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Where *have* ALL *the* HEROES Gone?

In an age of disenchantment, old-fashioned heroism seems to be on the ropes; at the same time, unsung heroes are everywhere. Maybe it's time to switch from public to private heroism. Beginning in the home...

Peter H. Gibbon is a research fellow at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education who travels around the United States talking about the current lack of respect for heroism in his country. He points out that New York City's Hall of Fame for Great Americans attracts only a fraction of the number of visitors who flock annually to Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He says that in an age of instant

but often ill-prepared communication, people are being given the impression that "sleaze is everywhere, that nothing is sacred, that no one is noble, and that there are no heroes." He reaches back to the ancient Roman poet Horace for words to describe this state of affairs: "Nil Admirari" – nothing to admire.

Though Gibbon focusses on the situation in the U.S., what happens there in this regard is all too likely to happen elsewhere. Americans are the leading trend-setters in the global society. They produce the movies, television shows, videos, CDs and web sites that are seen and heard more than any others by the international public. The publicity mills of Hollywood and New York turn out the stars who set examples for good or ill among impressionable young people around the world.

So if America really is giving up on heroism, other societies can be expected to act accordingly. The fading of public heroism in the U.S. is especially disturbing in the light of its national mythology. As the world's most heroically-minded nationality,

Americans have reserved a central place for noble conduct in their collective self-image. They have concentrated on individual greatness to define their greatness as a nation.

With this record in mind, it is to be hoped for all our sakes that Dr. Gibbon is being a bit alarmist. For the end of the heroic tradition would mean the end of a lot of other good things, too. If there is no admiration of greatness, no representative figures that ordinary people would want to emulate, we could be taking a U-turn on the road to civilization. True heroes and heroines (the qualification "true" is necessary because there have been a lot of phoney ones) have always shown the way to the betterment of the human condition. Heroism and progress (again, true progress of the moral and not the illusive material kind) go hand in hand.

A loss of interest in heroes and heroines would be something new under the sun, for history shows that human beings have always felt a need for paragons to look up to. Why? Because they show the rest of us that members of our species can be better than we ever thought they could be. Heroism symbolizes the soaring potential of humankind.

Dr. Gibbon suggests that the scepticism that has led to the decline of admiration in the United States is connected to religious scepticism. With the spread of secularism, people have come to feel that they are sufficient unto themselves and have no need of a higher power. A loss of religious faith implies a loss of faith in anyone greater than oneself, including heroes and heroines.

Along with secularism has come modernism, a cultural movement that thumbs its nose at structure, form, and convention. To modernists, one work of art or artist is as good as the next. Through *reductio ad absurdum*, that would put a gangsta rap "song" on a par with a Beethoven sonata. In the modernist mind-set, the old standards of what is good and bad do not apply.

Diluted by excess

Those "old" standards, which obtained for thousands of years, were predicated on excellence. They gave the rank and file of humanity something to aim for by identifying what was best. The "old" values system held out reasonable rewards for successful efforts to be among the best in one's calling. Entertainment was a metaphor for the way things worked in every aspect of society. Performers were admired not only for their talent, but for the work they put into developing that talent to a state of excellence.

In the new wired popular culture, excellence has been more or less abandoned. It's a simple matter of supply and demand. The more the demand for entertainment is pumped up for commercial purposes, the lower the standards. Television's hundred-plus-channel universe cannot sustain a continual flow of excellent material. In fact it does not produce much that is even very good.

A byproduct of this form of mass production is instant and apparently effortless stardom, and the wealth that goes along with it. A performer no longer needs to be first-class to win a following among a public whose tastes have been diluted by excess.

By capitalizing on the commercial possibilities of the cheap thrill, popular culture pays more attention to glitz than merit and to trash than things of value. That might be all right but for the fact that merit and value have been thoroughly confused with glitz and trash. The net effect is that persons who are "famous for being famous" are held in the same respect as genuine heroes and heroines.

Dining on subjects

Much of the blame for this rests with the news and public affairs media, which have become more and more like the entertainment media in their race for ratings and circulation. Because scandal sells big-time, the media now hasten to tell us the worst about everybody and everything.

They certainly show us the worst about the human race as a whole, concentrating on crime, conflict, and perfidy. By doing so, they make the world out to be a more cynical and ignoble place than it actually is.

