

The Philosophical and Cultural Foundations of Heroism

by Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

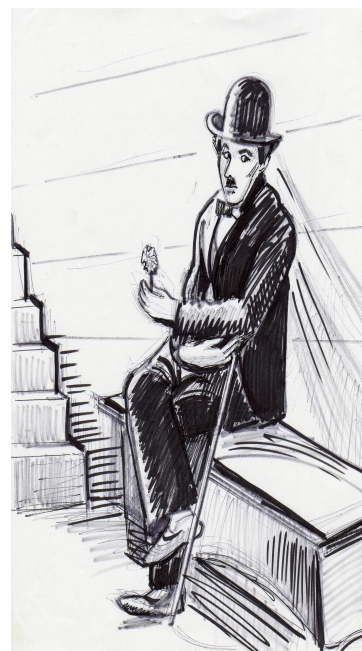
A handbook exploring heroism from a synthesis of historical, philosophical and cultural paradigms. The earliest motif of the heroic individual and heroism is examined through cultural anchors to illustrate how culture bound values define heroism as acts that achieve moral outcomes. In the end, one understands how honoring moral absolutes compels heroic behavior.

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This is mankind's age old dilemma in the face of death; what man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance. Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning. And in order for something once alive to have meaning, its effects must remain alive in eternity in some way.

--- Ernest Becker

Man cannot live without a continuous confidence in something indestructible within himself.

--- Franz Kafka

The essence of normalcy is the refusal of reality.

---Ernest Becker

Society almost everywhere provides codes for such self-aggrandizement, for the ability to boast, to humiliate, or just simply to outshine in quiet ways—like displaying one's superior achievements. If Hocart says that man cannot impart life to himself but must give it via ritual from his fellow man, then we can say even further that man cannot impart importance to himself; and importance, we now see, is just as deep a problem in securing life; importance equals durability equals life.

--- Ernest Becker

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Why Study Heroism?

In almost every civilization, ancient myths honored heroes with magical powers and mysterious qualities that distinguished them from ordinary people. These individuals may have been imbued with mystical qualities. It is that combination of virtues such as the hero's courage, actions and words that adds to their being venerated. As long as heroes are identified as extraordinary human beings, we will continue to be fascinated with why and how one becomes a heroic figure in society. One can assert that heroism is universal-- that most cultures of the world have heroes who stand above the common people and are admired. Heroes are Roman G-ds, warriors and human beings with extraordinary power to perform acts of supernatural order. Imagine American culture without its event making heroes such as Abraham Lincoln, Jonas Salk, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jackie Robinson. In America, we anoint heroes—honoring them for their bravery and uncompromising conviction to do the right thing. The undeniable connection of morality to heroism suggests that the heroic individual exercises moral clarity—knowing how and when to do the right thing.

We study heroism to deepen our understanding of why people act the way they do. Sigmund Freud, Ernest Becker, Friedrich Nietzsche and countless other great philosophers and psychologists theorized that the innate desire to transcend common day living underlies the heroic striving mechanism.

Is Heroism Universal?

If heroes are present in almost every culture of the world—the conclusion we draw is that heroism approaches absolutism as a construct. In early civilizations, the hero may have been a warrior who went to battle and returned victorious—recounting the number of enemy dead and sharing near death accounts in battle. Philosophers and psychologists suggest that human beings have an innate need to identify with heroes. The deep, powerful psychological need to identify with heroes serves us nicely—inspiring us to overcome what seem like insurmountable difficulties in life. By internalizing—taking in the admired qualities of our heroes, we transform ourselves into our heroes and imagine ourselves overcoming challenges.

The Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung studied heroism and theorized that the hero represents an archetype for human beings and that it is an element of the collective unconscious. As an archetype, the hero emerges in our dreams, myths, legends, fables and is symbolically present in all cultures. Jung concluded that the desire or striving to become a hero resides in all human beings and is expressed symbolically in dreams and our daily behavior.

