

Time for Heroes

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**Speech to Texas Association of Independent Schools
Houston, TX, February 1999**

Before we talk about heroes—people who truly deserve to be recognized and celebrated—I'd like to make one thing clear: Much of life, whatever your responsibilities and job description, is more about humility than about heroism. Just ask any teacher—or, for that matter, any parent! The wisest man, as Socrates was fond of saying, is the one who knows how much he still has to learn. And I have no doubt that trying to make educational institutions run their very best—producing students who can think independently, find solid moral groundings, and trust their own hearts—is a constantly humbling task.

So is writing books, I can assure you: (Tell stories about the hometown bookseller when my first book was published; the package from boy in California; possibly also tell the story about the letter from woman with Down syndrome child.)

Now, as a father of five rambunctious kids, I am convinced that today young people need heroes—true heroes—more than ever. People whose qualities of character, and personal triumphs against the odds, give us hope and inspiration—plus the subconscious reassurance that we, too, have what it takes to reach for the stars. A true hero, in my view, is a person who has looked deep inside of himself or herself, and found whatever was needed to succeed against great odds. That—and something more. A true hero then turns that success into a positive force for improving the world in some way.

This much is certain: A hero, at least my own idea of a hero, is utterly different from being a celebrity. It's the difference between the real meal that's cooking in the oven—and the brief flash in the pan.

A celebrity is merely someone who has gotten our attention—whether for 15 seconds or 15 years. It could have been for doing something good, or something idiotic or destructive. Whatever, merely achieving celebrity status is no big deal.

It deserves a great big So What. A celebrity could also become a hero, and vice versa—but the distinction is crystal clear.

Today's young people, though, are not always aware of that distinction. They are too often numbed by television and passive media, which can deaden one of their greatest gifts: their own imagination. For imagination, really, is another form of the power of creation: The power to imagine a better life, a better world, is the first step to actually creating it. And that is a power we all can share.

In addition, today's youth are bombarded by rampant commercialism, whose main message often boils down to “you are what you wear, what you own, and what you aspire to own—not what you are down inside.” In fact, the whole notion of describing people as “consumers” is part of this perverse psychology. I don't want to be a consumer. Rather, I'd like to be a producer, a creator—someone who makes choices that can make a difference somehow. We are all individuals, with great gifts, even if we have not yet discovered them. And we are all citizens of this great republic based on ideals of freedom and dignity and mutual respect. So let us be citizens first—and consumers a distant second.

That is why, in my years running a publicly traded venture capital firm, I always tried to hire people who knew themselves from the inside out—not the outside in. People who knew their minds and their values and tried to move the world in those directions, rather than taking all of their behavioral cues from the world around them. The people who make things run—whether it's a school, a church or synagogue, or a business—are like that. And true heroes, whether or not they have found any fame, are also like that.

That is why, whatever novel I am writing, it is always built around a hero. It may be an insecure teenage girl, whose enduring love for her grandfather turns out to be more powerful than the very motions of the stars. Or it may be a nameless, half drowned boy who washes ashore on a strange coastline, completely unaware that he has within himself the gifts to become one day the legendary Merlin, greatest wizard of all time.

To illuminate the qualities of character that make a true hero, think about some character from a story you cherish who rose to find heroic qualities in themselves. Inspiring, right?

Compelling as this story is, though, it is nowhere near as inspirational as the true stories of real individuals who have done something heroic. There are far too many to name, but a few come readily to mind. I am thinking of Abraham Lincoln, whose wisdom and humor saved his nation and more; Anne Frank, a lone girl whose pen eventually proved mightier than Hitler and all his armies; Harriet Tubman, whose bravery and persistence saved so many precious lives; Winston Churchill, the epitome of courage in that darkest hour; Mahatma Gandhi, whose gentle spirit gave his people the hope they required; Helen Keller, who triumphed over impossible odds to see the world with a kind of clarity that goes well beyond eyesight; Rachel Carson, who bucked the established science of the day to alert us all to the horrors of pollution; Glenn Cunningham, who defied the doctors' predictions that he would never walk again after a fire nearly destroyed his legs, ultimately to become the fastest mile runner in the world; Mother Theresa, who was never daunted by the scale of the problems she faced, but kept on doing whatever she could do to help people; W.A. Bentley, a Vermont farmer who devoted his entire life to sharing the surprising beauty of snowflakes with the world; Nelson Mandela, who maintained his faith in people, even his oppressors, through years of prison and turmoil; and so many, many, more.

