

It's Time Again for Heroes--Or Were They Ever Gone?.

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A place for **heroes** has always existed, from biblical exploits to mythological daring, from renowned or forgotten battlefields to the silver screen and the athletic arena. History and literature abound with heroic individuals who give us inspiration and hope (Walden 1986). Cultures have always provided an arena for them.

Though the concept itself may have been shrouded in ambiguity, **heroes** were there, providing a yardstick against which we evaluate ourselves. Some have maintained that **heroes** are actually cultural necessities and products of historical events. And although others have asserted that **heroes** do not really create history, we seem to need them nevertheless. As Robert Penn Warren (1972a, 4) noted, "By a man's hero ye shall know him." In times of crisis, Lincoln or a Roosevelt might be necessary, but in more complacent times, a Mantle or a Reagan will do.

Our perceptions of **heroes**, and perhaps what we want them to be, are intimately involved. For example, in his biography of Babe Ruth, Sobol (1974) stated:

Babe was a character, that's all. Something apart from every other human being you had ever met. And whatever your feelings about him you could never forget that he was the great, the incomparable, the idolized Babe Ruth. [dots] Only a Solomon could have looked at Ruth and separated the real man from the mythological hero [italics added]. (129-30)

The vagueness of the hero concept may have also resulted in a misconstrued and overused term. In this vein, Swindel (1980, xiii) stated:

Gary Cooper was idolized and admired but was also beloved, as perhaps no other contemporary screen figure was beloved. [dots] He was an encouragingly heroic [italics added] image in an optimistic era of hero worship. He belongs to a very recent yet thoroughly bygone American era such as many of our citizens yearn for.

Another aspect of the concept of hero is how it has evolved historically in American culture. As the young republic took hold in the late eighteenth century, **heroes** were identified by honor, duty, and patriotic virtue, all traits necessary for the young nation's survival. Thus, Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin became noted **heroes**. Nineteenth-century **heroes** and heroines were defined by their humanitarianism, economic attainment, military exploits, or scientific achievement. Reflecting those traits were such prominent figures as Lincoln, Tubman, Grant, Lee, Carnegie, and Edison. The twentieth century began with the magnification of physical attributes, humanitarian character, and the self-made individual of the courageous deed. Lindbergh and Earhart, the presidential Roosevelts, Ruth and Robinson, and King came to symbolize those traits.

The Hero Concept Today

As society and its values have changed, so also have our **heroes**. The social upheavals of the Vietnam era, the assassinations of prominent individuals, the suspicion of and betrayals by political figures and those in authority, and the rise of cable technology and its promotion of media personalities have all had a detrimental effect on the concept of the hero. With maturity, our perceptions change; we even outgrow some **heroes**. New knowledge may cause us to reconsider the object of our worship. In examining the Custer myth, for example, Connell (1984) noted:

As values change, so does one's evaluation of the past and one's impression of long gone actors. New myths replace the old. During the nineteenth century, [George A. Custer] was vastly admired. Today his image has fallen face down in the mud and his middle initial, which stands for Armstrong, could mean Anathema. [dots] Thus, from a symbol of courage and sacrifice in the winning of the West, Custer's image was gradually altered into a symbol of the arrogance and brutality displayed in the white exploitation. [dots] How odd that this consummate thespian's greatest role was a flop. (106-07)

From a serious examination of **heroes**, I have concluded that they cannot be, and do not have to be, perfect, although some have been misconstrued as such. Time and new information have revealed more than a few to have possessed feet of clay. Nonetheless, they all had a steadfast singleness of purpose, sometimes in a single action against overwhelming odds (Charles Lindbergh and Audie Murphy, for example), sometimes over a lifetime of actions (as did Helen Keller and Mother Teresa). Some of them made their appearance prematurely; that is, before the context of their heroism could be recognized and acknowledged. Abigail Adams, long excluded from recognition undoubtedly because she was a woman, is an example. Dr. Tom Dooley, a long-neglected embodiment of personal sacrifice and humanitarianism at its finest, is still waiting for acknowledgment. In terms of consistency, few if any can be regarded as total successes. The arrogant assertion that only "winners" can be **heroes** has softened into one of forgiveness and temperance, especially if the individual involved has clearly risked everything against the odds or has been enveloped by the martyrdom of death (Warren 1972b).

In seeking the criteria that define the hero, we do not discover the "perfect" hero who transcends time, for such an individual remains in the context of his or her time. Rather, we find that the hero's values and character transcend the era: courage, perseverance, truth, and daring to risk for the benefit of others. To promote a hero is to encourage the adoption of those values and traits. In this sense, there are **heroes** worth promoting, both famous and obscure.