Regardless of what culture in the world we examine we see heroism being lauded. Expressions of heroism are broad—ranging from having superhuman strength to superior intelligence; to heightened intuition, magnificent talent to moral acumen and clarity. Courage in the face of daunting forces reflects true heroism in the raw—fearless and uncompromising, the hero welcomes the challenge and defeats it. This hero leaves an imprint on society—one whose valiant story is documented in history books and whose legacy will retain staying power. We don't forget heroes whose life and work made a significant difference in the lives of many. The arenas of heroic significance which impacts great numbers of lives may be political, social, economic or cultural. An individual's heroic act may be single and event making or it may be a sustained, life long dedication to a cause or ideal—such as in the life and work of Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa won world wide acclaim and was elevated to heroic stature for her unswerving dedication to serving the poorest of the poor.

The Attributes of the Heroic Individual

The definition of the heroic individual varies slightly between cultures of the world. However, the consistent theme the heroic individual embodies is the unwavering, uncompromising dedication to advancing moral precepts. Heroic acts that achieve moral outcomes are usually driven by selfless, courageous behavior in the face of adversity or powerful social forces. The heroic individual, however, is brave enough to compromise his/her life to greater ends. A hero assumes a principled stand—an unwavering position reflecting his/her deeply held belief about a cause or mission in life. In some cases this unyielding passion to a cause becomes a lifelong commitment to achieving an ideal or moral absolute. The hero is thus a self-directed and self-determined individual with a principled, single-minded devotion to a cause much larger than him or herself. What constitutes morality? A moral individual strives to be kind, fair and responsible. To behave morally one must exercise good intentions to do the right thing. Intentional behavior may be driven by one being empathetic and deeply concerned about the welfare of others.

Is Heroism Culturally Defined?

Heroism seems to be culturally defined. In Judaeo-Christian western civilization we find that morality is embedded in the definition of heroism. Actually, morality may drive heroic behavior. In western civilization life is treated as sacred. The Ten Commandments are honored by Jews and Christians alike. Thus, a heroic act is defined as a behavior that achieves a moral outcome. For example, if an individual saves a human life, this is considered heroic because a human life was saved. Preserving a human life represents a moral outcome. By adding the situational/contextual component we may discover that the individual who performed the heroic act may have jeopardized his/her life during the process of saving the individual's life. In the end, morality is central to understanding the motive for heroic behavior.

Our culture defines heroism as a human being with the attributes of courage, selflessness, moral aspirations, and sometimes having extraordinary physical ability. In the end, these attributes combine to designate the heroic individual as striving to promote life values. Life values are advanced by the heroic individual. One's heroic act may reinforce that our natural rights of liberty, freedom, justice and self-governance are constantly at play. Our heroes embody these virtues and ideals that compose the fabric of our great country. The individual whose life was influenced positively by their hero may now claim he headed in the right direction—to achieving his/her personal and career aspirations.

The “Event Making “ Individual as a Hero

In his 1943 book titled *The Hero in History*, Sidney Hook distinguishes between the eventful individual and the event making individual. The eventful individual is someone who advises his/her countrymen that the enemy is approaching and to prepare for battle. In contrast, the event making individual acts heroically based on his/her superior intelligence, will or dedication to a humanitarian cause. The event making hero may be a larger than life individual whose heroic act transforms history in an unparalleled way. The heroic individual's life makes a difference in the life of others in a society. Their life and work is recognized, honored and will leave a legacy. As a result, his/her heroism leaves a legacy and transforms the course of civilization.

