Obscure Heroes

This paper asks whether the notion of a hero is useful in helping communities. After briefly identifying the origin, evolution, and components of a hero, the paper posits that what evolved to be called heroic leadership is not desirable because it is antithetical to democracy, unrealistic for a nuclear age, and can encourage us to wait for salvation. It would be more desireable to recognize and encourage obscure heroes, who are characterized primarily by their wisdom and moral courage.

by CARL M. MOORE

"The chief business of the nation, as a nation," said H.L. Mencken," is the setting up of heroes, mainly bogus." Emerson said that "every hero becomes a bore at last" and "the hero is suffered to be himself." We may joke about heroes and even intellectually dismiss their role, but Americans want heroes—larger than life heroes.

What is a hero? The word was first used in the *Iliad*, where *heros* was "a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise and about whom a story could be told."[1] It had "a connotation of distinction, but of no other than every free man was capable."[2] The ideal Homeric hero was personified by Odysseus, who combined heroism, proficiency in war, and wisdom (which included eloquence). Virgil's *Aeneid* modified the ideal hero, replacing wisdom with moral virtue.

Ernst Robert Curtius's analysis of the heroes in the *Iliad*, *Aeneid* and other epics concludes that the hero's basic virtue is:

> . . .natural ability in body and soul. The hero is distinguished by a superabundance of intellectual will and by its concentration against the instincts. It is this which constitutes his greatness of character. The specific virtue of the hero is self-control. But the hero's will does not rest here, it presses on into power, responsibility, and daring.[3]

That a hero is likely to utilize his intellectual will in a daring way that contradicts his instincts is derided by William Pfaff, who claims that "the most important, and morally the most significant outcome of the first World War was that a certain kind of life was rendered impossible. The war put an end to a perception of individual heroism as a social ideal, as an exemplary proposal of the way a man ought to conduct himself." Unlike Theodore Roosevelt, Winston

Churchill, and T.E. Lawrence, men could no longer plan to become a hero, to take that "complicated moral stance, in which some combination of moral courage, staunchness, idealism, fraternity, lover of fellows, recklessness, nihilism, morbidity, a suicidal will, simple stupidity, and insensibility before danger triumphs over the powerful natural impulses of fear and the urge to survive."[4]

If the end of the first World War demarcated the era when people could construct themselves as heroes,[5] the end of the second World War left us, in the judgement of some, without any more world renowned heroes.[6] Upon hearing of Stalin's death in 1953, Charles De Gaulle remarked that the age of giants had come to an end. At the same time, Nikita Khrushchev said that the modern world no longer had any use for the cult of the individual. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. lamented in 1958 that his was "an age without heroes": "towering personalities,. . . great men," people who because they "had not died at birth made a difference which one can imagine no one else playing in their stead," "mighty figures . . . who seized history with both hands and gave it an imprint, even a direction, which it otherwise might not have had."[7]

Whether or not our age currently has its share of heroes—daring, morally courageous people who have the personal self-control to disregard natural impulses and strive to realize a grand dream (usually for the benefit of society,[8] but not necessarily recognized as such by the members of society[9]) and who, as a result, are unique in the way they make a difference—we continue to believe in them. Shaw, in "Man and Superman," reminds us that "the savage bows down to idols of wood and stone, the civilized man to idols of flesh and blood."

My interest in the nature of a hero stems from my belief that people in society are oriented toward each other. I believe that "American citizenship [is]. . .anchored in the ethos and institutions of the face-to-face community of the town,"[10] and that our desire to improve community is a fundamental yearning. Joseph Campbell expressed it in the following way: "supporting. . .[the phenomenal] world is an unseen but experienced unity and identity in us all. [T]he first level of unity that is recognized is that of the family. And the second level of unity, which is deeper, is of the tribe or the social unit."[11]

What kind of leadership is needed to help communities—particularly communities that are hurting and need to change? Would belief in or nurturing of heroic leadership help to achieve positive community change? Should I suspend my disbelief and give credulity to "the Hero. . .[as] the one who has gone on the adventure and brought back the message, . . .who is the founder of institutions—and the giver of life and vitality to his community[?]"[12]

My initial encounter with this question was when I was asked to study whether the creation of a community-wide goal-setting process would be a beneficial way to move Cleveland, Ohio in a positive direction. After examining the reasons

why it might be desirable to have such a process and what were some of the options, we concluded that:

