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## **Not Giving Up on Zuko: Relational Identity and the Stories We Tell**

Barrett Emerick and Audrey Yap

When we first meet Zuko, we know he's the bad guy. He's got a big scar on his face, he's a prince of the Fire Nation, and he's trying to capture the Avatar. The audience isn't alone in thinking they know who Zuko is. His father (Fire Lord Ozai) and sister (Azula) think him weak, disrespectful, and undeserving of the crown. Aang, Katara, Toph, and Sokka spend a lot of the series thinking (with good reason!) that he's their enemy. But by the end of the series it's clear that Zuko's changed. He's neither a saint nor a monster, just a person who makes a lot of mistakes, hurts people he loves, but ultimately chooses to go in a new way.

You might think that this change in Zuko's character means that people were wrong about him at first, but we're going to argue that it's more complicated than that. On our account, Zuko is all of the things people think he is: disappointing family member, nemesis and villain, ally and hero. This chapter is about the role that others play in who we are as people. Because of other people, we can genuinely have several different identities that aren't necessarily compatible with each other. Ultimately, as we'll see, sometimes redemption and the choice to go in a new way is only made possible by others.

### **Personhood as a Social Practice**

Someone's identity—who they are as an individual—is formed of what philosopher Hilde Lindemann called a “connective tissue of narratives,” all woven together around important values, relationships, projects, and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Let's say you identify as a painter. Being a painter is a big deal for you—it's what we'll call an identity-defining project. You're probably also much more than a painter—you might also be an athlete, a sister, a friend, and someone who loves dogs; and each of those things contributes to the tapestry of your identity. Each plays an important role in making you, you. We are all of us telling stories with our lives; who and what we are is made up in part by the narratives we construct through our living.

We're not the only ones who get to contribute those narratives. Others play a crucial role in how we are able to tell our stories and whether we are even able to do so. Lindemann argues that a major part of what it is to be a person is to be in relation to others. If we were completely isolated from all others and couldn't have any kinds of social connections with them, we might still be human but we wouldn't count as *persons* in this technical sense.<sup>2</sup> What that means is that *being* a person is a social *practice*; it is active and dynamic, changing over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Hilde Lindemann, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 72

<sup>2</sup> This consequence of the view might sound terrible, but it actually explains some of the harm of practices like solitary confinement that deprive people of any meaningful social interaction for major portions of their lives. Those kinds of practices might keep people's bodies alive, but they don't allow them the ability to be persons, since they don't allow them to be in meaningful relation to others.

Lindemann argues that others help to “hold” us in our personhood. Holding someone in personhood involves treating them as if they are playing a particular role in the human drama. Specifically, this plays out via the *expression* of our inner lives, followed by the *recognition* and *response* of others as we perform our parts. Persons also then need to have the capacity to express (in one way or another) their inner lives, which they do through bodily engagement with the world and others. But expression alone isn’t enough; that expression also needs recognition and uptake by others. That’s why we’re not the only ones who get to contribute to the narratives that make up our identity. We have the first-person stories we tell about ourselves, but the third-person stories that other people tell about us also shape who we get to be in crucial ways.<sup>3</sup>

What we’re arguing is that the recognition and response of others in someone’s life can influence not only material aspects of their futures, but also who they might become. That’s true not just for someone’s identity-defining projects like becoming a painter, but for their ethical characters as well.

### **Zuko’s Stories**

That’s why it’s such a big deal when Aang decides to trust Zuko, with Toph’s support (“The Western Air Temple”). Aang has as much reason as anyone to distrust Zuko; to decide that he is irredeemably villainous, always someone to be feared and fought. And yet, when Zuko claims that he’s changed, Aang hears him out. He doesn’t accept Zuko’s change of heart uncritically, but he is open to believing that what Zuko says is true. Zuko has an inner life that he expresses, is recognized by Aang, and to which Aang then responds more and more over time. Aang thereby opens up a possible future for Zuko in which Zuko can demonstrate that he is trustworthy in small, everyday moments around camp and by being Aang’s teacher, as well as in big moments when he risks his life to save others. Zuko then becomes the person he aspires to be, growing into that identity and changing not just his ways but who he is as a person.