Ernest Becker

Ernest Becker's masterpiece *The Denial of Death* (1974) which won him a Pulitzer for non-fiction, pulled from the work of Otto Rank, Soren Kierkegaard and Norman O. Brown. In this remarkable and illuminating work, Becker takes Freud's major concepts and reformulates them in existential terms. For Freud, sex and aggression constituted our primary drives. Becker theorized that underneath our subconscious, what was being repressed was a basic anxiety related to awareness of death and mortality. Thus, man's primary motive is to control anxiety and deny the terror of death. Man is aware of his mortality—that he will die one day. This awareness is so overwhelming that man must repress it and contain it in his unconscious. Influenced by the Freudian tradition, Becker conceived of man as an organism driven to perpetuate himself and in the process becoming painfully aware of the threats to his perpetuation and mortality. For Becker, evil was identified as the greatest threat to self-preservation. In comparison to the masses, man desires to differentiate himself from others which explains why he thrives on developing his own unique talents and skills. Becker explains:

And what, then, would be the highest development and use of those talents? To contribute to the struggle against evil, of course. In other words, man is fated, as William James saw, to consider this earth as a theater for heroism, and his life as a vehicle for heroic acts which aim precisely to transcend evil. Each person wants to have his life make a difference in the life of mankind, contribute in some way toward securing and furthering that life, make it in some ways less vulnerable, more durable. To be a true hero is to triumph over disease, want, death. One knows that life has had vital human meaning if it has been able to bring real benefits to the life of mankind. And so men have always honored their heroes, especially in religion, medicine, science, diplomacy and war (*Escape From Evil*, p. 149)

Becker theorizes that the hero deliberately sets out to immunize himself from death. The hero is conscious; aware of his mortality and is driven to conquer and parade his conquests to the world. In some cultures the hero is said to be favored by God and is treated as a savior by ordinary people. The set of virtues associated with the hero then become goodness, purity, righteousness and immunity (Becker, 1975). Here Becker's analysis suggests that striving for hero significance lies at the core of the human experience—because self-perpetuation guarantees us time on earth and the pursuit of life enhancing experiences. The pragmatic look at Becker's philosophical treatment of heroism reveals that beyond man's principled need to self-perpetuation; that in the process of defeating evil forces, the hero's single minded dedication also rests on behaving in ways that reinforce that he matters to the world. In other words, man desperately needs to confirm to himself and others that he is significant and through heroic acts—he justifies and reinforces the understanding that he can preserve the life of others; sort of like reinstating life that should have been cut short. It's almost like undoing death—and what greater, more sacred maneuver is there than saving a life?

In its rawest sense Becker explains that the hero in society is a "savior" an extraordinarily supercharged human being able to rescue an entire civilization from destruction. In its most fundamental form, Becker's hero defeats evil because evil exists everywhere in the world. For Becker, the hero walks the earth searching for evil forces and destroying it. The hero fully understands what an ultimate sacrifice is and he attains added power by killing his enemies (Becker, 1975). According to Becker (1975) "As Dostoevsky saw, killing is sometimes distasteful, but the distaste is swallowed if it is necessary to true heroism: as one of the revolutionaries asked Pyotr Verhovensky in *The Possessed*, when they were about to kill one of their number, "Are other groups also doing this?" The critical questions concerning behaving heroically center around what the social/cultural norms are that guide behavior. Becker asks "What is the socially heroic thing to do?" The hero behaves heroically because he/she wants his/her life to matter—to reinforce that he/she is good and can leave an imprint of goodness on his culture. So, the acceptable cultural standards, values and norms of a given society define what constitutes heroic behavior. In Nazi Germany, it was morally acceptable for an SS officer to take orders from a superior officer and execute 100 Jews and Poles in a field. Now, the matter of evil needs reviewing. For Freud, evil originated and was driven by man's aggressive and self-destructive instincts. The problem of evil was ever present in modern man and it led Freud to profess a fatalistic look about humanity. Freud concluded that as long as instincts drive behavior evil will look us straight in the face at every turn:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. (Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 92)