And let us not forget all the unknown, unsung heroes whose triumphs are no less remarkable: The single parent who puts all those kids through school without any help or encouragement; the athlete who volunteers to teach children or raise money for charitable causes; the research scientist who doesn't give up searching for the cure even after colleagues and funders have abandoned all hope; the person who donates a kidney to save someone else's life; the grandmother who follows her conscience and works tirelessly to help her neighborhood; the fellow who still

manages to smile in the midst of great hardship; or the child, who without being coaxed or compelled in any way, does something kind, loving, or courageous. (Tell the story about my daughter upset at midnight; and perhaps tell the story about *Where Is Grandpa?*.)

Heroism is all around us, even if it's often not rewarded and celebrated. For this can be said about true heroes: They do what they do not for glory, not for fame—but for the greater good. For their family, their community, their country, or their planet.

In one of my books, *Heartlight*, a wise old astrophysicist who has dedicated his life to studying the nature of light, is sitting in his kitchen, musing on a prism. Light from the kitchen window strikes the prism, sending a full spectrum of colors in all directions. “Life,” he says to his granddaughter, “should be like a prism: Inhaling light, exhaling rainbows.”

This idea was expressed even better by Elie Weisel, when he accepted the Nobel Prize for his efforts to promote world peace: “All we can do during our lives is to leave a trace. We can leave it on a piece of paper, or on the ground, or in the hearts and minds of others.”

And again, fame need not be part of the picture. Let me share with you a story about one person none of you have ever heard of, who is truly a hero in my own mind. A woman with a strong belief in the value of education, she joined her husband in working extremely hard to ensure that all seven of their children made it through college. She managed somehow to do all that plus start an elementary school of her own and, in addition, establish a whole natural science curriculum at her local school for deaf and blind children. And, to no one's surprise, all seven of her own children went into the field of education in some capacity: One teaches school in New Hampshire; one is a counselor for troubled kids in Oregon; one is a school superintendent in Colorado; one directs a museum; one teaches at night and manages an animal hospital during the day; one has started an orphanage and school in east Africa; and one writes books that, I hope, have at least a touch of redeeming value. For this woman, as you have probably guessed, is my own mother. Her impact on the lives of her children could not have been more profound. And the work her children are doing shows the expanding ripples that can flow from one dedicated person. One heroic person.

Given this background, you can see why my novels are centered around heroes. For all of us can rise far beyond our dreams; all of us can touch lives far

beyond our own. That is why I am spending almost a full decade writing books about one particular boy—that fellow named Merlin. When he washes ashore on that fateful day, on the first page of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, he has no idea where he is or where he came from—and certainly no notion of the glorious future that awaits him. (Read opening passage from Prologue of *The Lost Years of Merlin*.) But before he can grow into that legendary wizard, the mentor to King Arthur and the wisest man of his day, that boy must struggle mightily. He must find his own identity and overcome many obstacles, often of his own making. Only then can he discover his own inner gifts, his own hidden powers—and share them with the world.

Let us never stop believing in heroes! That, by itself, is an act of heroism, especially in this beleaguered day and age. For by believing in heroes, we are believing in ourselves. Really, we are honoring the divine within ourselves. And if, by that belief, you can touch the lives of those around you, you will have done something even more difficult and impressive than surmounting all the challenges you face every day—yes, even more difficult than managing a school. You will have inspired heroes.

And heroes, to be sure, can change the world.