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## Where Have All the Heroes Gone?

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## WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?

*Jan Marker*

We live in a confusing world; a veil obscures the future. Who will come to save the day? Who will lead us into the future? Frequently, composition students are asked to write about their heroes. Some students write about sports legends, political figures, and celebrities. Mostly, students write about their own moms and dads. The generic hero essay stays on the surface, hovering around skills, talents, or a good deed. The great hero essay delves into the core of the person, and explores the very concept of heroism. Great essays are rare these days. Most students don't really have a hero, and it is evident in their writing. If you had to choose, who would you say is your hero? Do we even need heroes anymore?

I grew up during the Cold War, and heroes were everywhere. As a culture facing the threat of nuclear annihilation, we must have needed strong role models. John Wayne, Mighty Mouse, Superman, Zorro, the Lone Ranger...change the channel and there was another TV defender of justice and the American Way. Does anyone remember Crusader Rabbit? How about Rocky and Bullwinkle? Cowboys in white hats and funny cartoon heroes stood tall, dressed in black and white, and taught the '50s and '60s kids right from wrong. Right was the nuclear family, a TV in every home, a chicken in every pot, and a car in every driveway. The American Dream was reality, and we owed it all to our heroes. Our TV champions protected us by assuring us that we all held the same values. Looking back, I once thought it was easy to tell good from bad, right from wrong. Life was about choosing curtain number one, or curtain number two. Life was simple; we were all the same.

In time, I discovered there was more to life than just what was behind two plain cur-

tains. Life did not stay simple; we were not all living the American Dream. The Cold War times became a breeding ground for separation and us-versus-them attitudes. We no longer felt safe. McCarthyism turned our TV heroes into suspected commies. Boris and Natasha were lurking around every corner. Our 1950s one-dimensional image of life became more shattered with each succeeding decade. The '60s separated young from old with free sex, drugs, and rock and roll. The Vietnam War divided us further. Frustration and emptiness in the '70s fostered experimentation with more sex, more drugs, and disco. The '80s changed our perspective on sex and drugs with the explosion of AIDS. We became more selfish and materialistic both as individuals and as a country. These changes, and others, altered our cultural perspective. No longer did we all see the American Way in the same way. No longer were our heroes easily identified. Political scandals, money deals, and a huge range of new personal choices set us free from a stagnating culture, but left us without direction. Life was not black and white. The veil of hypocrisy was lifted, but left us alone.

Today, we are isolated and insulated from reality. We find people in our highest political positions who lie, cheat, and steal. Celebrities are rewarded for bigotry, alcoholism, and irresponsibility with front-page photos and free publicity. Highly regarded, highly paid professional athletes lie, cheat, and break the law. It seems invincibility has taken on a new meaning. Greed, selfishness and abuses of power are out of control. The rich and powerful frequently climb the ladder of success at someone else's expense. The honest, hardworking American is silent and unrecognized. Sure, a good deed will show up on a front-page or on CNN, but who remembers? The good news is overtaken by the mass quantities of bad news we absorb on a daily basis. Don't forget to take your vitamin with your rape, murder, disaster and mayhem. Even in the wake of 9/11, how many heroes can we name, by name, from that fateful day? Is it any wonder that students today find it hard to name their hero? Perhaps the veil of hypocrisy was not really lifted, but only replaced by a new, shinier, colorful, and more confusing veil. What do we find behind curtain number three...

But fear not, there is still some sunshine peeking through the veil. As an English teacher, I find that there are some heroes left on this planet, at least in the eyes of my students. In my class I read essays on moms and dads that are always there for their children. Moms come home from work, make the food, do the laundry, handle the obligations, and put the bandages on their child's soul. Moms are heroes because they are steadfast and dependable. Real moms don't run away from the bad stuff, they hold our hands, give us hugs, and help us through tough times. Dads are heroes because they spend time with their sons and daughters. Dads teach their kids that there are dependable, honest, hardworking people in the world. Dads take the time to fix the broken bike or car, and encourage sports or hobbies. Dads ruffle hair, put an arm around a shoulder, and keep

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throwing the ball until it actually lands in the mitt. Real dads show kids how to live rather than tell kids how to live. Sometimes students write about a brother or sister, an aunt or uncle, a close friend or a grandparent. These people are honest, personal, everyday heroes. Not larger than life. Not faster than a speeding train. Real heroes. One-on-one heroes.

When I was a kid, my Grandpa was my hero. For my birthday one year, he bought me a red cowgirl outfit, and another year, a bracelet with a heart-shaped charm. He bought them. Grandpa Oscar was a carpenter, strong, solid, and weathered. When we would go on walks together he would hold my tiny hand in his giant, calloused one; his hand felt tough like a well worn baseball glove, but warm and dry like grandma's fresh out of the oven biscuits. In 1962 he was sixty-nine to my seven, and I knew he loved me. In fact, the heart-shaped charm on my bracelet told me so. One time at a backyard family barbeque Grandpa found me as I sat off in a corner silently weeping. Everyone else was having a great time. My Grandpa sat down next to me and gently asked why I was so miserable. I looked up at him with teary, big brown eyes and sniffled, "A fly walked on my hamburger." Grandpa didn't laugh; he was quite serious as he traded burgers with me. Now that is a hero. Of all the things from my childhood, I remember that my Grandpa was the kindest person I have ever known. Shortly after he died in 1964, I was playing four-square when my heart-charm bracelet flew off my arm and got lost in an ivy patch. I thought it was the end of the world. I searched for hours until I found it again. I still have that bracelet. My Grandpa Oscar is still, and will always, be my hero.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that I know the one and only, true definition of a hero. I do know there is not a simple black and white answer like the TV heroes of the 1950s and 1960s tried to tell us. Time has an uncanny way of changing our perspective, or perhaps just clearing our vision. My hero is kind. Kindness is what I respect, and I would like to be a kind person. Who is your hero? Maybe it is time to look closer to home. Perhaps we really haven't lost our heroes at all. Perhaps we are just looking for them in the wrong places. 