

Heracles, the Short Version

The abbreviated version was begun for an illustrated children's book that didn't find a publisher. The morals are more for older kids and adults, but the Labors themselves are simplified enough for all ages.

Heracles lived long, long ago in a place we now call Greece. He was a beautiful specimen of humanity, unashamed to go about without any clothes, as was not uncommon in those days. Like all of us, he was half mortal and half divine, and because of this, he was very strong and fair-minded. A wise king gave him twelve "impossible" labors to perform, so he could practice his skills and develop his maturity. Anyone wanting to grow into a great human being will meet similar difficulties in their life, so Heracles has much to teach us.

The idea of myths is that we learn by thinking about them. There are many ways to understand them. This book has some suggestions, but you can come up with more if you try.

I

In his first labor, Heracles was sent to subdue a dreadful Lion. It was not an ordinary lion. Its skin was so tough that nothing—not arrows, knives or spears—could pierce it. Heracles drove it into a cave where he grabbed it with his bare hands. He squeezed it so tightly it couldn't breathe, and soon it dropped down dead.

Heracles needed to take the lion's pelt back to the king to prove he had killed it, but he was puzzled as to how to do it, since nothing could cut it. Then a clever idea occurred to him. He took up a great paw and pressed the lion's own fearsome claws against the stomach. It sliced into the skin with ease, and he soon had the whole skin off. Knowing how tough it was, he decided to use it to make a coat of armor and a helmet.

Heracles is easy to spot in Greek paintings and statues, because he is almost always wearing the lion skin or else carrying it over his arm.

Moral: Lions stand for pride, and our pride makes us deaf to advice. Even the best ideas don't get through to us, if we don't already believe in them. The only way to rid ourselves of pride is to be proud enough to admit we have it, because we want to be even better than we are now. This means there is a valuable pride that helps us improve and an inferior kind that makes us selfish and miserable, that keeps us stuck. Heracles cutting the thick skin with its own claw is like using intelligent pride to overcome ordinary pride. The honorable form of pride prompts us to become the best we can. We have to always remember to be honest about our shortcomings, or selfish pride will sneak back in to make us foolish. Heracles carrying the lion skin reminds us to remain humble and admit our faults at all times.

II

Next Heracles had to face a monster you may have never heard of before: a water dragon or serpent called the Hydra. It had many heads, at least nine, and was so venomous that its very breath was poisonous. Heracles lured it out of its lair with flaming arrows. It caught his foot in one of its coils and the battle was on. Whenever Heracles smashed a head with his club, it would grow right back. In some versions two heads grew back for every one he smashed. Luckily Heracles was accompanied by his nephew Iolaus. Only with his help could the Hydra be conquered. First Heracles bashed a head, then Iolaus cauterized the neck with either a flaming torch or a red-hot iron. Together they took care of all but the last head, which turned out to be immortal. Heracles cut it off and buried it in the earth, rolling a huge stone over it to keep it in place. Then he dipped his arrows in the poisonous blood of the serpent, and headed off to his next labor.

Moral: Problems often are very pesky. As soon as you deal with one, two more spring up in its place. That's because we aren't getting to the root of the problem, but only dealing with its superficial appearance, its face or head. We won't overcome our problems until they are dealt with deep down. It takes an intense fire of intelligence to discern the root of a problem and confront it there. Most of the time we have to have help; we can't do it alone.

The fact that one of the Hydra's heads is immortal tells us that we will always have challenges. A rewarding life includes knowing how to deal with problems, because they never go away permanently.

III

For his third labor, Heracles had to capture a beautiful deer. This one was gigantic, with golden antlers and hoofs of brass, which looks like gold but is much tougher. The creature was sacred to Artemis, (Diana), goddess of the hunt. It was so fast it could outrun an arrow, which in those days was about the fastest thing imaginable. Heracles spotted a glint of gold far away in the trees, and the chase was on. He spent a whole year hunting the deer, but at last he caught up to it on a high mountain. He shot it with an arrow and wounded it so he could finally catch up to it. Throwing it over his shoulders, he carried it all the way back to the king.

Moral: Our best ideas come to us as a flash of inspiration. At first we see only the barest hint of what the idea means, but it is so beautiful we want to pursue it. It takes a long time to overcome the difficulties of making it work: like Heracles crossing the forest and climbing the mountain where the deer hides. Our thoughts are too slow, too bogged down with practical considerations to keep up with a mere idea. The goal recedes faster than we can approach it. We may have to make compromises, which "injure" the purity of the inspiration, before we can put it to use, but if we keep at it we are sure of success.