> While most people felt that current processes and structures were not getting the job done for Cleveland, that there was a real need for better ways to make things happen—and the damage done by continuing absence of 'better ways' was profound, many of the same people agreed that *the climate was not right for a new process*.
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> The two principal reasons were what we came to believe were the two most significant potential constraints.
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> (1) There was no significant perceived crisis. The community would be willing to invest its energy in something global and new if there was a real crisis: In the absence of a crisis, major new process initiatives would be viewed with cynicism and distrust—or just weariness. In the absence of a crisis, the status quo serves many individuals' self interest.
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> (2) Large scale change requires the right leadership. The Greater Cleveland community did not appear to have any single person or organization with the authority to lead, interest in the development of a public agenda, and sufficient trust so that potential participants would suspend disbelief long enough that something could be done.[13]

One thing we did learn in the Cleveland project was that "uncommon leadership is just that." Cleveland perked up and public and private leadership provided part of the explanation why. But left unclear in my mind is, what is the role of uncommon—heroic—leadership? Is it reasonable to ask the question Bill Moyers asked of Joseph Campbell, "How is a hero different from a leader?"[14]

Whether or not our age currently has its share of heroes—daring, morally courageous people who have the personal self-control to disregard natural impulses and strive to realize a grand dream and who, as a result, are unique in the way they make a difference—we continue to believe in them.

Thomas Carlyle has been credited with summarizing and popularizing "the notion of history as the biography of great men," wherein "the hero functioned not merely as a myth or cult, but as a principle of historical explanation."[15] Max Weber also used the hero to explain change in history.[16]

It is Weber's term, charismatic authority, that motivated James MacGregor Burns to offer a refined definition of the hero as a leader. The concept of charisma, according to Burns, "fertilized the study of leadership" but, due to its

ambiguity, resulted in a number of different meanings. Not being able to restore charisma so that it could serve "analytic duty," Burns instead used "Heroic leadership," which is:

> . . .belief in leaders because of their personage alone, aside from their tested capacities, experience, or stand on issues; faith in the leader's capacity to overcome obstacles and crises; readiness to grant to leaders the power to handle crises; mass support for such leaders expressed directly—through votes, applause, letters, shaking hands—rather than through intermediaries or institutions. Heroic leadership is not simply a quality or entity possessed by someone; it is a type of relations ship between leader and led.[17]

Burns's definition is a reasonable evolution of the concept of hero and how it has come to be applied to leadership. Is it useful—not the definition, but the kind of person it describes? If "heroic, transcending, transforming leadership excites the previously bored and apathetic. . .recreates a political connection with the alienated. . .reaches even to the wants and needs of the anomic and shapes their motivation,"[18] can it be used in ways that assist community? While heroic leaders are more likely to "arise in societies undergoing profound crisis"[19] and, therefore, play "a vital role in transitional or developing societies,"[20] they are not likely, for a variety of reasons, to be a desirable construct for American democratic communities.

Heroic Leadership is Antithetical to American-Style Democracy

Americans are hypocritical about strong leadership. We say, and sometimes act as if, we want strong leadership, but then we do whatever is necessary to assure that such leaders will not be able to act in an unconstrained way. The best example is the American presidency, because if we give a president an electoral mandate to act, we are almost always certain to hold him in check by electing a Congress of the opposing party.

Heroic Leadership is Unrealistic in a Nuclear Age

While "war offers heroism on the cheap, making potential heroes of us all,"[21] that is no longer feasible.

> The advent of nuclear weapons has put a term to the semi- and anti-rational style [of political leadership]. Mankind, if it is to survive, must choose its leaders by the test of their intellectuality; and, contrarily, leadership must justify itself by its detachment, moderation, and power of analysis. Mankind needs not new hardware but a change of heart. It needs an end to the ethic of heroism in its leadership for the good of all.[22]

Sidney Hook has made essentially the same argument:

> A new political epoch entered the world with the development of nuclear weapons. The peace which results from a balance of terror is an unstable

> one. It is made more so by the proliferation of nuclear arsenals in an increasing number of nations. In a world of fanatical ideologies, of madmen in or out of uniform, a world in which the politics of absurdity have replaced the politics of sagacity, the decision that our leaders may have to make within hours, or even less, may make all the difference to that world—to its habitability and to the place of freedom in it if it remains habitable.[23]

But even if the facts of history were not so clear—that heroism is antithetical to democracy and impractical in a nuclear age, we still are not well served by a vision of *heroic leadership* that *encourages us to wait for salvation.* When Bill Moyers was questioning Joseph Campbell about "The Hero's Adventure," he asked: "In the political sense, is there a danger that these myths of heroes teach us to look at the deeds of others as if we were in an amphitheater or coliseum or a movie, watching others perform great deeds while consoling ourselves to impotence?" And, because he did not get a response from Campbell, he answered his own rhetorical question: "Still, it's feasible to me that these stories of heroes could become sort of a tranquilizer, invoking in us the benign passivity of watching instead of acting."[24]

