3-1-1994

What Heroes Teach Us

Richard Hill

Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol2/iss2/22

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Promethean by an authorized administrator of CU Commons. For more information, please contact libraryadmin@cu-portland.edu.
What Heroes Teach Us
by Richard Hill

Dedicated to the swift recovery of Clifford Horn!

As I write this, Tonya Harding has just lost any chance of the Olympic Gold medal. Her shoe lace broke. She can’t understand why bad things keep happening to her. Moralists squeal with delight: justice has been served. Men in barbershops admire her good old fashioned American spunk. The whole world is corrupt and she has simply done what was necessary to win. In the recent past, she has modified her hairstyle, attempting, the newspaper tells us, to “soften” her image. She has also ordered a new outfit from a woman in Virginia who specializes in wedding gowns—the kind which Nancy Kerrigan uses as a model for her skating outfits. The Tonya drama is endlessly fascinating, providing us, it seems to me, with a microcosm of our world. Can everything be packaged into an image of reality—or can we know the truth? How ought we to react to this contemporary morality play? Why do bad things keep happening to some people?

Other events evoke similar issues. On Monday night football, we watch the Excedrin two minute warning; on New Year’s Day, we endure the John Hancock Bowl, the USF&G Sugar Bowl, the Mobil Cotton Bowl; General Electric provides educational TV programs with commercials for viewing in schools. Some people see this as merely American free enterprise at work. But commercials sell more than products; they order reality. Advertising teaches us that when we have a problem, we associate not only with a particular brand; we think we need a product. Somebody else will solve our dilemmas. And the products come with built-in messages about who we are and how to live: the Marlboro Man and Joe (and now Jill) Camel teach us that smoking is cool. Pretty, busty women in beer commercials inform us that women are sex objects. (We seem to think that gender equality is barenchested men in Diet Coke commercials.) Shopping malls not only prepare us to be American consumers; they ensure that we will drive our cars farther (i.e., consume more fossil fuels) and that neighborhoods will be increasingly difficult to sustain.

At heart, these are moral issues. Noam Chomsky says that our government and media “manufacture consent.” Reality is created for us—to produce profit for corporations or to ensure domestic order. For the Environmental Protection Agency, acid rain is “poorly buffered precipitation”; sewer sludge is “regulated organic nutrient.” We don’t have tax increases. Read their lips: we have “revenue enhancements.” We may snicker at these euphemisms. (And there is enough silliness in contemporary political correctness: according to satirist Christopher Cerf, looters are now “nontraditional shoppers”; and if they’re caught, they become “guests” of the legal system, staying in “custody suites.”)

But there is a deeper issue at stake. We are fond of saying that our media doesn’t report the news; it creates it. The situation may be worse. We seem to report only the news that fits our current view of reality. “Desert Storm” may evoke images of power and Romance, but when our bombs in Iraq cause “collateral damage,” it is 250,000 people who are killed. The U. S. media did not report the story. In the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge were systematically destroying millions of Cambodians. Not only was this atrocity the subject of a powerful film (The Killing Fields), but it was appropriately reported in U. S. newspapers. A simultaneous Indonesian genocide of the East Timorese was hardly mentioned in our press. Why? The Khmer Rouge were Communists and we know that Communists are godless animals. The Indonesians were slaughtering the East Timorese with U. S. aid—and weapons. This doesn’t fit our image of reality. During the Persian Gulf War, our media forgot that George Bush armed Saddam Hussein when it was politically correct to do so before Saddam became the current “madman.” It took eight years after the news about irradiated Americans was first reported to reach the mainstream media. And we didn’t hear about the C. I. A. running drugs for Manuel Noriega, keeping him in power when it was in our best interests to do so. The
point is that whether we are liberal or conservative, the net effect is that we are distanced from reality and have difficulty doing our duty as citizens to create a cleaner environment and a better society.

Even more, these issues are metaphysical; they affect our understanding of truth. The Tonya Harding story underscores our difficulty telling the difference between image and reality. When we can’t handle the moral complexity of this parable, we resort to either/or thinking. If Tonya Harding is the “bad girl” from the other side of the tracks, who’s just a little too rough for our refined tastes, then we want Nancy Kerrigan to be the “golden girl.” And she’s not; she disappointed us by not winning the Gold Medal—and still going to Disney World. We want winners and easy truths. We never did measure up to Ozzie and Harriet, nor to the Huxtables—but we need these illusions. We talk about family values as if once in the “good old days” families were somehow simpler matters.