The best we can do is to unwittingly assume that culture represents a meaning system best suited for human beings— it is embedded with values, morals, language, religion and belief systems to perpetuate civilization. Society and its norms and values induce conformity and enable increased collaboration and cooperative behavior among a people.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was a German philosopher born in 1844 and he died in 1900. He is considered to be one of the most provocative and influential philosophers of the 19th century. Nietzsche was born in Rocken Prussia and his father, a Lutheran Minister died when Nietzsche was five years old. Nietzsche was then raised by his mother, grandmother, two aunts and a sister. At the universities in Bonn and Leipzig he studied classic philology and at the age of 24 became a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. As an adult Nietzsche suffered from migraines and he had poor eyesight. He also reportedly had a mental breakdown in 1889 that prevented him from working to his potential. Nietzsche died in 1900 in Weimar. Despite a life cut short by poor health and an emotional disturbance Nietzsche produced several works including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *The Antichrist* (1888) *Ecce Homo* (1889) and *The Will to Power* (1901). As we attempt to understand the influence of Nietzsche's work, we must begin with recognizing that he rejected Christianity and its traditional teachings. His famous proclamation "G-d is dead" reflects and necessarily led to his conclusion that the values and precepts of Christian thought no longer influenced followers to lead virtuous lives. By asserting that "G-d is dead" Nietzsche meant the death of our reliance and belief in G-d. In his book *The Joyful Wisdom* (1882) Nietzsche has a man with his lantern running through the marketplace, searching for G-d and finally concluding to a gathering crowd that G-d is dead:

Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the marketplace calling out unceasingly: "I seek God! I seek God!" As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement... The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. "where is God gone?" he called out. "I mean to tell you! We have killed him---you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from the sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move?... Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us/ ... God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife—who will wipe the blood from us?... There was never a greater event—and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!" (*The Joyful Wisdom*, p.167)

In "Thus Spake Zarathustra" Nietzsche introduces us to the "Overman" or "Superman":

"Can it be possible that you have not heard that G-d is dead? I teach you the Superman. Man is a thing to be surmounted. What have you done to surmount him? ... Behold I teach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the Superman shall be the meaning of the earth"

To replace the conforming individual, Nietzsche created his Overman or Superman—an individual refusing to conform to traditional values, yet is secure and highly individualized; expressing their unique emotional and social needs in creative ways. For Nietzsche, the courageous individual willing to challenge conventional norms of behavior became the ideal, liberated human being. This individual, in creating his/her own morality independent from the prevailing influences of organized religion or society differentiated themselves from the masses. The Overman thus evolves by determining for him/herself what is worth pursuing—and in the end, experiences happiness. Nietzsche proclaimed that virtuous behaviors of showing kindness and compassion for the less fortunate only operated to weaken the Overman by interfering in the Overman's quest for strength and liberation from ordinary, conforming and conventional existence. Nietzsche's Overman is courageous and he transcends good and evil—renouncing conventional norms and values espoused by existing institutions. The Overman disdains the meek, weak individuals in need of compassion and mercy. For Nietzsche human beings are habitually dissatisfied and unwilling to admit that there is no meaning in life—that there is no meaning to anything one accomplishes.

For the Overman to be capable of differentiating good from evil, he/she must trust their intuition. Nietzsche believed that man created G-d out of a desperate need to impose meaning in a world devoid of meaning. The discovery that the world is just what we experience and nothing more—that human beings were placed in the world to pursue their own destiny independent of a deity imposing a morality and value system to create meaning and purpose in life is too unbearable for man. Nietzsche argues that this realization gave rise to the establishment of the institution of religion. Without G-d and Christianity, man would then understand that it was incumbent on him to determine why and how he was placed in the world—and what to do with his life.

Nietzsche's conception of humanity as Godless and a grand illusion is consistent with Freud's treatment of religion. In his book "The Future of an Illusion" Freud claimed that religious beliefs derived from man's desperate desire to gain protection from the uncertain forces in the world—that religion arose out of our anxiety surrounding violence and death. The purpose of religion was to comfort us and create meaning in a world that was uniquely meaningless. For Freud religion was:

"born from man's need to make his helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race." (1927, S.E. 21, p. 18)

