

Being is Believing:  
Action, Character, and Belief in the Work of Tanya Huff

The central theme running through the work of Tanya Huff involves the relationships between our actions, our character, and our beliefs. One of the traditional questions in ethics is whether the fundamental moral problem is what we should do or what we should be; modern ethicists tend to focus on our actions, while classical ethicists focus on our character.<sup>1</sup> Huff's response seems to be that they are two sides of the same coin: our characters shape our actions and our actions make us into particular kinds of people. Similarly, just as being and doing are related, belief also plays an important role. The beliefs that we have about ourselves and others shape what people are able to be and what they are able to do.

Let us start by considering the relationship between what we are and what we do. Sometimes this relationship is explicit; for instance, Tony explains to Brianna: "We're wizards. It's what we do."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Huff's description of Mrs. Ruth evokes the connection between the two: "She'd known her time was ending for months now. It was, after all, what she did. What she was. She knew things."<sup>3</sup> However, frequently the relationship is more subtle. The crow in "Finding Marcus" talks about how it is in dogs' natures to search for their masters; similarly, it is in crows' natures to get bored easily and seek stories to entertain themselves. Each of them is playing the part that they were made to – what they are determines (at least to some extent) what they do. This may make it seem as if our actions are greatly constrained by who we are, which reeks of predestination or determinism. However, that only follows if our nature is unchanging; being sapient, part of our nature *is* the ability to change.

In "I Knew a Guy Once" Huff explicitly emphasizes the notion that our choices shape who we are. Able Harris does not tell the bar patrons how to behave. She simply tells them what she won't put up with and allows them to choose what to do; they will take the consequences of their own actions. As she says, she has known many people who see themselves as having no choices – but, in fact, there are always decisions to be made, and what happened to those people "depended on the choices they made."<sup>4</sup> We are free to make our own choices, good or bad, and it is this freedom which is important. In rather a different context, Jors learns this in his dealings with Alyise; after trying to make himself responsible for both himself and his trainee, he eventually realizes that she is also a Herald and thus responsible for her own decisions.<sup>5</sup>

One of the reasons it is important to make one's own choices is because to make choices for someone else is to limit what they can become. If our actions are shaped by what we are, it is crucial that we be ourselves. Forcing ourselves to be something else is a kind of dishonesty or disintegrity. Huff's most explicit illustration of this was in "Jack," when she portrayed the transformation of Lyra from an indie punk singer into a pop star in the making. The record company wanted her to be the kind of product that was marketable, so they tried to change who she was. (Fortunately, Jack pointed this out to her so she could escape before any serious damage was

---

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill exemplifies the modern approach to ethics, Aristotle the classical approach.

<sup>2</sup> "After School Specials"

<sup>3</sup> "Choice of Ending"

<sup>4</sup> "I Knew a Guy Once"

<sup>5</sup> "All the Ages of Man"

done.) Although fighting this homogenization is difficult, it is worth that effort to maintain your own identity. If you surrender your identity to someone else's control, you constrain what actions you are capable of taking; only by being yourself do you retain freedom of action.

Being true to who you are and doing things your own way may result in somewhat idiosyncratic results, naturally. It may mean that you fight a war not with battles but with food, as the cook does in "Slow Poison." In this case, who she was did not limit her actions but opened her to another (more successful) approach. She would not have been able to kill the Warlord through force of arms, even if she had been a warrior; he was too well guarded for that. However, she took her knowledge of food and used it in a creative way to accomplish the same end. In this case, who she was enabled her to take actions that others were not capable of; the combination of her courage and patience with her knowledge as a cook allowed her to free her people from his rule.

These illustrations portray the importance of integrity, of being true to your own character, despite what other people think of you. A related virtue, honor, also typifies the relationship of our character to our actions. In several of Huff's stories, honor plays an important role. The set-up for "The Demon's Den" is entirely predicated on honor – Jors follows the mountain cat into the mine because he wounded it and cannot leave it to die in pain; he is responsible for its death, and thus honor requires him to make it as painless as possible. Similarly, Able Harris keeps the bar clean, despite her staff's protestations that no one cares if she does, because it is part of the job; she has a duty to care for it.<sup>6</sup> Her conception of honor is different from that of those around her because *she* is different; her beliefs about what her responsibilities are stem from being a particular kind of person – the kind of person who does the job, regardless of what people say.

A similar conflict between conceptions of honor occurs in "Not That Kind of a War." Lieutenant Franks has what one might deem an old-fashioned view of war – he wishes to be fighting the good fight gallantly, not simply shooting at enemies as they charge. As Huff puts it, "He wanted deeds of daring and he got target practice instead."<sup>7</sup> Staff Sergeant Kerr, on the other hand, has a more pragmatic view of war; she sees it as a matter of survival, and given a choice between her side dying or the enemy dying, she'll choose to have the enemy die. To a certain extent, both Franks and Kerr are correct. Pragmatically, it is better to survive the battle than not, but sometimes honor requires a personal sacrifice, often for the greater good. These sacrifices may not be played out in quite the same fashion as in previous wars: the notion of a single commander sacrificing himself to win a battle belongs to a different kind of combat. However, as Kerr notes "perhaps a war without one single defining ideology was exactly the kind of war that needed an infinite number of smaller defining moments."<sup>8</sup> Franks' sacrifice was not something that would give them a decisive victory; a single death no longer suffices to win a war. Nevertheless, it could stand as an inspiration to his side. His action might have different ramifications than it would have had in an earlier age, but it is still an expression of his character and his fundamental beliefs.

