

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Directed by Irvin Kershner
Produced by Gary Kurtz
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox
Released in 1980

An unknown number of years after the vile Galactic Empire was seemingly vanquished by a fearless band of castoffs and idealists spearheaded by a naive farmboy, we discover that farmboy patrolling the barren wastes of an ice planet. He has traded heat for lifeless cold. But the spirit of rebellion still waxes strong. Humble Luke is working tirelessly to protect his comrades-in-arms from the angry counterpunch of an indefatigable enemy. Captured by a snow creature, we discover that Luke has progressed in the Force. To an audience not heretofore realizing that the Force could be applied to the manipulation of objects, Luke's recovery of the half-buried lightsaber seems truly miraculous. His training has been suspended by the untimely demise of his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi, but Luke, working tirelessly to restore freedom to the galaxy, has given his own needs or aspirations little thought. The bizarre re-appearance of a corporeal Kenobi, when Luke is at death's door, makes a deep impression on the fledgling Jedi. He decides not to rendezvous with the survivors of Hoth but instead journey to Degobah, where his residue of cocksure aplomb will be sorely tested. Yoda teaches Luke these difficult truths:

- Of higher worth than fearlessness in battle is the capacity to handle the fear confronting one's soul when he is unable to, or resolved not to, fight, and thus, yield control ("But I can help them. I feel the Force. / "But you cannot control it.")
- Because Jedis possess such extraordinary power, they are sorely tempted to use such power to further their own ends; or, more troubling, use that power to accomplish something that helps others but, being contrary to the will of the Force, will only result in unintended consequences of crippling import ("If you leave now, help them you could, but...you will destroy all for which they have fought and suffered.")
- Doing right is difficult, requiring patience and sacrifice and self-discipline; taking the easy path fosters evil ("If once you set down the dark path forever will it dominate your destiny; consume you it will, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice.")
- Because the Force permeates the galaxy, tasks impossible for one man to accomplish are insignificant when the unimaginable power of the Force is engaged with tranquility and faith ("Master, moving stones around is one thing. This is totally different!" / "No! No different, only different in your mind.")
- Perhaps the greatest lesson is that if a man undertakes a task (especially a difficult task) that he does not believe he can accomplish, he will not; ("I don't believe it." / "That is why you fail.") and intentions and superficialities do not matter—nothing matters but results ("...Alright, I'll give it a try." / "No! Try not! Do...or Do Not. There is no 'try.'")

Finally convinced that Yoda is to be respected, Luke makes the critical decision of the story. He decides to 'rescue' Han and Leia.

Here we have three distinct, but overlapping impulses. Luke wants to complete his training and become a Jedi, he wants to further the goals of the Rebellion, and he wants to protect his very dear friends. But his overriding goal is to destroy the Empire. First Yoda, then Obi-Wan hammer away at Luke, begging him to do something that seems counterintuitive. Put yourself first—stay out of danger and complete your training, because you're the key to ultimate victory. The battle is not waged between starships and groundtroops but between warring factions of the Force. If Vader and his insidious overlord can be destroyed, the Empire will collapse with them. Incredibly, Luke is being given the chance to save his own skin, increase his own power, and be applauded for it.

Instead he opts to save them. What's interesting is that, on the surface, Yoda and Obi-Wan are vindicated. At the film's conclusion, Luke is broken. He's lost a hand, been gravely wounded psychologically, and, worst of all, failed to save Han (and needed to be rescued, himself, almost consigning Leia to imprisonment and death at the hands of the Empire). Yoda and Obi-Wan said he couldn't handle it, and, despite getting in a few good licks on Vader, they were right—Luke was overwhelmed.

And yet, though they knew Luke would lose, they also believed Luke would die. They didn't understand Vader, and his complimentary desires for acquiring more power for himself (at the expense of the Emperor) and mentoring his only son.

Yoda had taught Luke that the real fight is in the mind. ("Your weapons—you will not need them.") It's the battle against greed, anger, but especially fear that a Jedi must win. Luke won. He did not give into the Dark Side, and he let go of the platform with the expectation that he would die, knowing this would be better for him and the Rebellion than accepting Vader's conditions for surrender. Moreover, the physical and spiritual terrors of the duel were equal to months of training.

(In the next film, Luke steps out on another limb, deciding to save his father after he has, at last, rescued Han and Leia by defeating Jabba the Hutt. Yoda and Obi-Wan hated that Luke had discovered his parentage as they thought that killing Vader was a necessary stepping stone for the Rebellion to succeed. It was better when their protégé was setting out to challenge the supposed murderer of his father, Anakin Skywalker. But Luke is better prepared physically and spiritually this time, ready to die if he cannot convert his father. This unconditional love for his father is what ultimately breaks Vader and compels him to kill the Emperor, sacrificing his own life to save his son.)

