

In Search of Heroes

BY PETER H. GIBBON

To teach about exemplary lives has been a goal of American and European education for hundreds of years. Schools automatically offered young people heroes and role models. How else to combat the ambiguities and temptations of adult life? Where else to find the good to be imitated and the evil to be avoided? And so young people read Plutarch's "Lives," were saturated in the pious maxims of McGuffey's "Readers" and inculcated with the triumphs of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.

Did this force-feeding of idealism in youth make our grandparents and great-grandparents better people? I couldn't say whether this is the case. I can say only that the tradition of education by exemplary lives has ended.

The end may have come during the '60s, with the counterculture, the youth rebellion and the questioning of authority. Certainly Vietnam, the assassinations and Watergate gave many an excuse for cynicism.

It may be partly the new trend in biographies, which looks into all corners of a subject's life and pitilessly probes for ordinariness and weakness. The private lives of our leaders are fair game, and we expect (some even hope) to find dirt. Thus we learn that John F. Kennedy was sexually compulsive, that Lyndon Johnson was more often than not devious and that Sir Thomas More, one of my heroes, was vindictive, disputatious and vain.

It may be a new approach to history, which stresses that violence and exploitation were endemic in our past. The discovery of America and the settlement of our West, for example, do not represent the opening of opportunity or the creation of wealth but genocide, environmental rape and the injection of lawlessness, greed and materialism into Eden. Columbus becomes a killer instead of a discoverer.

If new trends in biography and history make it difficult to have heroes, what about our popular culture and the media? My students are inundated with images and bombarded with information. Has this increase in information given them heroes?

My generation was raised on "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." My students watch "Married with Children." We admired Rock Hudson and even thought that was his name; my students know he died of AIDS. We loved "Shane" and "Gunsmoke"; they watch "Blazing Saddles" and "Saturday Night Live." We subscribed to Boys' Life. Even junior-high-school students relish National Lampoon and "Doodles." We listened to preachers like Billy Graham. They were amused by Tammy and Jimmy. I liked Elvis Presley. They like him, too, but they know he died bloated and drug-infected.

Because we read Boys' Life, were we Boy Scouts? Hardly. But I do think we were more trusting, naive, sentimental and less cynical. We had greater faith in the adult world (perhaps knowing less about it) and were more deferential to authority. We had some heroes.

While irreverence among the young is inevitable and, in some ways, desirable, I would argue that today irreverence, skepticism and mockery permeate our scholarship and culture to such a degree that the tradition of exemplary lives is destroyed and that it is difficult for the young to have heroes. In schools we offer students lives that are seriously flawed, juvenile novels that emphasize "reality" and a history that is uncertain and blemished. At home they roam among dozens of channels and videos that do not intend to uplift and offer no role models.

Disappearing heroes: Sir Richard Livingstone, a 20th-century educator, tells us, "True education is the habitual vision of greatness." I am afraid that we have lost the vision of greatness in our schools and culture. We have traded exemplary lives and heroes for information, irony and reality. I am terrified that our children are not being raised by exemplary lives and confident schools; nor by high culture, vigilant communities, families, churches and temples, but rather by an all-enveloping enemy culture interested in amusement, titillation and consumerism.

I have no easy answers for disappearing heroes and increasing irreverence, only a few modest suggestions. Portray old heroes as human beings, but let them remain heroic. Yes, Lincoln liked bawdy stories, was politically calculating and suffered from depression. But he also exhibited astonishing political and moral courage and always appealed to "the better angels of our nature."

For a shabby age, find new heroes and heroines. I recently discovered the letters and diaries of the German sculptor Käthe Kollwitz, who died in 1945. She endures personal despair, a world war and fascism; still she paints and draws, has compassion and thinks lofty thoughts.

In schools, give moral and ethical education the same importance as the presentation of reality. Teachers need to be more cautious and selective about introducing messiness and complexity to our children. Presenting "reality" is a rather empty educational goal if our reading lists and assignments produce disillusioned, dispirited students.

Intellectuals and columnists could be less mocking and disdainful of those in authority. Too often they look for weakness, find fault and are confident of easy answers for complex problems; and American young people conclude that there is only corruption and shallowness in high places and no heroes.

Hollywood and popular culture must be fought. The movies, the media and the popular-music industry offer their own heroes—most of whom are disdainful of normal life, hard work and fidelity. Instead, they glorify violence, excitement and aberration. The cumulative effect of such indoctrination is incalculable but frightening.

Of course, parents need not be victims of Hollywood, of pundits, of negligent schools or a cynical age. They are the first and most important educators. If they try to make their lives exemplary, so will their children.



Ethical education should be given the same importance as 'reality'

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