

# Sounding a warning about an endangered species: Heroes

He wanted to make this graduation speech special. For one thing, his son was a senior. But he was also worried about the kids, these privileged upper-middle-class students at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, N.Y.

In talking to them over the years, as teacher and headmaster, he'd noticed something disturbing: They knew celebrities galore and admired plenty of TV, movie and sports stars, but they didn't have any heroes.

So he decided he would speak to them about heroes, and offer examples — three female heroes.

And so, on that June afternoon in 1992, Peter Gibbon told the story of Eva Jane Price, a Christian missionary in China who helped opium addicts, the maimed and starving, and who was murdered in the Boxer Rebellion.

And of Kaethe Kollwitz, a German sculptress who battled social injustice and her own grief and despair by creating magnificent art.

And of Eugenia Ginzburg, who survived Stalin's prison camps through courage, curiosity and poetry (in a stifling boxcar bound for Siberia, she struck a deal with the

guards: Give us water; I'll recite Pushkin).

"True education is the habitual vision of greatness," Gibbon told his audience that afternoon, quoting the British educator Sir Richard Livingstone. He urged the students to look for heroes beyond the athletic field, the movie screen and the recording studio, and to be guided in their choices by "some sort of moral grandeur or loftiness."

Did his words transform many lives? Probably not. But they had a huge effect on the life of one person: Gibbon. Newsweek published his speech, and it elicited loads of mail.

Today, Gibbon, 57, is a research associate at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. And the subject he's been researching and speaking about at schools around the country is heroes.

Recently, Gibbon spent the day at the Episcopal Academy in Merion. Tennis-player trim, tweedy as Mr. Chips, he has a pensive, cerebral manner, the distracted air of an intellectual who is pondering five ideas at once. He is still a master teacher, in the tradition of Endicott Peabody, Groton's influential moral-

ist and character builder.

Growing up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, Gibbon admired baseball and tennis players but also devoured landmark biographies about Lincoln, Davy Crockett, Clara Barton, Kit Carson. It was hardly great literature but it gave him a sense of history and, more important, "an heroic outlook."

As a Harvard undergrad, he wrote a paper about Thomas Carlyle, an early advocate of cultivating and emulating heroes. In those days, Harvard men prided themselves on their appreciation of high culture, Gibbon recalled. They revered certain professors and adopted literary heroes, such as Samuel Johnson and T.S. Eliot.

Today, Harvard, and the world, has changed, particularly with respect to heroes.

"In America, we no longer have public heroes," Gibbon told the students. "Politicians speak in platitudes, and squabble. Corporate leaders downsize, then increase their own salaries. *Journalist* has become synonymous with *cynic*. Lawyers are seen as business-seekers not as problem-solvers, and doctors as wary technicians. Soldiers press buttons, athletes are mercenary" and to many youths, the President is "a joke," a Leno punchline.

Instead of public heroes, es-

teemed for their character, we have celebrities and "superstars," idolized for their wealth and fame, promoted by *People* magazine and *Entertainment Tonight* and treated like philosopher-kings.

Gibbon cited more depressing evidence:

- Fifth-graders more readily identify Freddy Krueger (from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies) than Abraham Lincoln.
- In a Gallup poll, the most admired Americans listed by teens were all TV or movie stars.
- Americans can remember who got Oscars and Grammys but are clueless about winners of the Medal of Honor.
- Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame attracts a million visitors a year; New York City's Hall of Fame for Great Americans draws 15,000.
- Graceland, the Elvis estate, is almost as popular a national shrine as the White House.

"We are entertaining ourselves to death," Gibbon said. "All of us should be embarrassed by how much we know about stars and how little we know about heroes."

In the early 19th century, E.A. alum Stephen Decatur, the bold naval warrior, was a hero. In today's world, Nelson Mandela is an authentic hero, Gibbon said. Yet in a class after Gibbon's chapel speech, one Academy lad offered his own idea of a hero: Jimi Hendrix.

Not quite. True heroes, Gibbon said, meet three criteria: They accomplish something extraordinary; they show moral valor, especially in adversity; and they are "great souls" who lift us up through their high-minded, noble example.

Heroes are an endangered species these days, partly because of affluence and comfort, partly because of "a critical, sneering spirit that looks down, not up." To the media, sleaze is everywhere, nothing is sacred. Biography has degenerated into "pathography," and every book is "an intimate life." Said Gibbon: "Sex takes everyone off the pedestal." The title of a recent book about Mother Teresa: *The Missionary Position*.

Maybe we trash heroes because they make us feel inferior, reminding us how ordinary we are, Gibbon said. But heroes also inspire us by setting the bar high, by making life richer and more challenging.

That's why Gibbon believes in the value of heroes, why he's writing a



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer  
Peter Gibbon prepares to address students at Episcopal Academy about the absence of heroes — and a sense of the heroic — in American society.

book about it, and why he was dismayed recently when he visited New Haven. There, in a courtyard at Yale, was a statue of Nathan Hale, the hero of the American Revolution who said, as he was about to

be hanged, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Eli undergrads had plastered the pedestal with invitations to a "Ho and Pimp" party.



Art Carey  
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