As we imagine monsters and robots, they’re both determined or programmed to be and act a certain way, and there’s no overriding that programming. Persons aren’t like that. Aang recognizes that treating Zuko like a person means recognizing that he has agency and the capacity to do things differently in the future. Zuko’s upbringing in the Fire Nation might have set him up to act in particular kinds of ways, but that’s different from saying he’s irrevocably *programmed* to act like that. By treating him as a person, Aang and his friends help to create space for Zuko to write a new chapter in his life’s story, different from the one his father and sister imagine for him. The world would be better if more of us treated others the way the Aang gang treats Zuko.

That doesn’t necessarily mean that Zuko wouldn’t be able to do so if Aang didn’t treat him that way. As we said, Zuko has agency; he is capable of choosing how to act and is responsible for his choices. But, if Lindemann is right that persons are like actors performing their identities, there are very strong incentives to stay on script and penalties for going off script. So, if everyone holds you in an identity and consequently expects a certain type of performance from you, it can be very hard to do otherwise. On the other hand, when others recognize and respond to your efforts to perform a new identity, that can make it easier to do so.

Sometimes, just having one person believe in you in that way can be enough. Often, however, we need more, such as the support of, and the ability to find our place in, a larger moral

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<sup>3</sup> Hilde Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16

community. Sokka is slower to believe that Zuko had changed his ways than Aang. Katara, having previously been betrayed by Zuko, is the slowest of all. Zuko's ability to live into that identity is affected by how much recognition his efforts secure, and how others respond in light of that recognition. As in Katara's case, recognition and response can often be sensitive to past histories. It's understandable that she is reluctant to trust Zuko again, given their shared past, though she does not reject him outright. In contrast, when Zuko saves the Earth Kingdom villagers from the soldiers who are extorting them, they reject him as soon as they find out that he's Prince Zuko and not just any wanderer ("Zuko Alone"). Although as viewers, we can tell that he has a story of himself from his childhood, of a boy who's trying to do his best and live up to his demanding father's expectations, that can't be who he is to the villagers. Their third-person story of him, and their responses to him, are fundamentally shaped by their relationship to the Fire Nation. Who he is to them isn't just shaped by his actions in the moment, but also by the weight of history and oppression. Although it is painful for Zuko, their reaction is understandable given the legacy of violence he inherits as the prince of the Fire Nation; it makes sense that the villagers would refuse to trust him even though he had worked to protect them.

What Zuko's rejection by the Earth Kingdom villagers illustrates is that stereotypes, positive or negative, might skew and distort what type of recognition people get. Sometimes this can have damaging or devastating impacts on who they become. In a racist society, for instance, a Black person's actions are often interpreted as threatening or violent, where something as simple as being in a public space is treated as suspicious. Such skewed recognition can and has led to police violence, the breakdown of community, mass incarceration, and murder. In a carceral society, even people who have served their full sentence will often only be recognized by others as offenders, and will have a harder time securing things like housing and employment after release from prison.

### **Personhood and Redemption**

Society could be structured so we can be more like Aang. Our social systems could treat people more like agents—as persons and not as things—who are capable of changing their ways and growing to become more than who they once were. This doesn't mean that people who've done wrong won't still have to do a lot of hard work to make up for it, or that we should just trust people unconditionally as soon as they ask for it. Aang is right to be wary and turn him away when Zuko first appears in the "Western Air Temple." Until that moment their shared history involved Zuko trying to injure or capture Aang and his friends. And Zuko's first apology doesn't go well either; he's clumsy and anxious for them to accept it—and to accept him—and he expects too much from them. When he apologizes for the second time in that episode he does a better job: he names particular ways he acted wrongly, accepts responsibility for having done so, and expresses his commitment both to acting differently in the future and to making up for those past wrongs. He acknowledges that his life has been hard but doesn't offer that as an excuse for his actions—just as an explanation. And, he helps to add context to his actions by explaining that he was taught to believe that regaining his honor was the most important thing he could do, and that the only way to do that was to please his father by capturing the Avatar. Part of what it means for him to change his ways and to be on the road to becoming a new person is understanding that his honor is something that cannot be given to him by someone else. Instead it is something he must earn by acting rightly and playing his part to end the war. He needs the Aang gang to recognize his efforts and allow him the opportunity to do so.