Eric Hoffer taught us that the true believers[25] "surrendered to leaders because leaders could take them away from their unwanted selves. People lost themselves in mass movements to escape individual responsibility—to be free of freedom."[26] James MacGregor Burns characterizes the phenomenon in the following way:

> While emotional needs in hero and spectator may be deeply involved, no central purpose, no collective intent other than short-run psychic dependency and gratification unites performer and spectator. And if there is no transcending purpose, there is no real change that can be related to or measured by original purpose
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> Idolized heroes are not, then, authentic leaders because no true relationship exists between them and the spectators—no relationship characterized by deeply held motives, shared goals, rational conflict, *and* lasting influence in the form of change.[27]

Thus, I hold that belief in heroic leadership is not helpful in the task of creating and recreating community. This past summer I worked with a team of people at the Western Governors' Association in trying to describe the unique character of the West, so that the organization could identify suitable themes for the incoming "lead" Governor. It became abundantly clear that one of the great obstacles to development in the West is that it still believes (in fact, cherishes!) mythic images of people laboring *individually* to save communities. The cowboy hero lives on.

The West and all of us would be better served by what Victor Hugo suggested in *Les Miserables*: "Life, misfortunes, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are battlefields which have their heroes; obscure heroes, sometimes greater than illustrious heroes." According to Maeterlinck, it is the deeds of heroism, performed "in obscurity and silence," that we should commend.[28]

What does it mean to say that we would be better off by an emulation of "obscure heroes," that we should commend the *deeds* of heroism performed in obscurity? "What [should] we . . . understand," asked Sidney Hook, "by the concept of 'the hero and the heroic' in a democratic society?"[29] What follows is a preliminary attempt to define the nature of such a person.

Conclusion: Defining the "Obscure Hero"

First of all, I believe that anyone can be an obscure hero. Not everyone is likely to be one—only a select group will achieve such a distinction—but it is important to understand that it does not require God-given gifts that are parceled out to a select few. There is no formula; the designation is open to either gender, any age, any race.

The primary qualities for such a personage are similar to what historically we have required of heroes: wisdom and moral courage. Sidney Hook said that "the heroes in a democracy are not likely to be event-making men and women unless they subvert the democratic process. The ideal democratic leader. . .is characterized by two traits: intellectual honesty and moral courage."[30] James MacGregor Burns observed that "it is this combination of moral and intellectual commitment that I find so lacking in our current politics."[31]

What is meant by wisdom? Intellectual honesty? Intellectual commitment? During the course of a year I work with approximately twenty different groups of adults whom someone has designated to be leaders in their communities. My experience, in organizations called community leadership programs,[32] reveals that when given a choice, they believe that practical judgment (often expressed as the judgment a leader makes in hiring staff) is a more important characteristic for a leader than is intelligence. They also seem to prefer a style of leader who works with followers and who empowers followers to find their own paths. Wisdom, today, refers to a participative style of leadership; and, consequently, there must be a relationship between the leader and the led that only can be forged in shared conflict.

Moral courage means a variety of things, such as readiness to take personal risks for what one believes is right. Other common expressions are "fortitude in adversity," "perseverance," "ethical,"[33] "refuses to compromise principles," "independent." It is not sufficient that someone is principled. One must be prepared to act on principles. In light of the "politics of interest"[34] that

characterizes most communities, "moral courage" often means that someone is prepared to act on behalf of the good of the community; such people have a vision of what is needed for the community that is greater than what serves them or their organizations.

Most obscure heroes are likely to have their egos in check, which does not mean that they do not have ambition. Rather, they are not *transparently ambitious* and they do not have ambition only for themselves. In contrast with the traditional view of a hero or of heroic leadership, the locus of interest of the obscure hero is on the community, rather than the self. Jacques Barzun confirms that our images of heroes have changed, no longer do we find heroic "the former patterns of glory—the soldier, the statesman, the divine." The new heroes "seem the. . .selfless and beneficent members of society. . . .[35]

One surprise for me in preparing this paper is that the primary characteristics of an obscure hero—wisdom and moral courage, particularly as it refers to commitment to a higher cause—are also essential for the traditional heroic leader. Hopefully, the obscure heroes are more numerous. If this is so, they surely they function on a smaller scale. The change they seek is at the group, organizational or community level rather than for society at large,[36] and obviously they do not require or even encourage idolatry. Or they wouldn't be obscure for very long.

Notes

[1]Another interpretation of the Greek meaning of "hero" is that it was someone for whom a cult was formed.

[2]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 185.

