

Virtue In Action

Susan Boyle: A Triumph of Talent

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



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Susan Boyle: A Triumph of Talent



From computer screens all over America, Scotland born Susan Boyle serenades America. The “Britain’s Got Talent” contestant has broken YouTube records with over 100 million views for her stirring rendition of “I Dreamed a Dream.” But it’s not just a beautiful voice that turned Boyle from an unemployed charity worker into an international star.

For better or worse, it’s her age and appearance that have captured the imagination of the American public and turned the once cynical judges of the British reality show into supporters. Boyle – who has never been married and once claimed she’d never been kissed-- is no glamorous Britney Spears, Beyonce or Fergie.

In fact, when she first took the stage at the British talent show, her unkempt brows, graying hair and plain manner of dress drew laughter, even scorn from some audience members. A few young people rolled their eyes and nudged each other – in full view of the cameras—when Boyle gave her age as 47.

Yet something special happened when Boyle sang a show tune from “Les Miserables”. Boyle delivered a stunning performance and in those few moments, the audience went from jeering to cheering for the woman some have described as “frumpy”. In the days after, the video went viral and Susan Boyle has become an international sensation.

The fact that Boyle exceeded almost everyone’s initial expectations compels us to examine why physical appearance is so important in forming our initial impressions of another person. What criteria do we use in judging others and ourselves, and is our criteria fair?

Boyle’s story also presents us with a unique model of **self-worth, authenticity** and **integrity** in her decision to not **drastically** change her appearance or attitude about life, even after her brush with fame.

Importantly, Boyle’s determination to pursue her dream also provides us with a powerful example of **perseverance**, one that any of us can admire and emulate.

A Dream Deferred

It took almost a lifetime for Boyle to reach the “Britain’s Got Talent” stage. The daughter of an Irish store clerk and a typist, she was the youngest of nine children, born with a slight learning disability due to a birth complication.

Boyle also was born with extraordinary talent, which she exhibited early in life, auditioning for plays, at least one other television talent program and even recording a song for charity during her 20s. But not much came of her early career aspirations.

Boyle became a charity worker who volunteered several

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Photographs courtesy youtube.com

times a week on behalf of her church. She spent much of her life alone, except for living with and caring for her elderly parents, according to the Washington Post. She has commented that recently her only companion has been her cat, Pebbles.

Boyle credited her mother — who died in 2007 — with her desire to compete on “Britain’s Got Talent”. She had initially stopped singing out of sadness over her mom’s death. Boyle decided to pick up the microphone again this year “to fulfill a wish to my mother that I wanted to do something with my life,” Boyle told STV’s *five thirty* show. Walking out onto that huge stage in front of 12 million viewers was a huge undertaking for Boyle, whom neighbors have described as private and withdrawn. Yet despite her age, frumpy looks, shyness and not having sung consistently for two years, Boyle was determined to persevere and to audition for “Britain’s Got Talent” against 3,000 other contestants. Then, at the very moment Boyle was ready to perform she had to endure the laughter and cynicism of the crowd.

CNN interviewer Larry King asked Boyle how she felt when she stepped onto the stage to the sounds of jeers and laughter, to which she replied: “That didn’t bother me; I knew I had to get on with my act.” Boyle simply knew that she had a job to do, and trusted in her own abilities to the point that nothing else was going to stop her from pursuing her dream. This same degree of confidence also helped Boyle face the judges, who also second-guessed Boyle, based merely on her looks and age.

Talent judge Simon Cowell appeared surprised by Boyle’s age and asked why she had waited so long to pursue her dream. “I’ve never been given the chance before, but here’s hoping it’ll change,” she replied cheerfully. Cowell’s co-judge, Piers Morgan, too raised his eyebrows when Boyle elaborated that she dreamed of being like actress and singer Elaine Paige. But moments into Boyle’s performance, Morgan’s mind was changed.