For Nietzsche followers of Christianity represented a "slave morality"; were members of a herd conforming to mass Christian thought. The ordinary man, according to Nietzsche was "bungled and botched." Nietzsche explained that individuals responsible for encouraging moral, ethical and virtuous behavior were doing so out of self-interest and self-promotion. With regard to good and evil in the world, Nietzsche declared that Christianity, with its emphasis on performing acts of kindness to win entrance to heaven only interfered with the Overman's pursuit of defining for him/herself what is good and evil. The ordinary human beings refusal to admit that there exists nothing more than what he observes empirically, aroused incredible anxiety and resulted in the creation of God and the potential for entry to heaven by being kind, compassionate and omniscient. The Overman logically argues he cannot see heaven and thus dismisses the existence of heaven. Since Nietzsche's Overman understands there is nothing beyond life, he lives life fully.

Nietzsche asserted that Christianity seductively persuaded human beings to pursuing a virtuous life. Since the Overman is Godless, he/she defines for him/herself what is good and evil in an ever-changing world. In this way, the Overman evolves daily by adapting to his/her changing environment. Nietzsche asserts that his Overman is pursuing a path of self-discovery as he/she adapts, changes and overcomes him/herself. This conceptualization of man is consistent with the perspective of man attempting to achieve his fullest human potential—to evolve into everything he/she was innately meant to be realized.

In German, the Overman was termed "Übermensch." Nietzsche's Overman, in his/her quest to become the driver of his/her own life creates a "master morality" free of the influences of contemporary culture; fully liberating him/herself from modern, social life. In other words, the Overman exercises his/her "will to power" by overcoming him/herself and realizing innovative, genuine and more pure ways of living. The Overman then becomes his/her own hero in the process. Among Nietzsche's list of individuals who became the Overman are Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Goethe and Julius Caesar. Nietzsche's "will to power" refers to each human being's desire to structure their life in ways that create predictability, control and self-satisfaction. Since human beings uniquely express themselves, all of behavior is a product of individual values and predilections. Nietzsche would assert that the unique expressions of human behavior simply represent different power modes or positions of individuals.

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway, who was born in 1899 and died in 1961 is considered one of America's greatest writers. For many Hemingway represented a sort of mythological hero because of his larger than life image; and his penchant for being a big game hunter and sport fisherman. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois on July 21, 1899 and was the product of conservative, Midwestern values such as religion, the need to be principled and to work hard while being self-determined. His outdoorsman skills of fishing and hunting he learned from his father. After graduating from high school he enlisted during WW I but was rejected because of his poor vision. So, young Hemingway became a Red Cross ambulance driver. After spending two years in Italy he returned home in 1919. By 1920 he was in Paris where a migration of writers landed, making it a literary hangout. With time, Hemingway began writing articles and short stories. He traveled to Spain in July of 1936 to report on the Spanish Civil War. In 1942, he traveled with American troops fighting the Germans. In all Hemingway was married four times and had three children.

In his adult years Hemingway lived fully, enjoying celebrity status, indulging in alcohol, women, and serious adventure. For Hemingway living on the edge was preferred to ordinary living. One can liken his life to a balancing act at the tipping point to a life consumed by self-gratification. Hemingway needed to be at the center of the event—either in war, the bullfight or enjoying big game hunting. It was not until the 1950's that Hemingway's acclaim began to diminish. Refusing to surrender to his critics, he wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952, which earned him the Pulitzer Prize followed by the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. At the reception he offered the following for his acceptance speech in 1954:

“Writing, at its best, is a lonely life...He grows in public stature as he shed his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day.”

By 1960 however, Hemingway's health was seriously declining. He developed diabetes, vision impairment and kidney problems. After a psychiatric hospitalization and electroshock treatments he was discharged. On July 2, 1961 Hemingway committed suicide by a self-inflicted wound to the head. For Hemingway, courage was the hero's main attribute. His hero would not engage in self-deception and he accurately interpreted his reality. Honesty and integrity were his core values and his hero was concerned with maintaining manhood while honoring the Hemingway code “grace under pressure.”

