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Parables in Pop Culture

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How To Train Your Dragon (2010): A Parable for Kindness

Long ago up in the Nordics on the Island of Berk, the young Viking Hiccup, wants to join in his town's fight against the dragons who raid it day and night. However, his father, Stoik the Vast, who is also the village leader will not allow Hiccup to do so because he is small, clumsy, and lacks to drive most Vikings have in regard to dragons. Regardless, Hiccup ventures out into battle and shoots down a mysterious Night Fury dragon with his invention. When he goes to search for it, he finds it but can't bring himself to kill it. Instead, Hiccup and the dragon, whom he later names Toothless, begin a friendship that would open up both their worlds as the boy learns that his people have greatly misjudged the species that terrorizes their island. But even as the two each grow in their own way; they find that they must fight the destructive ignorance that is plaguing their world and people.

How to Train Your Dragon is an animated film directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois. The movie is based on Cressida Cowell's novel which has the same title, one in a series of eight children's novels. People who were enchanted by the flying sequences in *Avatar* can experience the same exhilaration in this movie as Hiccup rides Toothless between mountain peaks. Equally uplifting is the father-son reconciliation which is handled with just the right emotional heft.

One of the directors of *How to Train Your Dragon* was Chris Sanders. He was born and raised in Colorado and originally fell in love with animation after he saw animated shorts on *The Wonderful World of Disney*. He majored in character animation, graduated, and began work at Marvel Comics. A few years later he started working with Walt Disney Company as a visual developer. His first large animation works were *Beauty of the Beast* (1991) and *The Lion King* (1994). He then began at DreamWorks where he co-wrote and co-directed *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010). Some of his trademarks in films are strong, tough female characters, main characters who are seen as misfits, and working with Dean DeBlois. In the movie, the female character Astrid is a very strong woman. If Hiccup had not figured out how to tame the dragons, Astrid would have won the contest of dragon slayer. The main character, Hiccup, is a misfit in this movie because he doesn't have the same drive as the other Vikings. He doesn't want to kill dragons.

The other director, Dean DeBlois, is a Canadian writer, director, and producer. He is best known for having co-written *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) and *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010). DeBlois began working for Walt Disney Feature Animation in 1994 as a storyboard artist. In October of 2008, he went to feature animation to co-write and co-direct DreamWorks *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010). DeBlois and Sanders re-envisioned the story based on the book from scratch. The final film earned DreamWorks Animation its highest critical acclaim to date and became the studio's top film outside of "Shrek." DeBlois's trademarks are quite similar to Sanders which is why they work so well together. His films also have strong female characters and main characters who are misfits.

The beginning of the film starts with the main character, Hiccup, introducing the Island of Berk. The shot starts in the ocean, the camera tracking forward. There is a cloud of fog and the

camera enters and exits. Upon exiting, the shot transitions to the Island of Berk, early in the morning. Hiccup describes the Island as sturdy and talks about all of the good things about the Island. He then mentions the only problem are the pesks. As he says this, we are in a field watching sheep graze. The sound of wings flapping becomes noticeable and we see a dragon enter the frame, pick up a sheep, and fly away.

The scene changes from a calm morning to chaotic. The music in the background is quick and upbeat, this causes the viewer to feel a sense of excitement and not knowing what is going to happen next. The Vikings begin fighting the dragons in every way possible, whether it be with weapons or just their fists. Hiccup begins running around the village to get to his apprenticeship. On this journey we do not see much color, everyone and thing is very drab. The only pop of color we see at this point is the fire engulfing different buildings on the Island. Hiccup sees everyone fighting and begs to be given a chance but is told to stay put. He doesn't listen and goes out onto the battlefield with one of his contraptions in hopes to shoot down a Night Fury.

We hear light bellows in the background from the other Vikings still fighting. But the music becomes softer, showing that Hiccup is concentrating on tracking the Night Fury in the sky. He catches a glimpse of it and shoots, not aiming too well. He hears the dragon cry and watches as it falls out of the sky, thrilled that he hit it.