From Jeering to Cheering

Boyle’s performance was incredible, both in the quality of her voice and in her commanding presence. Morgan, visibly moved by the performance commented, “When you stood there with that cheeky grin and said you wanted to be like Elaine Paige, everyone was laughing at you. No one is laughing now. That was stunning.”

Judge Amanda Holden expressed awe in the wake of Boyle’s performance. “I am so thrilled because I know that everybody was against you,” Holden said of the audience. “I honestly think that we were all being very cynical and I think that’s the biggest wakeup call ever.” Star writer Lynne Cordero celebrated Boyle’s success on stage as a win for anyone who has a dream, writing: “Not only did this woman put these people in their place, she became an inspiration for all those who feel that it might be too late in life, or that they might not be capable of anything beautiful or good, simply because they don’t fit the mold of what society deems beautiful.”

Even Cowell, who has made headlines for ridiculing

and critiquing the appearances of “American Idol” contestants, specifically their weight and manner of dress, acknowledged embarrassment about the lack of fairness with which Boyle was treated.

“We were all guilty of judging her before she sang,” he told “Entertainment Tonight” after the show aired. “You watch it back and it is embarrassing. We were completely wrong.” Fortunately, those at her performance and likely most of us viewing her performance online have been **open-minded** enough to admit that our initial impressions were wrong, and to reconsider how we form our impressions of others.

Boyle Challenges our Culture

Boyle’s story challenges us individually and as a culture to become more fair by being less biased, open to new ideas and new ways of looking at our world, and by always affirming respect for others.

“The very fact that Boyle wasn’t taken seriously just because of her looks says a lot about the entertainment industry and society,” wrote Andy Comer, a copy editor and columnist for The Monitor. “We expect our performers to be young and beautiful. Oh, and talent is nice, too.”

To Comer’s point, lifestyle magazines are filled with polls about who has gained or lost weight. Some celebrity blogs focus most of their energies catching celebrities looking less than their best, as if a “bad hair day” or uncoordinated outfit somehow reflects on a person’s worth. Boyle too has commented on the speed with which people judge based solely on appearances, an act that denies someone the dignity they deserve. “There is not much you can do about it; it is the way they think; it is the way they are,” she told the Times of London in a recent interview. “But maybe this could teach them a lesson, or set an example.”

For her part, Boyle is carrying on that lesson by resisting the temptation to change her appearance. Several groups, including an entertainment tabloid, have offered to pay for an extreme makeover, even publishing pictures of how they could change Boyle’s appearance through cosmetic surgery to make her appearance more appealing to our culture. Boyle has begun wearing trendier clothing and dyed her gray hair, but she told the Times she would resist

any efforts to change the essence of her appearance: “For now I’m happy the way I am – short and plump. I would not go in for Botox or anything like that,” Boyle told the publication. “I’m content with the way I look. What’s wrong with looking like Susan Boyle?” Boyle is a rare example of authenticity in remaining true to herself, and of integrity in holding to her own beliefs despite society’s pressure to change.

Keeping the Dream Alive

For the moment anyway, few argue that there is anything wrong with looking like or being Susan Boyle. Entertainment magazines and web sites now follow Boyle as they do traditionally glamorous stars from Beyonce to Lady Gaga.

But like most internet sensations, Boyle’s time in the spotlight will likely eventually ebb. Hopefully, her spirit of perseverance, confidence, authenticity and integrity will continue to inspire. “I Dreamed a Dream” is a sad song that ends with the lyric “life has killed the dream I dreamed.” Boyle sang those words onstage and commented that the lyrics reflected where she was in her life at that time. Fortunately because of her confidence in her own abilities, and her perseverance and authenticity in being true to herself, life didn’t kill Susan’s aspirations. Instead, it only strengthened her resolve to reach her goals no matter what others thought. We should ask no less of ourselves.