We live in a fragmented world where we no longer share agreed upon verities. In a world of such diversity, TRUTH appears unreachable; instead we have individual perceptions of reality. College teachers no longer “profess”; and if they did, at least some students would protest. They want their current view of reality to be confirmed. (And is education possible under these conditions? There is a danger in letting Business or any other institution dictate the direction of schools.) People’s lives no longer mean anything or “go anywhere”; they are victims of random circumstances. Technology overwhelms us, alienating us not only from machines which purport to make our lives easier but from ourselves. Our world is split: politically, racially, personally, philosophically. We have divided our world into us vs. them. Nation-states have no objective basis for adjudicating disputes. Serbs and Croats kill Muslims; Catholics kill Protestants; Israelis kill Palestinians. And the world community sits back helpless. Black and white people, parents and children, husbands and wives, men and women no longer understand each other. We seem to have no basis for bridging the gap. Values have become personal “biases.” We live our lives without context. We don’t know who we are. We don’t know where we’re headed. These are the real problems.

What does all this have to do with heroes? Everything! In the world which I have described, many of us conclude that heroes no longer exist. We don’t believe in excellence—or, if a hero satisfies the needs of one group, that person must alienate another group. If a person achieves something great, he or she must have a skeleton in the closet. A Current Affair is on the case. I’m empathetic to the need for investigative journalists. The 1960s taught us the value of suspecting “official truths.” At the same time, we must maintain the value and persistence of heroic ideals. Heroes traditionally solve the problems of cultures. In our time, as I have tried to suggest above, the predicaments are complex, though they primarily have to do with three issues: a failure of imagination, flawed morality, and splintered identities. Let me explain what heroes teach us.

In a world like ours, the first lesson of the hero is that the more things change, the more they remain the same. People usually think they live in what the Hindus call the Kali Yuga, the Dark Ages when truth and morality are absent, when the world, which once walked healthily on four legs, now totters on one. Heroes teach us that suffering is universal. As Virgil writes in The Aeneid, “Sunt lacrimae rerum.” There are tears in the nature of things.

I have been slow to fathom this truth. I admit that twenty-five years ago I thought that in one generation we could produce utopia. This wouldn’t happen through violent revolution as some insisted. But rather we could correct the world by transforming consciousness. As The Beatles sang, “You’d better free your mind instead.” As a next step, we would raise perfect children. After all, Buckminster Fuller had notified us that “There is no such a thing as genius; some children are less damaged than others.” (Just a little pressure on parents!) The reality of course has been far different. My children are wonderful—but not perfect. I’m a good bit chastened these days. Like all of us, I’ve suffered a bit. And maybe as the Greeks told us we could, I’ve suffered into some truth—the humbler sadder truth that we’ve got a long way to go.
The best writers of the twentieth century echo Virgil, all in their own way. The Hemingway hero is grim, telling us that we are all amputees, part of our psyche irretrievably damaged. The Existentialists insist that there are no universal truths. Each of us has to discover an individual set of values which must be fluid, open to change in a dynamic universe. One of my favorite writers that I can’t teach (his books are too long) writes that “we sit here on a blind rock careening through space; we are all of us rushing headlong to the grave.” Samuel Beckett discloses that we are “waiting for Godot,” who presumably will solve our problems. We are guilty and responsible for evil, as Kafka says, but we don’t know what we did or who to see to get a hearing. Vaclav Havel, the current President of The Czech Republic, writes that our situation is hopeless. To be alive, Tonya, is to suffer.

The real problem is fear that our lives don’t make sense. We fear that the world will blow up, that we will die, that we won’t find love. In short, we fear that our world isn’t fertile and that there is no place to run. We are paralyzed and hopeless. The second lesson from heroes is that this desperation is in fact a desirable state. As my college roommate used to tell me, “Hopelessness is an advanced state of consciousness.” It’s only in despair that we have a chance to learn. As Samuel Johnson wrote, “When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

Heroes traditionally live out this wisdom. Adam’s sin is felix culpa, the happy fault. Out of the hopelessness into which his sin plunged humankind comes the salvific action of Jesus Christ. Heroes know that before we go up it is necessary to go down. Christ descended into hell before he rose from the dead. Virgil’s Aeneas goes into the underworld to encounter his past before he fully commits himself to his future. Dante in The Divine Comedy had to go down into hell before he could struggle through purgatory and eventually find true love in Paradise.