It's now daylight and the dragons have left, so the town must put itself back together again. Hiccup leaves his house in order to search for the Night Fury he shot down earlier that morning. As he's walking through the forest, he begins mumbling to himself saying some people lose their knife, but he manages to lose an entire dragon. He gets angry and swats at a low hanging branch. It comes back and hits him in the face with a swift "thwack" sound, almost

sounding like a whip. He looks up and sees that the branch is connected to a tree that has been cut in half. He then looks down and sees a track as if something had hit the ground with full force. He walks down and looks over the edge of the dip and sees the dragon. The music rises, scaring the viewer, quickening the heartbeat. Hiccup walks down to the dragon, who is tangled in rope and unable to move. He picks up his knife over his head exclaiming, "I am a Viking." He looks into the Night Fury's green eyes; the music is suspenseful waiting for Hiccup to make the move and kill the dragon. The dragon cries, laying its head down and closing its eyes. Hiccup realizes he is unable to kill the dragon. Instead he cuts the rope in order to free it. This action is the first act of kindness that changes everything in the rest of the movie. Hiccup possessed the power to kill the dragon and make his father proud, but he couldn't. When the dragon is freed, it pins Hiccup down, possessing the power to kill him. Instead, he bellows in Hiccup's face and runs away. Both had the power to kill the other, but neither acted on it.

Hiccup goes home, wanting to tell his father that he doesn't want to kill dragons anymore. And his father wants to tell him that he starts training to kill dragons in the morning. The conversation is intense and the music in the back reflects that, not really knowing how the conversation is going to end. Hiccup ends up obeying his father, accepting that dragon training will begin tomorrow.

As the recruits enter the ring in which they will be training, the camera does a 360, showing the whole ring. Then it cuts and we're given an aerial view of the ring as well. This shows how big the ring is and how small the people are in comparison. Gobber, who is teaching the recruits, begins to go over the dragons that they will be going up against. The camera starts on Gobber as he's speaking and then switches to one of the recruits, Fishlegs. For each dragon Gobber introduces, the camera goes to Fishlegs and zooms into his face more each time. Gobber

lets out a dragon, known as a Gronckle. They only have six shots and it used five of them. The Gronckle corners Hiccup, the camera switching back and forth between them. Hiccup doesn't fight back, expecting the dragon to let him go like the Night Fury had, but Gobber pulls it away just before it shoots. Gobber then tells the recruits that a dragon will always go for the kill. Hiccup sees the good in these creatures and didn't see fighting as an option. The statement that Gobber says has Hiccup questioning why the Night Fury hadn't.

Hiccup goes back to the forest to see if the Night Fury is still there and it is. It is unable to fly away because part of its tail is broken. Hiccup comes back the next day with a fish for the dragon. This act of kindness melts the heart. Hiccup shot down this dragon and now feels bad for the damage he caused. The Night Fury, whom he calls Toothless, takes the fish, eats it, and suddenly his eyes become soft and he almost reminds me of a dog. Toothless then regurgitates the bottom half of the fish onto Hiccup's lap and looks at him in a way signaling for Hiccup to take a bite. He takes a bite, swallows, and smiles at Toothless. Toothless then attempts to smile back. The music during this scene is light and happy, signifying the beginning of an unlikely friendship. Hiccup starts sketching Toothless in the dirt with a small stick. Toothless notices and picks up a small tree and starts to draw in the dirt too. The camera pans out and shows the squiggles that Toothless had drawn. This angle also shows us how small Hiccup is compared to Toothless. The camera comes back in switching between Toothless and Hiccup as Hiccup walks around the squiggles. The music has gotten louder but remains light and airy, showing that this scene holds happiness. Hiccup ends up in front of Toothless. He sticks his hand out and turns his head so that he isn't looking at the dragon. Toothless fills the gap by moving his head forward onto Hiccup's hand. It is in this moment that Hiccup realizes everything the Vikings know about dragons is wrong.

Hiccup begins making a prosthetic back wing for Toothless so that he can fly again. The music playing during this scene is intense, showing Hiccup's concentration. The camera is behind Hiccup and as he opens up the wing to show the finished product, the scene cuts and transitions to Hiccup bringing Toothless a basket of fish. As Toothless is eating, Hiccup goes behind him to attach the prosthetic. Once he attaches it, Toothless opens his wings and begins to fly. An aerial shot begins, making the viewer feel like they are flying. Hiccup is on Toothless's tail, holding on for his life. The music is fast paced, elevating heart rates. Hiccup pulls the prosthetic open and Toothless begins to fly with ease. Toothless then flicks Hiccup off of his tail into a small lake, this causes the prosthetic to close, and Toothless to also fall into the lake.