The contrast between Franks and Kerr also illustrates the way in which belief shapes being – the world is shaped by what you believe. Sometimes this applies to objects or places. For instance, Brianna needed a wand, but did not have one; she only had a pen. However, her belief caused it to

---

<sup>6</sup> "I Knew a Guy Once"

<sup>7</sup> "Not That Kind of a War"

<sup>8</sup> "Not That Kind of a War"

function as a wand; it changed the pen from a normal writing instrument into an instrument of magic.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Halfrest has a Waystation and a Meeting Hall because having those makes you a real town. The inhabitants want to demonstrate that they have permanency, they have a real place to live. They believe that having the right buildings will do this – it will make them into a town.<sup>10</sup> And, at least for them, it does. This raises an interesting question as to whether this belief-shaped reality is relative to the beholder; Jors and Alyise, after all, did not particularly see Halfrest as a “real town” simply because it had those buildings. There may be some limitations as to how much we can shape reality simply with our beliefs; my believing the world is flat will not, in most universes, actually make it flat. Our beliefs can, however, greatly affect our experience of reality.

One of the most interesting presentations Huff gives of the relation of belief to being with respect to people is in “Tuesday Evenings, Six Thirty to Seven.” The Brownies come to Missus Owl because they are tired of being Brownies; they wish to become something else. She agrees to help, but this generates problems; since the sort of Brownies she deals with are not normally short, foul-mouthed men of magic, she has to conceal them from the rest of the community. When the Guider from the main office comes to meet the Brownies, she and the minister’s wife have very different experiences. As Big Tam puts it, “The dark one, for all she was here to check you out, truly wanted to see Brownies so that’s what she saw and heard – wee girls. The other, well, she’d convinced herself that there were no such thing as Brownies hadn’t she? So that’s all she saw.”<sup>11</sup> Quite directly, the beliefs that the two women had shaped their experience of reality. The Guider saw what she wanted to see – a happy troop of little girls collecting badges and learning things. However, since the minister’s wife did not believe the Brownies existed, she was not able to see them; her belief in their non-existence translated into their actual non-existence, at least so far as she was concerned.

The way in which other people’s beliefs affect us are not necessarily this extreme; beliefs can shape what we are in much more subtle ways. Frequently we gather encouragement and confidence from other people – as children, we gain strength from our teachers and parents, and as adults we gain it from our peers and our colleagues. If I am uncertain that I am capable of something, being told that someone believes in me is sometimes all I need – if someone believes I have strength, I actually have the strength. Huff touches upon this idea at the end of “The Demon’s Den,” when Ari discovers that Gervis believes she was chosen for something other than being a Herald. Since Gervis believes Ari has a purpose, she starts to see herself that way as well; he gives her the confidence to stop seeing herself as a worthless person who should have died and start seeing what she can still accomplish. His belief in what she can do shapes her belief in herself – and that, in turn, shapes what she is.

In addition to being shaped by other people’s beliefs, therefore, we are also shaped by our own. The little girl in “Choice of Ending” will always know she is loved, according to Mrs. Ruth, and this will shape the kind of life she has; she may be a rebellious teenager, but she will come through it okay because of this knowledge. The beliefs we have can sustain our character even through difficult times and even when other people doubt those beliefs. Brock, for instance, believes he is a Herald. He is not swayed by the arguments of other people that he has no Companion, he is not

---

<sup>9</sup> “After School Specials”

<sup>10</sup> “All the Ages of Man”

<sup>11</sup> “Tuesday Evenings, Six Thirty to Seven”

wearing Whites, and so forth. As he points out, “Clothes are on the outside.”<sup>12</sup> What we are is not simply a matter of what other people believe or of external trappings like our clothes. What we are is a matter of our character – how we act and what we believe.

Brock himself is a culmination of both of the themes running through Huff. As Gervis puts it “He believes he is a Herald...And he acts accordingly.”<sup>13</sup> What Brock believes himself to be shapes what he is – he is the kind of person that Heralds are, a person who is kind and honest and helpful. And because he is that kind of person, he does kind and truthful and generous acts. His belief shapes his character which shapes his actions. Huff leaves us, therefore, with an extremely optimistic outlook. If we can change the person we are by believing hard enough, if we can become the person we want by doing the actions we think they would do, there is hope for us all: goodness is within our grasp. Perhaps our hearts are not naturally as big as Brock’s. But if we believe in ourselves long enough, we may be able to change that.

Erica L. Neely  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Urbana, Illinois

---

<sup>12</sup> “Brock”

<sup>13</sup> “Brock”