As Dr. Gibbon is quick to note, today's journalists are not responsible for the situations they cover: "They did not invent celebrity worship and gossip. Nor did they create leaders who misbehave and let us down."

At the same time, they "are not innocent, and they know it... Roger Rosenblatt, a veteran of the Washington Post, Time, Life and New York Times Magazine, says,

"Without emulation we sink into meaninglessness, or mediocrity, for nothing great or excellent can be done without it."

Francis Beaumont

'My trade of journalism is sodden these days with practitioners who seem incapable of admiring others or anything.' In his memoir, former presidential press secretary and ABC senior news editor Pierre Salinger writes, 'No reporter can be famous unless they have [sic] brought someone down.' And New Yorker writer Adam Gopnik comments, 'The reporter used to gain status by dining with his subjects; now he gains status by dining on them.'

Turning up dirt

The malaise surrounding heroism might be attributed to the media's obsession with the up-to-date, as if nothing that has happened in the past is of any importance. But that does not account for the fact that the heroes of former times are also being "brought down." "Thomas Jefferson is now thought of as the president with the slave mistress and Mozart as the careless genius who liked to talk dirty," as Dr. Gibbon observes. Under the spell of *nil admirari*, revisionist historians twist the facts to suit their political or cultural points of view, and biographers sometimes treat their subjects as blood enemies. The latter are well aware that biographies that turn up dirt about a prominent person, however irrelevant that dirt might be, sell better than those that stick to the point of why that person was worth writing about in the first place.

All of the above applies to Canada as well as the United States. With the majority of its population sitting across the border within close range of the American media, Canada is in bed with an elephant not only economi-



Sir Alexander Mackenzie

cally, but attitudinally. Canadian youths wear the same styles of clothes and listen to the same kind of music as their U.S. counterparts. There is little to choose between American and Canadian young professionals in their range of enthusiasms and tastes.

It follows that if respect for heroism is waning in the U.S., the same thing will occur in Canada, only more so. Canadians have more to lose out of their culture from this trend, since heroes and heroines are scarcer in relation to their population. Canadians have never glorified heroism to the extent that the Americans do.

A Canadian tradition?

It has long been lamented that Canadians grow up knowing more about famous Americans than about the famous people – or people deserving of fame – who have occupied their own territory. A generation of Canadian youngsters could identify Davey Crockett as “king of the wild frontier” without having a clue about explorers like the LeMoynes brothers, Samuel Hearne and Sir Alexander Mackenzie who performed similar exploits on the Canadian frontier.

As if the lack of recognition of Canadian heroes were not enough, Canadians tend to knock the heroes they do recognize. People who know of Sir John A. Macdonald at all are likely to make jokes about his heavy drinking, and never mind his incredible accomplishment in setting Canada on the road to nationhood. Knocking heroes, it seems, is almost a Canadian tradition. Years ago every Anglo Canadian knew about the World War I flying ace Billy Bishop. A revisionist National Film Board docu-drama a few years ago depicted Bishop as a fraud who faked his victories.

Sir Arthur Currie was another revered figure in World War I as commander of the Canadian Corps, hailed as the finest military formation among the Allies. In the 1920s Currie was accused of wasting the lives of his soldiers for his own glory. He fought and won a libel suit against the newspaper that had printed the charges. Not long ago, a spokesperson for Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal listed all the famous people who were buried there. She named several hockey players, and Sir Arthur Currie – last.

While that may seem a sorry commentary on the priorities of Canadians, the fact is that they have always been more likely to find heroes among hockey players than of any other people. And there is nothing really wrong with their preference: hockey at its best is a game that brings out qualities that people are bound to admire – dash and quick thinking, physical courage, stamina, a certain artistry, and that ineffable characteristic called “class.”

Death of the local hero

There was a time when every Canadian boy could rhyme off names like Syl Apps, Gordie Howe, Maurice Richard and Jean Béliveau. The most admirable thing about such men was their character. Of the last-named hero, Guy Lafleur said in his younger days: “I may not be the hockey player Jean Béliveau was, but some day I hope to be the man he is.” Brilliant as they were by themselves, the old-time hockey idols were team players. The team played in the spirit of one for all and all for one; if one of them stood above the rest, so much the better for them all.

Lately, with the frenetic sports media as a cheering section, we have entered into the era of the individualistic superstar. Teams built around a single player are vulnerable. If the great man refuses to play when he does not get the money he demands, he sentences his teammates and fans to a losing season. An already high-priced player recently did just that.