Empathy is often crucial to this whole process. When Zuko apologizes to Toph for accidentally burning her feet, he acknowledges that firebending is dangerous, that fire is unpredictable, and that he should have been more careful (“The Western Air Temple”). Aang had made a similar mistake with Katara when trying to learn to firebend (“The Deserter”). That point of connection opens up space for him to recognize Zuko’s apology as a genuine effort to accept responsibility, to make up for his actions, and as a desire to go in a new way. In short, Aang recognizes that Zuko, like the rest of us, is a fallible being who doesn’t have to spend the rest of his life making the same mistakes.

This story shows that it’s not bad that other people get to influence who we are, especially not when they’re people who love us and can *hold us in personhood* even when we can’t do it ourselves. This kind of practice is fairly common when those we love grow older and no longer behave in familiar ways. Loved ones might become angry or upset at our presence, forget who we are, and perhaps even try to physically harm us. A gentle and loving parent might develop a progressive disease affecting their cognitive capacities. This may result in them mistaking their child for a stranger, perhaps leading them to strike out and harm a person they once nurtured and protected.<sup>4</sup> But that child might still hold them in their personhood, continuing to weave their identity-constituting stories as a kind and loving person.

By the end of Book Three, Zuko is no longer the bad guy of the story but a valued member of the team, eventually even standing up to his sister and moving into the path of a lightning bolt that was about to strike Katara (“Sozin’s Comet, Part 3: Into the Inferno”). Zuko’s redemption is enabled by those in his moral community holding him in personhood. Specifically, his friends and uncle hold him in an identity in which he *is* a good person, deserving of care, friendship, and love, who can work to make things right and play a part in ending the war.

As powerful as their efforts to hold him in his new identity are, though, Zuko’s redemption arc wouldn’t be possible without Uncle Iroh. In fact, it might not have even begun. It’s clear throughout the series that Iroh cares deeply for and believes in Zuko, even saying in Book One that he sees him as his own son (“The Siege of the North, Part I”). In Book Two, Iroh challenges Zuko for unquestioningly accepting the destiny that his father had chosen for him, rather than a destiny that he would choose for himself. “It’s time for you to look inward and start asking yourself the big questions,” Iroh says at Lake Laogai: “Who are you, and what do you want?” Though Zuko doesn’t have a clear answer at the time, he takes a big step and frees Appa from captivity. He then falls ill in the grip of what Iroh calls a spiritual metamorphosis before emerging as the prince he was meant to be (“Lake Laogai”). Those changes don’t happen right away, though. At the end of Book Two, Zuko chooses his sister over his uncle and thereby rejects a potential new path (“The Crossroads of Destiny”).

Early in Book Three, Iroh is held captive by the Fire Nation and refuses to speak to his nephew, seemingly angry with Zuko for acting wrongly; in doing, so he demonstrates his belief that Zuko is capable of being better (“The Headband”). This might seem surprising; we often think of anger and blame as forms of hostility, an indication that a relationship is ruptured, or that the blamed person is irredeemably bad. But implicit in moral anger itself is the recognition that the person does not have to be held in that past identity. We don’t become angry with a lightning bolt when it starts a fire—at least not like we would with an arsonist. After all, the lightning bolt isn’t a person; we might be angry that the fire caused damage and harm, but it doesn’t make sense to

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<sup>4</sup> Lindmann tells a story like this about a woman and her mother with Alzheimer’s (2014, 154-55).

blame the lightning bolt or hold it responsible. The arsonist, however, is a person who acted wrongly. When we become angry with them, we recognize them as an agent who made a choice—and that means they *could* make a different choice in the future. That’s part of why Zuko’s eventual apology to Iroh (and Iroh’s interrupting it with a strong hug) is so moving. Iroh had challenged Zuko to be better and when Zuko lived up to that challenge, figuring out for himself what it meant within the confines of his life’s narrative to be a good person, Iroh accepted him back immediately, welcoming both the change and the new person who sat before him (“Sozin’s Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters”).