Hiccup then constructs a saddle to put on Toothless so he can ride him and control the prosthetic. There are many "hiccups" along the way with trying to learn how to ride a dragon. While trying to learn how to ride Toothless, Hiccup is also still taking part in the dragon training. But instead of fighting the dragons like the other recruits, he uses different tactics that don't hurt the dragons which he has learned while spending time with Toothless. As stated previously, Hiccup has learned that what the Vikings know about dragons isn't right at all. The dragons only fight back because they are threatened. If the Vikings went about handling them in a nonviolent way, the problem wouldn't exist. But most Vikings are stubborn and have the drive to fight dragons just like their ancestors had. No one, until Hiccup had taken the time to try anything different. Hiccup is rising in the ranks of dragon training because of his newfound knowledge and everyone is just as surprised as he is.

Hiccup takes Toothless out into the open sky for a test drive. The screen seems to widen as we watch Hiccup on top of Toothless. They're flying over the ocean, so the set is more colorful than what has previously been seen. As the viewer watches the air hitting Hiccup's face,

a slight breeze can be felt, and a faint salty aroma of the sea is smelt. The camera zooms in and out giving multiple shots of Hiccup and Toothless flying through the air. They fly high into the sky and fall back down at top speed. They begin zooming through large rock formations with great precision. The music playing is very suspenseful, keeping the viewer at the edge of their seat, praying Hiccup and Toothless don't run into one of the rock formations.

Before this point, no one else had known about Hiccup and Toothless. Astrid showed up in Toothless's valley, waiting for Hiccup to explain himself as to how he started "fighting" dragons so well. Toothless appears scaring Astrid away. Hiccup and Toothless pick her up. Toothless begins flying very jaggedly, trying to scare Astrid. The music has a scary element to it, leaving the viewer afraid for Astrid's life. She apologizes to Hiccup and Toothless begins flying at a much more comfortable pace, just soaring through the pink, cotton candy like, clouds. The music switches to a relaxing, even romantic sound. The camera does a 360 around them and then zooms far out, showing the large clouds and them, only about the size of a speck of dust. They fly into the pink clouds and when they exit, the shot transitions to a dark blue sky and the aurora borealis is displayed on top of the clouds. This scene shows the most color we've seen so far throughout the film.

They enter a foggy sky and see other dragons carrying kill into a mountain. Toothless follows and Hiccup and Astrid watch as the dragons drop the kill into a big hole. A massive dragon appears from the hole, a deep shade of red hueing the shot. Just as Toothless leaves the ledge he was perched on, the large dragon snaps. All of the dragons then begin flying out of the mountain. The camera is placed underneath so the viewer watches as the dragons fly up and out. The music is very suspenseful because Hiccup, Astrid, and Toothless now know where the dragon nest is. They fly back to Toothless's valley and discuss what they're going to do next.

The scene changes to the next day when Hiccup will be tasked with killing a dragon because he came first in the dragon training. There are brightly colored banners hanging from the poles surrounding the arena. The viewer can hear the cheers of the crowd as the camera circles the stadium and then comes to ground level as the viewer watches Stoik give a speech. Hiccup is then put into the ring to fight the dragon. Slowly he throws his shield, knife, and helmet aside claiming to the dragon that he “is not one of them.” The crowd gasps and Stoik bellows for the fight to stop. Toothless hears Hiccup’s cry as the dragon in the ring begins to attack. He comes to Hiccup’s rescue but is captured in the process.

Stoik begins yelling at Hiccup, saying he should have known and then begins saying that everything in the rings was a trick, a lie. Hiccup says he should have told his dad and then says to be mad at him, but please don’t hurt Toothless. His father is appalled that Hiccup is worried about the dragon, exclaiming that they had killed hundreds of them. Hiccup comes back by saying that they had killed thousands of them and that they are only defending themselves. They aren’t dangerous. Hiccup is willing to stick up to his father to show how much he cares for and believes that dragons are not dangerous.

The Vikings take Toothless to lead them to the dragon nest. Back on the Island of Berk, Hiccup rallies the dragon training recruits, teaching them how to ride dragons. The scene switches back to the Vikings as they reach the island with the dragon nest. They attack, only the small dragons flying out. Then, the unexpected alpha dragon busts out of the mountain. Loud screams are heard and the sound of breaking rock as the dragon goes through the mountain. This is nothing the Vikings have ever seen before. The alpha blows fire onto the Vikings ships, restricting them from leaving. Hiccup and his crew come flying in on dragons. Hiccup shouts orders to his friends and then has Astrid drop him off on the boat that has Toothless. The ship

sinks and Hiccup and Toothless are underwater. Hiccup tries to free Toothless but is unable. Stoik dives in to save Hiccup and then Toothless. Once both on land, Stoik tells Hiccup that he is proud to call him his son.

