

Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?

Today's zeitgeist is controlled by a popular culture that worships the antihero. Many of today's entertainers, athletes, and other pop culture icons exemplify everything that is unheroic in our society.

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When I was growing up, my world was filled with heroes. There were John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Carl Yastrzemski. These icons represented everything good about America: strong, principled, humble, and decent. They led exemplary lives, worked hard, and cared about the world in which they lived. As an impressionable boy, I saw them regularly on television and read about them in magazines and newspapers, and, because of their iconic status, I looked up to them, I wanted to be them. Our country was replete with politicians, titans of industry, civic leaders, athletes, and entertainers about whom I could have said, "I want to grow up to be just like them." And, even in retrospect and in knowing that they had their flaws, they still seem like role models worthy of emulation.

But in 21st century America, I ask myself: Where have all our heroes gone? I look at the iconic figures of today, the influential people that our children see on television and in the movies, and read about in magazines and newspapers and on the Internet, and I have a hard time finding anyone whom I can call a hero. Most of those in the spotlight these days appear to be far from heroic: politicians who are self-glorifying panderers, corporate leaders who are greedy and corrupt, athletes who are entitled and irresponsible, and entertainers who are spoiled and aloof. There are exceptions, of course, there are people in the world who should be seen as heroes, but they rarely get the attention they're due. There just aren't many people in the public eye today for whom I can say, "I would like my children to grow up to be just like them."

Yet heroes are essential to children's development. They convey the values that reflect the best that society has to offer. They influence the choices children make — what would my hero do in this situation? And heroes act as role models, shaping children through their words

and deeds. Charles Barkley, the former NBA star, once famously said, "I am not a role model." But he, and others like him, are role models whether they like it or not.

The heroes that emerge in a generation are the living manifestation of the zeitgeist of the times, which doesn't speak well of this recent generations. In the past, children's heroes were mostly agents of good — of course, every generation has antiheroes, but they were the exception rather than the rule. They inspired children to goodness and great deeds. Heroes were courageous and strong and helped children to be brave when facing their fears. They set the bar high on standards of behavior, being kind, compassionate, generous, and humble — you never saw Superman trash talking the villains. Heroes gave hope to children when they were afraid because kids believed that there was someone out there who could protect them. Most importantly, heroes always did the right thing; they protected the weak, vanquished evil, and set things right.

Today's zeitgeist is vastly different, controlled by a popular culture that worships the antihero. Many of today's entertainers, athletes, and other popular culture icons exemplify everything that is unheroic in our society — 50 Cent and Britney Spears, Terrell Owens, and Paris Hilton — yet are seen as heroes in the eyes of children. Many of today's heroes encourage values that are also unheroic, such as selfishness, dishonesty, disrespect, irresponsibility, greed, cruelty, and violence. It seems like the best we can hope for these days are heroes who are at most benign rather than harmful. A decidedly unscientific survey I conducted recently with kids indicated that these "minimal-damage" heroes include Hilary Duff, Brad Pitt, and Shaquille O'Neal. Not antiheroes by any means, but also not genuine heroes either. They're heroes to children mainly because they're attractive, rich, and famous, not for any redeeming qualities they may have.

So where can we find real heroes for our children today? You might argue that kids' heroes should be their parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults in their lives. And I agree wholeheartedly. But that is rarely the case, particularly as the influence of popular culture on children grows. These everyday people are far too ordinary and too close to children to be their heroes. Kids need to place their heroes on pedestals. That's what gives heroes their power — they're somehow different from ordinary mortals — and causes children to want to emulate them. And there are genuine heroes out there, for example, the soldiers who are

fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the workers trying to protect our Gulf Coast from economic and environmental disaster. Unfortunately, their time in the spotlight is too short, if it occurs at all, to remain heroes. As children's attention is drawn elsewhere and the memory of their heroics fades, so does their influence as heroes.

Because popular culture won't shine a steady spotlight on real heroes, parents must be making their children aware of people who are actually deserving of their veneration. Parents need to talk to their children about what makes a hero and, in doing so, teach them about the values and beliefs that are exemplified by real heroes. Just as importantly, parents must learn who are the antiheroes being pushed on their children by popular culture and explain why they're actually unheroic. Believe it or not, there are real heroes out there in the spotlight, politicians, business and civic leaders, athletes, and entertainers — Nelson Mandela, Bill Gates, Geoffrey Canada, Roger Federer, Bono — as well as teachers, coaches, and others in our communities who actually embody the best of what the world represents. They have to be kept in the spotlight by parents so our children can see them for the real heroes that they are.

So, I ask you, who are today's worst anti-heroes? And who are the real heroes we can shine the spotlight on for our children to see?