## Opening Up Possibilities

Wouldn’t things be better if there were more people like Iroh and Aang? In saying that, we don’t mean to paper over the fact that this is often very difficult in practice. We also don’t mean to suggest that everyone should always forgive those who wrong them. Indeed, some of the time people who have been wronged should hold on to anger if they need to do so, and others shouldn’t pressure them to forgive. Moreover, not all relationships should be sustained, nor should reconciliation always be everyone’s goal. In many cases, it’s best overall for the victim to leave their relationship with the wrongdoer in ruins. So, in arguing for more Irohs and Aangs in the world, we aren’t saying that victims should be the ones to carry that weight. Instead, we think a better solution would be to have a *moral community* that opens up space for wrongdoers and potential wrongdoers (which is to say everyone) to go in a new way. Lindemann’s account of personhood is grounded in the idea that we are fundamentally social beings, always becoming who we are via relationships with others. The work of holding each other in their identities thus falls on *many* people and social institutions. In the absence of this moral community, there can be a lot of luck in the process. Only some of us have Irohs in our life (whose belief in our goodness is a crucial part of what makes us become good), or Aangs who give us the space to change. Zuko is lucky in that he has both. It may seem unjust that who a particular person can become is so strongly affected by others in their life. If so, we suggest that we should work to arrange society so as to provide a wider array of possibilities to everyone.

But Zuko is lucky in other ways too. After all, he’s a prince of the most powerful nation in the world and has all kinds of advantages that others don’t have. So we might wonder: what’s the difference between Zuko and other privileged young men—“golden boys” who get more than their share of second chances? After all, there’s no shortage of people who mourn the damaged life prospects of young men facing the consequences of their own bad actions.<sup>5</sup> For example, Brock Turner was a student at Stanford University who was convicted of sexually assaulting a woman in 2015. His father described the emotional toll of the guilty verdict on his son as “a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike Turner’s father, we (and probably Iroh too) don’t think that emotional toll is excessive; it’s totally appropriate for Turner to feel profound guilt and remorse for his reprehensible actions—just as Zuko does. But Turner’s father also made those remarks

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<sup>5</sup> This is what Kate Manne calls “himpathy,” or having an excess of sympathy for relatively privileged men. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Victor Xu, “The full letter read by Brock Turner’s father at his sentencing hearing,” *The Stanford Daily*, June 8, 2016, at <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/06/08/the-full-letter-read-by-brock-turners-father-at-his-sentencing-hearing/>

within a carceral context that we oppose—one that assumes that punishing someone and holding them responsible are the same thing. The focus for us isn't on punishing wrongdoers—it's on creating a world where fewer wrongs are committed, where those who are wronged are cared for, and where wrongdoers work to repair their wrongs. So, Turner's moral community should absolutely hold him responsible for his actions—including *feeling anger and distrust towards him*, and expect him to work to make up for them—and that means treating him like a person who can do so.<sup>7</sup> The specific contours of such reparative work have to be determined within a particular context and moral community, responding to the particular needs of all those involved and especially the wronged person. None of what we have argued for here is about letting anyone off the hook for their wrongful actions. Quite the opposite: if we write someone off as a lost cause, as a thoroughgoing villain or an irredeemable monster, we let them off too easily. The hard work of moral growth and living up to the potential entailed by our agency is often only possible in circumstances where others recognize that we are capable of doing so.

Here's what's illuminating about the way Iroh treats Zuko: he doesn't deny that he's done wrong or has hurt others. He doesn't make excuses for his behavior, or try to paint a rosy picture of his character, but maintains a space for his nephew to become a different person, in which Ozai's and Azula's stories aren't the definitive ones for his life. Iroh isn't in denial, but instead holds Zuko in his personhood by treating him consistently, even stubbornly, as though he can do good things, even as he recognizes when Zuko fails. When Iroh and Zuko reunite at the White Lotus encampment, Iroh tells his nephew that he was not angry, but rather afraid that Zuko had lost his way—something that Zuko admits as well (“Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters”). Iroh holding Zuko in his personhood is instructive and morally important. It lets us imagine how different things might be if the parents of golden boys didn't excuse them or deny their wrongdoing, but rather recognized the harms their loved one caused, *and* expected them to do better moving forward.

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<sup>7</sup> By contrast, we don't think his father treated him as a person in that way.