This “going down” is symbolically significant. As heroes go down, they discover two levels of reality. First they face the “other,” that shadow side of themselves they can’t control. For men, this is the anima, the creative feminine side of the character. They also confront the void, the experience of life without any preconceptions. This is where the true courage of the hero is tested. The void is the level of awesome mystery; the likelihood is that we will be destroyed; there is a chance we may find wisdom and fertility. Dante faints three times as he challenges the tangible evil of hell. But his journey requires him to know sin before he can purge it from his soul. As Aeneas goes into the underworld, he progressively peels away layer after layer of his identity. In Virgil’s terms, he finally meets his true self, his father Anchises who foretells his destiny, to found a great line of Roman leaders. These heroes remind us—and this is the second major problem heroes address—that we have to give up attachment to ego (what Joseph Campbell calls desire) if we are going to find the right path on the journey of life. We give up attachment to material possessions as the source of life’s meaning. We let go of our privileged assumptions about life and face the void without preconceived notions.

The potential practical consequences are enormous. We may die, we may go insane, we may shipwreck. But in fighting fear and desire, in recognizing that our individual ego identities are insignificant in light of the awful truth of the void, we may discern two important truths. In such a world, one doesn’t win. Our obsession with victory is an illusion. I often tell people that baseball, one of my true passions, is not about winning and losing. I watch baseball games with little attention to the score. Rather, I think of baseball as a dance, choreographed by a small leather spheroid which dictates the beautiful movements of athletes who respond to its motion. If baseball is not your sport, consider that a similar disregard for winning might have prevented the Tonya Harding melodrama. Or, more significantly, when we realize that wars are never won, we may find alternative behaviors.

The second consequence of the “happy” encounter with the void is that we may acknowledge that all of us are in this together. In growing up, we might say that we lose our innocence twice—if we’re lucky. The first is the perception that our
parents and other authorities are flawed and responsible for our problems. It is noteworthy that many hero stories are about fathers and sons (Odysseus/Telemachus, Anchises/Aeneas, Virgil/Dante, Robert Pirsig and his son Chris in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance). We realize too that our world is not perfect, a discovery that is the occasion for deep distrust of institutions. In making this breakthrough, young people often feel bitter and lonely, intimately aware of their separateness. Later may come a second loss of innocence, the acknowledgment that we too are capable of the same mistakes as our parents. In losing innocence this second time, we realize the error of us, vs. them thinking. We come to appreciate the value of our common human heritage and are less inclined to either/or thinking (e.g. rooting for Tonya or Nancy; maybe we’ll root for them both because they’re both on the American team, or because we appreciate excellence in all the athletes. Because the Olympics represent a noble ideal, we yearn for a complex justice to prevail.) Above all, we empathize with our brothers and sisters who are suffering and doing their best.

The thrust of my teaching the last few years is appreciation for the value of Dialogue. I tell students that ideas come through awareness of ecological relationship. We listen carefully to others and respond with our best approximation of the truth. This is really the insight of The Oresteia, which is about competing notions of justice. At the beginning of Euripides’ trilogy, the Greeks suffer under a rancorous eye for an eye morality. They can’t kill bloodkin; such deaths must be avenged. By the end, the gods expand the range of those we can’t kill to include marriage partners and people in our city. Today we live in a Global Village. An encounter with the void dictates that we don’t kill our fellow villagers. One of my favorite Pacific Northwest Indian legends makes this same point. After a woman from a coastal tribe has been kidnapped by a man from another tribe, her brothers engage in a venomous feud which leads to many deaths on both sides. She has a child and finally escapes back to her own people. She finds a way to stop the bloodshed, to circumvent our tendency to blame “the other” for our problems. She tells her son that he shouldn’t shoot strangers who come to their shore. “One of them might be your father.”

This ethic may appear unrealistic, but heroes tell us differently. War appears to be the inevitable human folly. We fight because of human weakness and a failure to conceive better alternatives. But we seem to misunderstand our admiration for war heroes. We are deluded if we think their gallantry resides in their ability to kill competently. What we truly revere about the brave is their recognition of a larger context for behavior. They risk their individual lives for the greater cause of community.