[3]*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 167.

[4]"A Critic at Large: The Fallen Hero," *The New Yorker*, May 8, 1989, p. 106.

[5]A historical paradox is that if Pfaff is right, that people could no longer plan to be heroes following the first World War, the times nevertheless gave rise to heroes: "[T]he post-first World War years [was a time] when a new kind of charismatic leadership would emerge, in nation after nation, filling the void left by collapsing monarchies, feudalisms, and patriarchies, with they mystic unity of the Leader of the Masses." (Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* [New York: W.W. Norton

and Co., 1969], p. 417.)

[6]As the concept of a hero is inextricably wed to the warrior and warfare, it is not unreasonable to seek in "the wars to end all wars" watersheds in the evolution of the concept.

[7]"The Decline of Greatness," *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 1, 1958, p. 25.

[8]A recent issue of *Outside* magazine reminds us that we expect a hero to be a savior. The story, "Mr. Mrazek Goes to Alaska," is about a New York Congressman who is called a "hero" because he led "...the fight to end destructive logging practices in the Tongass [National Forest]." (November 1989, p. 17.)

[9]American mythic heroes, in particular, are individuals like the cowboy or the hard-boiled detective, "...who again and again saves a society he can never completely fit into." (Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], p. 145) "The price that the hero must pay is ultimate neglect..." (Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* [Oxford: Oxford University Press], p. 145)

[10]Bellah, p. 39.

[11]Joseph Campbell (in conversation with Michael Toms), *An Open Life* (Burdett, N.Y.: Larson Publications, 1988), p. 52.

[12]Campbell, p. 23.

[13]Carl M. Moore and Anne F. Coughlin, "Community Goals, Cleveland and...How Things Are Made to Happen," *Advancing Cleveland* (Cleveland: Cleveland State University, 1986), p. 209.

[14]Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers), *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 126.

[15]Sidney Hook, *Philosophy and Public Policy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), pp. 153-54.

[16]Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1962), pp. 298 ff.

[17]*Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 244.

[18]Burns, p. 137.

[19]Burns, p. 244.

[20]Burns, p. 246.

[21]Pfaff, p. 107.

[22]John Keegan, *The Masks of Command* (New York: Viking, 1988).

[23]Hook, p. 162.

[24]Campbell (with Bill Moyers), p. 131.

[25]*The True Believer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

[26]The idea is quoted in Burns, p. 248.

[27]Burns, p. 248.

[28]Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wisdom and Destiny* (1898), p. 10.

[29]Hook, p. 156.

[30]Hook, p. 161.

[31]*The Crosswinds of Freedom: The American Experiment*. Volume Three (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). Burns illustrated his point with the following examples. "All political leaders in democracies are brokers, finaglers, manipulators; the question is whether they rise above this when fundamental issues reach crucial turning points. FDR transcended his foxlike maneuvering when he moved to the left in 1935 and 1936, when he tried to deal with a deadlocked political system during his second term, as he came to confront the menace of nazism, when he sought to leave a legacy of world peace and security in postwar plans for the United Nations and in settlements with the Russians. John Kennedy made the kind of commitment of heart—as well as head—that the presidency called for in his third and last year in office, setting a standard for his successors. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, struck one as merely opportunistic to the last, operational, pragmatic in the worst sense—he earned the appelation 'Tricky Dick.' Conservative Republicans had to wait for Reagan to make a firm, strategic commitment to rightist doctrine—a commitment hopelessly snarled in Reagan's White House."

[32]Carl M. Moore, *A Colorful Quilt: The Community Leadership Story* (Indianapolis: National Association of Community Leadership Organizations, 1988).

[33]Fred Friendly, in an interview for National Public Radio preceding a Public Television

Series on Ethics, defined ethics as "the distinction between what you have a right to do and what is the right thing to do."

[34]Bellah, pp. 200-203.

[35]Barzun emphasizes that to be a hero in the modern era one requires freedom. He explains that the artist and the scientist are the new heroes because they "...exemplify the scorn for money as well as the life that ordinary work precludes: no thought of gain, no routine, no orders from above or below, no bourgeois conventions—continual creativity and eternal fame." ("The Paradoxes of Creativity, "*The American Scholar* [Summer 1989], p. 343)

[36]The easiest way to account for the distinction in this paper could be to argue that heroic, charismatic leadership necessarily functions at the societal/national level—especially during times of terror, while obscure heroes are more likely to be found at a community level. While there is some truth to such an observation, I would posit that we are never well served by inauthentic leadership (where a true relationship does not exist between the leader and led) at any level and that we should nurture the development of obscure heroes that have the courage to act for the betterment of community—rather than special—interests.

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