Hiccup then hops onto Toothless and flies toward the alpha dragon to get it to follow them. They fly up into the sky, luring the alpha. It follows and chases Toothless. They enter dark clouds, the alpha lost. Toothless comes in and out of the clouds, shooting at it. The Vikings on the ground look up into the sky and see what looks like lightning. The alpha roars and shoots a large puff of fire, lighting up the whole sky. Toothless and Hiccup then fall down, letting the alpha follow. As they are about to reach the ground, the alpha gets ready to fire and Toothless shoots into his mouth. The alpha catches on fire from the inside and then crashes onto the island, disappearing in a cloud of fire and smoke. Toothless and Hiccup begin flying up and away from the fire, but Hiccup gets knocked off of Toothless. He falls into the fire and Toothless flies back down to catch him. Stoik find Toothless on the ground thinking that Hiccup had died. Toothless unfolds his wings, showing a mostly undamaged Hiccup. Stoik thanks Toothless for saving his son. The Vikings exclaim and this is the turning point for the overall relationship between Vikings and dragons.

We're brought back to the Island of Berk and Hiccup is in bed, Toothless sitting in his house right next to him. Hiccup moves to get out of bed, showing that part of his left leg is missing and replaced by a prosthetic. He and Toothless start to leave the house, Hiccup not expecting to see dragons everywhere. There is much more color now because of the dragons and the Island seems more alive than ever. The music playing in the background is light and happy. Everyone greets Hiccup as he exits his house. Hiccup exclaims that he must be dead, and his dad comes up behind him to tell him that he's not. He further explains that the Island would not be

how it is without Hiccup. The music picks up as Hiccup gets on Toothless's back. Hiccup then begins narrating about the Island and says that the upside is the pets, they have dragons.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Mathew 5:9).

Throughout this movie, Hiccup is seen as a peacemaker in my eyes. He took a chance on something that his people have always seen in an evil light. Even though he was ridiculed for it, in the end everyone understood. The Vikings began to accept the dragons and not fight them. All it took was a little kindness and a mind free of past thoughts.

Comparing this film to real life, I have been on mission trips to Honduras and everyone on the team reminds me of Hiccup and the kindness he showed to Toothless and the other dragons. My junior year of high school I thought that I had wanted to be a doctor, though I wasn't completely sure. Around the same time, my dad asked if I might want to accompany him on a medical mission trip to Honduras. At first, I was hesitant because I had never been out of the country before, but I came to the realization that it would be a once in a lifetime opportunity and so I agreed. I was one of the youngest members on the team, so all of the older members took me under their wing whenever I wasn't able to be with my dad, who happened to be the only person I knew on the trip. This kindness made me feel much more at home in a country that was completely foreign to me.

The leader of the trip knew that I was struggling with a career choice and so he set me up with a different professional each day to give me some hands-on exposure. The kindness he showed in trying to help me figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life is something I'll never forget. I quickly realized that neither dentistry, nor pharmacy, were my passion. Near the end of the week I was able to go into the operating room with my dad and watch him perform

various procedures. But the one procedure that was really eye opening for me, was watching him remove a cyst, the size of a softball, from a man's chest. My dad cut into that cyst and it erupted; pus everywhere. It was in that moment, that I realized that I definitely wanted to be a doctor and even narrowed it down to plastic surgery or dermatology. The patient after the surgery exclaimed to my dad how thankful he was for his service. Even though my dad was doing an act of kindness, the way the man thanked him felt like an act of kindness right back.

Another part of the trip, which was truly eye opening for me, was how grateful the Honduran people were for our services. They always made sure to say, "God bless you" before leaving. Their gratitude was palpable. Even if the exam was quick, or a 90-day supply of vitamins given, the looks on their faces were as if we had given them the greatest gift imaginable. For me, those interactions showed the true meaning of medicine and how any act of kindness can make a huge difference in someone's life. Since that initial trip, I had the opportunity to go the three following summers and intended to go again this coming summer of 2020, but the trip was cancelled due to COVID-19. Partaking in a mission trip is one of the most humbling things and I would highly suggest, if ever given the opportunity, to definitely go. Sometimes the smallest act of kindness can have the biggest impact.

Citations:

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