Heroes and the Teaching of Values

In the last few years, there has been a revival of concern about the learning of values in the American school. Teaching methods that have solely stressed cognitive skills in analyzing and clarifying value choices have lost favor. Teaching neutrally about them is also out. The current trend is teaching values in concert with methods of analysis and judgment that allow students to develop answers concerning right and wrong, better and worse, and personal responsibility for the common good (Leming 1996).

Prominent educators are recommending that certain widely held values should form the core of systematic character education in the school curriculum. Among the things they stress are the integration of cognitive and character development through moral reasoning and self-knowledge, taking other perspectives, and thoughtful decision making (Lickona 1993). They also urge the use of personal models in past and present history and fiction to exemplify and encourage students' emulating certain values and character traits, such as honesty, civility, courage, perseverance, loyalty, compassion, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Lickona 1991).

The disillusionment of our times has led to a move away from the traditional hero to a nontraditional kind of role model. Brodbelt and Wall (1984, 6) have maintained that "**heroes** reflect the culture, and what the culture values will determine the type of heroic act that is to be rewarded." Today's hero is the celebrity, promoted by the popular media and exemplified by sports figures and media personalities (Brodbelt and Wall 1984; Walden 1986). Sports figures meet society's requirements for fame and success--constant prime-time media exposure and huge incomes. They have moved from being merely entertaining to "mythological or pseudo-religious in their appeal and importance" (Walden, 12).

Media personalities, such as MTV rock stars, film actors, and television personalities, are also often **heroes** to young people. Their ascent to hero status may be a direct result of the disillusionment of our times. If the younger generation is unable to distinguish between the imagery of a performer and the reality of life, they soon value the glitz over the substance. Forgotten is the idea that the hero reveals the potential of humanity and the goodness of human nature; the celebrity reveals the potential of the media. It is ironic in this regard that film and television actors are revered for portraying characters who are totally unlike themselves, a notion that once prompted Laurence Olivier to state that "acting is lying" (Channel 2 News 1986). Walden (1986, 22) asserted that the disillusionment and confusion of our times are warnings of a loss of identity by a society "that does not provide, along with a free choice of types, effective guidance." Furthermore, it is for that reason that "more and more of our **heroes** are winners or performers and fewer are **heroes** of social acceptability, independent spirits, or servants of the group" (Boorstin 1982, 28).

A danger of this lack of effective guidance is confusion over who deserves hero worship, and that, I believe, could result in our falling prey to the most persuasive guide, the media, in making that choice. The media have taken full advantage of our disillusionment and have promoted and sensationalized a circle of celebrities that includes the antihero and the nonhuman idol. We are thus witnessing a blurring of the

difference between the hero and the celebrity, in which the heroic has become entertaining and the ideal is reduced to fame and fortune.

Does today's celebrity have the same status as the traditional hero who symbolized and inspired the American Dream? Can we, as social studies educators, promote the traditional hero? Should we?

Identifying a Hero

Social studies educators are in a prime position to encourage young people to understand and identify with true **heroes** and the values they embody. In a study of individuals aged ten to ninety, I investigated the selection of **heroes** across generational lines for trends and patterns (Sanchez 1998). For the study, I defined hero as a person who performs a voluntary action that symbolizes the moral/ethical standards of the culture.

That definition could serve as a working definition for educators and starting point to clarify that blurred division between the hero and the celebrity.

Citizenship education, the goal of social studies, is about the promotion of moral and ethical standards that symbolize and perpetuate a democratic citizenry. The standards are embodied in humanitarian endeavors that benefit others, that inspire and unite. We can inspire young people with the endeavors and values of authentic **heroes** who can be role models for the values, spirit, and traits that are necessary for our citizens in the twenty-first century.

To help our young people develop into reflective and concerned citizens, we must allow them, with our guidance, to evaluate and choose their **heroes** for the qualities that help us fulfill our citizenship obligations. As social studies educators, one of our missions must be to identify those individuals who give us the right direction and provide the inspirational link that can allow us to become **heroes**. We can encourage reflection on those individuals who project the best of what our culture offers. To expand the horizons of heroism, social studies education must require more than assigned reading about one-dimensional individuals in history textbooks.