Hockey is only one of the sports that has deteriorated into a game of spending money. In the money-spending game, players go to the highest bidder, and show no attachment to a particular team or city. The identification with their fans which once made them local heroes has faded out of sight.

From Joe Louis to Mike Tyson

Meanwhile, the notion that “it matters not whether you win or lose but how you play the game” has apparently been tossed out the window. “Show me a gracious loser and I’ll show you a perennial loser,” O.J. Simpson once said.

Winning is everything because winning means more and more money for the players and owners. “I measure respect by the figures on my contract,” one baseball star declared in a fair reflection of the prevailing mentality in pro sports.

Athletes are heroes and heroines among the young, who regard them as the kind of men and women they would want to be when they grow up. A child who emulated some of the pro players these

“The grandest of heroic deeds are those which are performed within four walls of domestic privacy.”

Jean Paul Richter



days might go on to be guilty of all the seven deadly sins. (For the record, these are pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.)

From the days of Joe Louis to the days of Mike Tyson, the emphasis in sports heroism has shifted from character to performance. In a perversion of the old saying quoted above, it matters not what kind of human being an athlete is; it matters how well he or she plays the game, meaning how many ticket-buyers he or she can draw.

Fighting anonymous battles

Not that the great athletes of the past could not perform as well as those today, given the training and equipment available to them. But it was character above all that made men like Joe Louis beloved among their own people and people around the world.

Sport is a peaceful – well, comparatively peaceful – substitute for war, the anvil upon which heroism has been hammered out over the centuries. Canada has had its share of heroes from two world wars and the Korean war in which Canadians fought against aggression; they are ill-remembered today.

While turning their backs on the traditional type of hero – the good guy type – the youth of the sixties and seventies gravitated towards the bad boys. For the most part, rock stars do not make healthy role models. Partly out of the joy of shocking their parents, young people placed them on a pedestal nonetheless.

The icons of pop culture have a heavy influence on fashions and behaviour among the general populace due to the well-established fact that humans are an imitative species. If people do not imitate good examples, they will imitate bad ones. The problem is not that there is nothing to admire, but that people are liable to admire the wrong persons and things. In his 1998 novel *A Man in Full*, that marvellous social observer Tom Wolfe points out that the fashion for baggy pants among boys originated in prison. "In jail they don't provide belts," one character explains, "and so if your pants are too big you just let them ride low." When jailbirds become role models for youth, it is indeed time to start worrying about what the world is coming to.

The attraction of "grunge" to teenagers raises the ques-

tion of whether they were exposed to better role models, they would emulate them anyway. Maybe not; but the fact remains that there is no shortage of authentic heroes and heroines around. They are simply not as well-recognized as they rightly ought to be.

The heroic figures of the new age have better things to do than appear on *Entertainment Tonight*, and they are unlikely to be written up in *People*. Nor, like the old-style war heroes, are they likely to be found fighting battles against a national enemy.

Rather their battles are against man's inhumanity to man, against injustice, disease and hunger – and for the most part they are waged anonymously. The new-style heroes and heroines will be found in non-governmental agencies in the trouble-spots of the world, in run-down neighbourhoods giving aid to the helpless and homeless, in schoolrooms and community centres doing their best to steer underprivileged youngsters in a constructive direction. They will be found – as true heroes and heroines have ever been found – leading lives of self-sacrifice.

Turning off the trash

The abandonment of the traditional concept of heroism is not altogether a bad thing. There has always been an element of exaggeration in the making of idols for public worship.

Instead of looking at the statues of the kings and queens, the generals, presidents and prime ministers of the past, we should be looking at those unknown soldiers whose effigies adorn our cenotaphs. The generals memorialized in statuary merely lived to take the credit for what the troops under them suffered to win their victories. Like those nameless campaigners for freedom, most of the heroes and heroines throughout history have been of the unsung kind.

The media may continue to produce shabby role models, but there is no reason for independent-minded people to go along with them. In a free society, the way to get rid of trash is simply not to subscribe to it, so that it is no longer so profitable to its purveyors.

If the age of the public hero has come to an end, then we must look for the kind of heroism that is won with a minimum of publicity. And if parents find that their children have no wholesome role models, then they must strive to become those role models themselves.

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"Every man is a hero and an oracle to somebody, and to that person, whatever he says has enchanted value."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