IV

The king then ordered Heracles to bring him a huge boar that was goring people and ripping up their farms. On his way, Heracles met some centaurs, mythical beasts that had the upper bodies of men and the lower bodies of horses. He fought with them and killed several before heading up into the hills to find the boar. He chased it for awhile, and then drove it into deep snow. Plunging through the deep drifts tired the boar so that Heracles could catch up and capture it in his net. The net held the boar tightly so it couldn't injure Heracles as he carried it to the king.

Moral: Boars are boy pigs, and pigs are considered greedy and self-indulgent. Centaurs are wild and barely tamed. When we want something very badly we get hot for it. If we are too hot, we make mistakes and can do a lot of damage. In order to master our selfish feelings, we have to cool them down first, after which we can restrain them so they can no longer do us any harm. Driving the boar into the snow tells us to cool down our excess passions in order to be at our best.

V

The most famous of Heracles' labors is the cleansing of the Augean Stables. King Augeas owned the biggest herd of cattle in all of Greece, thousands and thousands of them, but he hadn't cleaned out his stables for thirty years. The cow poop was mountainous, obviously, and it was constantly being replenished. Anyone who tried to simply shovel it out would never come to the end of it.

Heracles had to use his brains. He thought for a long time. Then he made holes in the front and back walls of the stables. Next he dug channels from two nearby rivers and diverted them through the stables. In no time the water had flushed out all the muck, and the stables were fresh and clean.

Moral: A lot of things are fun at first, but it's important to take care of the after effects. If we ignore the consequences of our behavior, garbage piles up, and once it gets deep enough we seldom have the heart to deal with it. We might hope it will just disappear, but it doesn't. We have to bring pressure to bear on it.

And not just any pressure: it has to be intelligently and creatively conceived. Much of the charm of this labor is that Heracles comes up with a solution no one else could imagine.

Clear thinking is like fresh running water: it keeps rushing forward, sweeping away all impediments to its progress. If it is directed to a problem, it can solve it almost effortlessly.

VI

Some diabolical birds were terrorizing the countryside, and the king asked Heracles to get rid of them for his sixth labor. They were man-eating creatures made of brass, with sharp bronze feathers that could be shot at their victims, and poisonous dung.

Heracles first thought this labor would be a piece of cake, but when he arrived he found that the ground was too swampy to support his weight, and the forest where the birds gathered was so thick he couldn't see anything. As he stood wondering what to do, the goddess Athena came and presented him with a pair of immense bronze clappers. When Heracles smashed them together with his supernatural strength, the noise startled the birds, and they flew up out of the forest where he could shoot them down. Heracles picked off a number of the birds with his deadly arrows, and the rest flew away, never to return.

Moral: From the dawn of time, warriors have posed a threat to their own side as well as the enemy. They seek to prolong war to preserve their jobs, and in the process they use up scarce resources. They hide their murderous motivations behind secrecy and patriotic propaganda. Heracles had to make a lot of noise to dispel the cloak of secrecy and bring the malefactors out into the open. It

takes a courageous effort to stand up to warmongers and drive them out of their breeding grounds, so that peace can be restored.

VII

The seventh labor was to subdue a deranged bull that was devastating the island of Crete, and it was a relatively simple matter for Heracles to overpower it and drive it back to the king.

The meaning of the story hinges on why the bull went mad in the first place. King Minos of Crete had prayed to the ocean god Poseidon to give him a very special bull. He promised to sacrifice it to the highest god, Zeus, but once he laid eyes on it, it was so beautiful he couldn't kill it. He very badly wanted to keep it, so he sacrificed an ordinary bull instead. But the gods were not fooled, and they caused the special bull to go mad and begin tearing up the countryside.

Moral: Humans are often deceptive, telling a false tale that sounds convincing instead of being completely honest. It isn't always easy to tell the difference between truth and fiction. While liars can fool many people most of the time, the universe is never fooled. Nature responds exactly to what we do, not to what we say or wish for. Therefore we should honor our promises, and only promise what we are willing to live up to. It takes a special kind of strength to be utterly straightforward, to be true to our word.

VIII

Next Heracles was sent to capture some man-eating horses. Another king, Diomedes, a giant and son of the war god, owned four ferocious horses with a taste for human flesh. When newcomers appeared in his land, Diomedes would innocently invite them in and then feed them to his horses. Heracles first killed Diomedes and fed him to his own horses, who then became more tame, allowing Heracles to lead them home to the king and complete his task.

Moral: Many people are polite and nice on the outside but seethe with hatred inside. Naïve people may be taken in by them, and be destroyed. But a savvy person is not fooled, and so the hatred consumes its host instead.