Textbooks, the teacher's most frequently used tool, also have the intimidating responsibility of portraying the essence of **heroes**. But studies of recent social studies textbooks that examined the portrayal of **heroes** have not been encouraging. One study of thirty-one selected textbooks concluded the following:

Analysis leads us to believe that most secondary level social studies textbooks are narrow if not limited in their presentation of a variety of categories of **heroes/heroines**. In most cases the concept of hero and heroine is presented infrequently and the full development of the hero/heroine characteristics was the exception rather than the norm. The concept of hero/heroine typically was not utilized to illustrate those values and ideals necessary for the maintenance of a democratic society, nor were those concepts utilized in a manner which enabled the student to better grasp democratic ideals and focus upon the intimate relationships between mankind and his institutions. It would be beneficial if the values of society could be presented, explained and integrated into the social context by focusing upon the hero/heroine. This study revealed that usually such was not the case. (Brodelt and Wall 1984, 12)

That view supports Dunn's assertion that social studies has neglected this responsibility because of the "incomplete development of the **heroes** of American history" (Dunn 1991, 26). It also supports the assertion that the stories of traditional **heroes** are token and lack depth and accuracy--for example, the "ugly truth" about many has been consistently glossed over--that students are merely exposed to one-dimensional, positive, ethnocentric manifestations. "Perfection is not a prerequisite for heroism," according to Dunn. Many traditional **heroes** have been lost, partly in an effort to study more of our heritage without considering its moral and ethical consequences. What we see promoted outside the educational realm is a collection of charismatic individuals who succeed largely because of technical superiority and very frequently through violent actions (Dunn 1991, 29).

Accurate Portrayal of **Heroes**

With a multicultural textbook, teachers can expand the hero concept through culturally diverse **heroes**. That effort will fail if tokenism and lack of depth continue to be the norm. The opportunities and purposes of multicultural education will be derailed if educators attempt to appease diverse groups with romanticized portrayals of ethnic **heroes**. A cursory look at our heritage and the richness of its diversity is an inevitable result of lifting undeveloped, inaccurate exploits and myths out of context and misconstruing them (Sanchez 1997).

To maintain our society through a focus on **heroes**, teachers need to seek out and explore in depth the lives of individuals who model our moral and ethical heritage. We must expand our horizons beyond the conventional textbook to sources such as trade books that provide accurate accounts and consider the complex dimensions of the individual's humanity and the moral and ethical consequences of his or her actions.

Accurate accounts of **heroes** attract the learner's attention, arouse interest, and most important, raise questions that lead to discussion and reflection about values. Literature about **heroes** provides examples of values that students can recognize and follow (Vitz 1990). By viewing a hero's story on stage or screen or by reading it in print, young people are engaged by the hero, who stimulates imagination and teaches moral lessons (DeRoche and Williams 1998).

Trade books by notable authors offer balanced treatments of individuals such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, the two Roosevelt presidents, Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, the Wright Brothers, and Betty Friedan, among others. It is important to consider stories that present both positive and negative aspects of a person's life so that students understand that human imperfections are an inevitable part of a hero's character. The deeds of humanitarians, parents, and teachers can also become part of the fabric, for fame is not a prerequisite for heroism.

The hero's exploits should be considered carefully in context, and judgments about the person's values and behavior should be made initially in terms of the culture of that person's time and place. Only after a context-based examination of the hero's actions should there be consideration of the extent to which the actions and the values that they represent transcend the time and place in which they occurred. Students will recognize that certain core values are fundamental to their own present and future.

Values such as courage, perseverance, compassion, honesty, and tolerance, which define good character and effective citizenship, are not restricted to a particular person, time, or place. Accounts from other cultures can be analyzed comparatively. Students will develop an understanding of humankind's fundamental unity and an appreciation of the common qualities of humanity that pervade the diverse peoples of the world.

Establishing Criteria

In reflecting on the spirit of heroism, students embrace not only an individual but also the qualities and characteristics of the hero. Social studies educators can promote those qualities that will perpetuate effective citizenship by engaging students in a dialogue to establish personal criteria for behavior and to choose those worthy of hero status. Through their development and critical analysis of exemplary qualities, students will begin to understand the essential links of traditional **heroes** to those around us and ultimately the link to each individual (Pearson 1989, Sanchez in press). By identifying the values of a true hero, we acknowledge our own potential.

Heroes symbolize something greater than attaining wealth and fame, performing death-defying acts, or acquiring media-promoted status. They reflect our values, our ideals, our dreams. Their qualities endure as a guide and inspiration for all of us to be **heroes**. It's time for **heroes**, again.

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