Vocabulary:

fairness: being open-minded; free from bias and injustice

drastically: extremely severe or extensive

confidence: belief in oneself, trusting in one’s abilities, trusting another person

self worth: the sense of one’s own value or worth as a person, self-respect

authenticity: the condition of being genuine, true to oneself

open-minded: a mind receptive to new ideas, impartial

perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

integrity: steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code

elaborated: added details in writing, speaking, etc.

cynical: bitterly or sneeringly distrustful, contemptuous, or pessimistic

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Highlighted Virtues:

Fairness
 Openmindedness
 Perseverance
 Authenticity
 Integrity

Lesson Goals

- To examine what criteria we use in forming our impressions and judgments of others, and to evaluate the fairness of these criteria
- Evaluate the role of our culture in movies, music, TV, magazines and the Internet in shaping our criteria for how we view others, and what we expect of others
- Encourage respect for others, open-mindedness and fairness in how we form our impressions and judgments of others
- Provide a model and discussion of what it means to have a true sense of self-worth, to be authentic and live with integrity
- To inspire students with a sense of hope and patience that dreams can be achieved, and possibly at very unexpected times



Discussion Questions

1. Approximately how many views of Susan Boyles' performance have been viewed on YouTube? Why is the video attracting so much attention?
2. What was the audience's initial reaction to Boyle?

What do the crowd and judges' initial reaction to Boyle tell us about how we as a society and individually form our impressions and views of others? What traits do we typically focus on? How much of this is influenced by our culture in terms of music, movies, magazines, etc.?
3. Are the criteria we use in forming our initial impressions of others fair?

How do these criteria influence us as individuals in what we then focus on for ourselves?

Do you think we as a society need to change the things we focus on in forming impressions and judgments of others?
4. Name some obstacles that Boyle faced that could have kept her from her dream. What motivated her to compete on "Britain's Got Talent?"

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5. What virtues enabled Boyle to overcome the obstacles in her life? (perseverance, confidence, sense of self-worth, ask students to define each virtue as part of their answers)
6. Give two examples that show the mainstream media has accepted Boyle. How does Boyle feel about the way our society judges talent?
7. How has the popular culture and media pressured Boyle to change?
What virtues has Boyle lived out by politely rejecting these suggestions? (self-worth, authenticity, integrity, ask students to define each virtue as part of their answer)
Are there some reasons that Boyle should consider changing her appearance for her next performance?
8. Do you think it's fair that Boyle's appearance is such a big part of the media coverage on her? Why or why not?
9. Within in our own school and local community, what aspects are presently important in how we develop our impressions and judgments of others?
Using Susan Boyle's story and the associated virtues as a model, do we need to adjust our criteria in how we view others?

Journal Writing Options

1. Write about a time when you judged a person based on appearance or first impression and later found out you were wrong. How did this make you feel? Explain how this discovery affected your future actions and how you form your impressions of others.
2. Do you believe our society judges people by their physical appearance too much? Explain whether you believe the Susan Boyle story will change society in any meaningful way and why or why not.

Extended Learning Activities

1. Have the class analyze media coverage of Susan Boyle. Ask them to choose 12 articles from daily newspapers and magazines this month and judge whether each article is positive or negative, whether they believe the coverage was fair, and what elements of Boyle's life each article focused on.
2. Have the class hand out "Inside Out" awards to celebrities or local leaders in a mock ceremony. Make the criteria that the person must serve his/her community, be helpful in society and provide a good example to others. Consider this a reverse of some awards, including MTV Awards or People's Choice that focus on celebrity and appearance, rather than service and character.

Related Links:

- "Susan Boyle's Spunk and Inspiration," Lynne Cordero, The Star:
<http://www.thestar.com/Article/619807>
- "Susan Boyle Sensation Grows," CBS News Video:
http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4951763n?source=mostpop_video
- "The Susan Boyle Phenomenon: Redefining Beauty, Grace and Success":
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0421/p06s13-wogn.html>
- "Why Susan Boyle Inspires Us: A Story Like a Disney Movie," Marie Puente, USA Today:
http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2009-04-19-susan-boyle_N.htm
- "Unlikely Sensation Says 'Attention Hasn't Changed Me One Little Bit'" CNN:
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/TV/04/16/susan.boyle.simon.cowell/>

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