Because of the crippling corrosiveness of revenge, if Luke had followed his instructors' orders and waited, he would have eventually fought Vader, not knowing who he was, and killed Vader not with dispassion, but with unbridled hatred. Thus he would avenge his father's supposed killer (and by this point, perhaps, the deaths of Han and Leia) and become, almost as a matter of course, the Emperor's new apprentice. He would have fulfilled his own short-sighted goals at the expense of the Rebellion.

That's the incredible subtext to the anguished question Luke asks as Vader's goliath star destroyer hunts the Millennium Falcon, "Ben, why didn't you tell me?" Yoda believes the

Rebellion will only succeed if Vader dies. While Obi-Wan sympathizes with Luke and believes Luke can save them, he knows that Luke will be confronted with a fatal trap or will never complete his training, meaning that in the inevitable confrontation between Vader and Luke, Luke will die. But more likely, he will be converted, which is even worse. With Luke go all hopes for the Rebellion. If Han and Leia knew the whole story, they would gladly sacrifice themselves to preserve Luke and ensure the eventual success of the Alliance. ("Patience!" / "And sacrifice Han and Leia?" / "If you honor what they fight for...yes.")

But Luke has learned much from his friends. Han has saved his life at least twice and has a bounty on his head. Leia has suffered under the strain of leadership, depriving herself of the comforts that are a princess's due. He must protect them. Sure, the risks are great, but Yoda is asking him to give up an almost sure thing (their rescue) for the vague but significant possibility of defeating the Empire. Luke would always wonder if he could have won it all for the future—their friendship and freedom. Yoda is dispassionate and coolly philosophical. Luke is hot-blooded, but learning fast the perils of rash behavior. His mission to rescue his friends is impulsive and a touch egotistical. He knows he's good, but he hasn't grasped Yoda's admonitions about the insignificance of his own merits in light of the unfathomable capacity of the Force.

And yet, Luke is acting out of love. He is all about giving, not taking. So strong are his convictions that he's willing to part ways with his esteemed mentor and spiritual co-pilot at the Death Star's destruction, Obi-Wan Kenobi. ("It is you and your abilities the Emperor wants. That is why your friends are made to suffer." / "That's why I have to go.")

Ironically, Luke, for all his compassion, does come perilously close (as he would also in *Return of the Jedi*) to letting his hatred bring him to the Dark Side. When he faced that terrible vision in the cave, he was confronted with the possibility that he, too, could give in to the Dark Side, as Vader did. But in the aftermath of the duel, Luke realizes that he wasn't so much at risk of taking Vader's place, but becoming his father. That Force power and that willfulness was in him, too. Vader almost had him. Consider:

"Don't make me destroy you. Luke, you do not yet realize your importance. You have only begun to discover your power. Join me and I will complete your training. With our combined strength we can end this destructive conflict and bring order to the galaxy."

"I'll never join you!"

"If you only knew the power of the Dark Side. Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father...."

"He told me enough. He told me you killed him."

Luke is as angry as he has ever been. He's been beaten, badly. His hand is gone and he's suffering blinding pain. And here is this dark, robotic specter chastising him. And this despised tyrant has the gall to mention his long-lost, longed-for father. Luke's response is achingly vitriolic, in effect saying, "How dare you even mention him. You killed my hero and you're nothing compared to him."

Vader's response is one of the most jaw-dropping, head-shaking, foundation-shattering lines in the history of cinema:

"No. I am your father."

What?!

"No. No! That's not true. That's impossible!"

"Search your feelings. You know it to be true."

Could this paragon of evil be his father?! So he's alive! But it would be better that he were dead than to have become this brutal killer, some soulless thing who just—

"No! No!!!"

Everything Luke believed in has been decimated. He can't believe in the memory of his father. He can't believe in Obi-Wan and Yoda. Should he believe in the Dark Side?

Luke knows he is in grave danger. This beast is his father. He will save Luke, but to what end? His anger, which could have pushed him over to the Dark Side, has given way to shock. If Vader, instead of speaking of the Dark Side as a conduit for the aggrandizement of power, had spoke of the Emperor as an enslaver that has left him bereft of all companionship, Luke might have joined him in destroying Vader's master. And that would have been enough to make Luke Vader's slave. For at this point Vader feels no love for his son, but hopes to use against him Luke's natural inclination to make his father proud. Vader wants to exploit those feelings for his own benefit. He needs Luke's power so he can crush his slave-master. He doesn't want to "rule the galaxy as father and son" as much as he wants to rule the galaxy and force Luke to do the heavy lifting that the Emperor has delegated to him lo these many years, killing the Jedis, battling the Rebels, becoming the symbol of repression and loathing for the galaxy.

Luke can only see his face in that mask. He's not too good to be seduced by the Dark Side. His father was a good man too, probably. This is what he could become.

"Come with me. It is the only way."

No, there is death. It's the only way out of this cursed trap. And wouldn't it be better to just let go of all this? It is very possible that Luke wants to die, for to go on living, his every conviction shattered, may just be too much.

But Luke doesn't die. His nightmare is just beginning.