IX

The ninth labor involved retrieving a magic belt from the queen of the Amazons, who were an all-female band of warriors. The belt held her weapons and acted as a defensive shield. Heracles knew he couldn't defeat the Amazons in battle, so he made friends with the queen, and she gave him the belt as a gift. But some of her subjects didn't trust any man, so they spread false rumors about Heracles. Soon a mob gathered and attacked him, and he had to fight a great battle before he could get away.

Moral: Kindness succeeds where aggression fails. Facing an overwhelming force, Heracles knew if he opposed it directly he would be defeated. Instead he embraced his enemies with openness and honesty, and quickly gained what he was after. That might have been the end of it, but it is all too easy to stir up trouble in suspicious people. One naysayer can easily fire up a mob, and many innocent people have lost their lives because of it.

X

As the king tried harder and harder to think up impossible tasks for Heracles to perform, he had to send him ever farther away from home. For the tenth labor, Heracles literally had to go to the ends of the Earth.

The king asked him to steal and bring back the beautiful red cattle belonging to the triple-bodied, three-headed giant Geryon. Geryon was not only a monstrous creature with a human face, but he employed the dog Orthrus to guard his herd. Orthrus was the two-headed brother of the three-headed hell-hound Cerberus, who Heracles had to confront in his twelfth labor, Heracles did a lot of

killing in this labor, including bashing the dog with his club and shooting Geryon with a poisoned arrow.

Once the dog and giant were killed the stealing of the cattle was easy, but the trip back was not. One problem succeeded another on the return journey. At one point, the goddess Hera sent a gadfly to scatter the cattle and it took Heracles a full year to round them up again.

Moral: When we have a job to do, it is very important to stick to it. There will always be unforeseen difficulties, and sometimes we feel like just giving up. We have to “take stock” and gather our energies back together in order to succeed. “Killing” our obstacles means overcoming them, which almost never involves actual killing. This labor exemplifies persistence, a trait for which Heracles has always been admired.

XI

For his eleventh labor, Heracles was required to bring back three golden apples from a special tree in a garden of paradise, guarded by a fearsome serpent. The location of the garden was unknown to almost everyone, so Heracles first had to find it. On the way he freed Prometheus, who had been chained to a rock by the god Zeus. Zeus had sentenced him to be tortured daily because he had revealed the secret of immortality to humanity. In gratitude for his release, Prometheus told Heracles how to safely fetch the apples out of the garden.

When Heracles arrived at the edge of the magical garden he met Atlas, a Titan who holds the world and sky on his shoulders. Heracles offered to take the heavy burden if Atlas would get the apples for him, and Atlas agreed, thinking he would leave him holding the weight of the world forever. He brought out the apples and told Heracles he was taking them to the king himself. But Heracles tricked him back: he begged Atlas to hold the world for just a moment while he got more comfortable. Atlas obliged, and Heracles gathered up the apples and took off for home.

Moral: The highest aspiration of humans is for spiritual awakening. This usually comes at the end of a long and difficult journey of discovery. It is only attained by those who thirst for the meaning of life and are committed to finding it. In such an endeavor, expert help is indispensable.

XII

The last of the labors is the most dreadful of all. Heracles had to bring the king the three-headed hound guarding the gate of the land of the dead, Kerberos or Cerberus. Kerberos is a true hellhound: not only does he have three suspicious and vigilant heads armed with slavering jaws, but his tail is a dragon and hissing snakes line his spine. His job was to bar the living from ever entering the underworld, while letting deceased souls in, but not out. There was to be no return from the afterlife.

Heracles undertook special preparations in order to be able to perform the task. He attended the Greeks' secret mystery school to obtain the extra powers of mind he needed. Then he went down into the depths of the Earth, not knowing if he would ever be able to come out again. He made his way to the god of the underworld, Hades, and asked if he could take the dog. Hades agreed on one condition: he had to overpower him using only his bare hands. Once permission was granted, the rest was fairly simple. Heracles met Kerberos and subdued him with his tremendous strength, and then led him back to the king.

Seeing him arrive with Kerberos in tow, the king knew he wouldn't be able to defeat Heracles, and set him free from further labors. Heracles then returned the dog to his place guarding the entrance to the underworld, so that those who got in could never get back out again. And the dog has never failed in his job since.

Moral: Sometimes it is necessary to go beyond the normal bounds of everyday life to seek something extra special. Doing so requires learning about secrets of life that are not taught to

everyone. Armed with this knowledge and a stout heart, anything is possible. The sky's the limit, and the sky has no limit.