Another relevant case is the common perception today that we no longer have universal truths. Rather—students tell me this all the time—we have individual opinions. We can’t decide the advantage of one behavior over another. If all people are doing their best, who are we to judge the validity of their choices? In a world of cultural and ethnic multiplicity, this is an inviting temptation. And yet the presence of heroes insists that some behaviors are better than others. The next major lesson that heroes teach us is how to see our lives within context.

Whatever Charles Barkley says, we can’t escape the fact that heroes are role models. What is important is to realize that the true heroes aren’t necessarily people who achieve much, but those who see much. They envision a better alternative which gives advantage to individual and group alike: Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx, Joan of Arc hears the word of God, Yudishthira in the Hindu epic The Mahabharata grasps paradoxical truths when examined by Dharma (“What is an example of defeat?” “Victory”). Once heroes jeopardize their lives, overcome fear and desire, and risk the possibility of a world of no meaning, they detect a larger dimension of reality. Within this larger framework, we know that our age is like any other. There’s a sense in which all times are Dark Ages; we are constantly facing the Kali Yuga. The hero can teach us how to live more effectively in this world.

From the heroic perspective, it is important to know the Whole Truth. In Zen and the Art of
Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert Pirsig argues that most of us understand reality based on either the Romantic or the Classic perspective. We admire the intuitive, pioneering Romantic courage of the individual who refuses to be bound by social constraints, the person who does it "my way" (Tonya Harding?). Or we value the rational authority of the group, the perspective which recognizes the need for social order (Nancy Kerrigan?). We prefer the traditional standards of the "father" or the new possibilities represented by the "son." To choose either, says Pirsig, is to miss the Big Picture. In novelist Milan Kundera's terms, it is to choose kitsch, on one level the cheap art like the pink flamingos some people have on their front lawns or the iridescent pink plastic Jesus figures people keep on the dashboards of their cars. But kitsch has a more profound meaning. It is the simplification of reality which compels us to miss the truth of a situation. Pirsig and Kundera, both of whom dramatize the reality of contemporary voids, see yet the fertile potential of complex truths. We need both the courage of the individual hero and the security of the social bond, tradition and innovation. Pirsig insists that we best choose based on QUALITY, the hero's perspective.

As a moral term, Quality recognizes that some behaviors are better than others. The better truths--which lead to heroic conduct--value complexity, see our shared human heritage, comprehend the value of suffering, posit the need to confront the void, and imagine the beauty of humility, compassion, and service. Quality truths give us hope beyond hopelessness.—Without the hero, there is no hope. It is not surprising that we "buy" the misshapen truths of advertisers who create a materialistic haven for us, who tell us that we can't be successful without their product, that there is no proof that smoking is deadly. It makes sense that we fall for the contemptible euphemisms of those who seek social order at the expense of individual autonomy. We accept this kitsch because we don't know who we are.

The last—and most important—task of the hero is to show us the nature of our true identity. We perhaps know the story of the lost princess who is raised among peasants. One day she discovers her true identity. In finding strength when confronting the void, heroes teach us that like the princess, we too are royalty. We are capable of greatness. Like so many classical heroes, we are the children of God who must be about the business of the father—and mother. When asked by Dharma about the inevitable destiny for each human being, Yudishthira gives the hero's response: Happiness. Lest we become prideful at this discovery, The Mahabharata also tells us that it may take many reincarnations and, like The Divine Comedy, the Hindu epic tells us that we won't achieve salvation by merely following pre-set rules. The way is narrow, but not the province of any one group. Goethe's Faust provides us with the basis for humility and hope: "there are two souls which live in me,” a side which skirts close to the earth needing its security and one which aspires to fly to the stars.

Heroes instruct us that the journey to discover our true nature is perilous. The stakes are high; we may not be successful. But heroes also inform us that we must travel on this journey of discovery. A Jungian psychologist I heard once said that in the modern world, all people are neurotic and sick. Given this condition, he went on to say that we have a choice. We can become victims and endure the social conditioning of our times, acquiesce to the perception that our lives don't make sense, and actually welcome the view that there are no universal truths. Or we can become heroes. We may discover the essential truth about ourselves. As we go down that "long and winding road," the Beatles sing, we must "carry that weight a long time." Heroes can help enlighten us and lighten the way. In this Lenten season before we await the Resurrection, the lessons of heroes are particularly relevant. We must explore the void if we want to discover our identities. We must go down before we can understand there is an up. We too may seek Resurrection.