding places along the way. Very little of it was underground, but it was a secret, and calling it “underground” reminded those who were helping that the secret had to be kept.

All too often, the words bravery and courage remind us of battles and battlefields. Harriet’s battles were of a different kind. They didn’t take place on a battlefield, but they did require bravery. They took place in darkness and in secret places. Her courage was special because, even after she was free, she continued to risk her life and her freedom. She couldn’t enjoy being free when she remembered the ones who weren’t free. The battle she fought was for something she believed in: freedom for all.

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“Come quickly,” Harriet said as she noiselessly entered the slave cabin. “We have a long way to go, and runaway slaves don’t have much time.”

Harriet’s troop of escaping slaves entered the forest, huddling together and waiting for her directions. Each time, she used different paths, different safe houses, different boats, different wagons.

“We will cross the river here. Take off your shoes and hold them above your head. The water moves quickly, but it is not too deep. You’ll dry off on the rest of the journey.”

“You sound like a general giving orders,” one of the escaping slaves said.

“I’ve been called General Tubman before,” she answered, laughing quietly as they reached the dark woods on the other side of the river.

* * *

As she guided escaping slaves to safety in the free states, Harriet’s bravery was tested many times. Slave hunters were offered thousands of dollars to capture her, but she continued taking small groups through forests, hiding on boats, in attics, and in underground tunnels. With special handshakes and

passwords, her friends on the Underground Railroad helped her.

Her own escape took great courage, but it was her return to the South and the danger of recapture for which she is remembered. Fifteen times, she returned. She helped more than three hundred slaves find their way to the North. Always at night, always in secret, always in danger.

The success of the Underground Railroad as a way to freedom in the North was the result of Harriet Tubman's courage and her belief that she could change things. None of her "passengers" was ever recaptured, and Harriet was even able to rescue her own parents. Her journeys in darkness to help others to freedom are reason enough to remember her name—Harriet Tubman—a heroine in a battle of a different kind.

Susan Finney