



Written Comprehension Text

GRADE 11

Heroism: Why Heroes are Important

by Scott LaBarge

1

When I was 16 years old, I read Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden*, and it changed my life. I read about living deliberately, about sucking the marrow out of life, about not, when I had come to die, discovering that I had not lived, being electrified. Somehow he convinced me that living deliberately meant becoming a philosopher. I remind myself of Thoreau's warning to all philosophy professors: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers ... To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, ... it is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."

2

The term "hero" comes from the ancient Greeks. A hero was a mortal who had done something beyond the normal scope of human experience. He left an immortal memory when he died, and thus received worship due to the gods. Today, it is much harder to detach the concept of heroism from morality. We define our ideals by the heroes we choose, and our ideals - courage, honour, and justice - define us. Our heroes are symbols of all the qualities we would like to possess and all the ambitions we would like to satisfy. We all have a vested interest in each person having heroes, and in the choice of heroes each of us makes.

3

It is so important for us as a society, globally and locally, to try to shape these choices. The Barron Prize for Young Heroes polled American teenagers and found only half could name a personal hero. Superman and Spiderman were named twice as often as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Lincoln. Director Spike Lee lamented the fact that, while his generation grew up idolizing great civil rights leaders, today young people aspire to become pimps and strippers. No one wants their children to get their role models from Gangsta rap and a hyper materialistic, misogynistic hip-hop culture, but our communities are finding it difficult to make alternative role models take hold.

4

The greatest obstacle to the appreciation and adoption of heroes in our society is pervasive and corrosive cynicism and skepticism. This obstacle of cynicism has been seriously increased by scandals like the steroids mess in Major League Baseball. and by our leaders' opportunistic use of heroic imagery for short term political gain.



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The best antidote to this cynicism is realism about the limits of human nature. We are cynical because so often our ideals have been betrayed. Washington and Jefferson held slaves; Martin Luther King is accused of philandering and plagiarizing, and so on. We need to know the things that make our heroes noteworthy, and forgive the shortcomings that blemish their heroic perfection.

6

The false steps and frailties of heroic people make them more like us, and since most of us are not particularly heroic, that may seem to reduce the heroes' stature. But this dynamic pulls in the other direction as well: these magnificent spirits, these noble souls, are human too. They stumbled, they wavered, they made fools of themselves - but they rose and accomplished deeds of triumphant beauty. Perhaps we might do so too.

7

Again, the critical moral contribution of heroes is the expansion of our sense of possibility. If we, as Thoreau said, live lives of quiet desperation, it is because our horizons of possibility are too cramped. Heroes can help us lift our eyes a little higher. Immanuel Kant said that "from the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." But some have used that warped, knotted timber to build more boldly and beautifully than others, and we may all benefit by their examples. Heaven knows we need those examples now.

Adapted from: <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/more/resources/heroism-why-heroes-are-important/>