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the protagonist Santiago is an old fisherman who has not caught a fish for 84 days. Challenged by feeling defeated, inadequate and old, Santiago has faith that he can land a prize catch. Santiago's will, pride and faith enables him to overcome forces of nature in the form of a fish he battles with for three days. After reeling in the large marlin Santiago attaches it to his boat. As Santiago rows to the village sharks chew off chunks of the fish, leaving only a skeleton for the other fishermen to see. In this novel, Santiago emerges as the hero because of his unwavering faith in himself and his indomitable or indefatigable spirit.

Santiago understands that the sea can be kind, unforgiving and unfair. Although he knows that he could be regarded as a guest to the sea, and that it is part of nature, Santiago perceives himself as part of nature. By doing so he avoids becoming the antagonist doing battle against an external, natural force. For Santiago conquering the elements of the sea, in the form of fiercely capturing a fish is the driving force of his heroism. His monumental triumph occurs after three days of battling and reeling in his marlin. Santiago now is victorious and Hemingway has Santiago declaring “Man is not made for defeat.... A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (p. 103) Santiago as the heroic figure has dignity and grace, never surrendering to defeat.

The other driving force in Santiago is pride. As a fisherman, Santiago compromised his safety by venturing further out to sea to land his big catch. In the end, Santiago emerges as a hero by killing the marlin and experiencing a sort of spiritual grandeur—the outcome of his undying will to overcome external forces and elements pitted against him:

I'll kill him though in all his greatness and his glory. Although it is unjust... But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures. Now is when I must prove it. (p.66)

In the end, this novella is a parable about life—that life is an endless struggle for perpetuation and meaning. In the story. Hemingway shows that there is honor in struggle and defeat.

Hemingway's characters in his short stories and novels were given to violence, living hard, rugged lives and using alcohol, being sexually promiscuous and these characters were at times, in despair and taking risks. These male characters lived in an unforgiving, tough world and their bruised bodies reflected their rugged life. Hemingway's heroes faced death squarely in the face and weren't afraid to let their lips touch death. Philip Young, a Hemingway biographer created the phrase "Hemingway code hero" (Young, 1966) to describe characters in Hemingway's novels who possess honor, courage and endurance in confronting pain in suffering in life. The code hero shows no emotions because it represents a sign of weakness and vulnerability.

The existentialist themes in Hemingway's work is expressed in characters being strong and persevering—enduring life's painful challenges and seeking to create their unique, individual meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Hemingway's characters realize it is their responsibility to make something of their lives, to define and explicate their own oral codes.

Charlie Chaplin

In film history, an enduring image that embodies heroism in its truest spirit is Charlie Chaplin's tramp. The tramp made more people laugh than any other character in film history in the early 1900's and is considered one of the most universally recognized figures of all time. His character was the unassuming, lonely, well meaning vagrant with oversized trousers, a tight fitting coat, large shoes, a bowler hat, moustache and a cane. Despite being a tramp, he insisted on being treated with dignity. Understandably, he was misunderstood by society, labeled and stigmatized as irrelevant. For some, the tramp represented freedom from the limits of a stratified society of individuals leading routinized lives—and he was socially marginalized for being unemployable, homeless and incapable. The majority of Chaplin's films were silent, requiring audiences to listen with their eyes. The tramp's popularity was attributed to the universal understanding of pantomime. Since pantomime requires no spoken language-- communication through physical movement is easily understood. It is the universal language of life happening at the plane of movement. Movement can be trusted more often than words professing to action, and it reveals one's intentions and motives. Pantomime then lent itself quite nicely as a method for the tramp to be trusted and reveal his altruistic behaviors. The caring social gestures the tramp routinely expressed convinced audiences of the "little fellow's" integrity. When the talkies emerged, Chaplin said "Talkies are spoiling the oldest art in the world—the art of pantomime. They are ruining the great beauty of silence. They are defeating the meaning of the screen."

Charlie Chaplin was born on April 16, 1889 in London, England. At the age of five, Chaplin performed in a music hall. In 1896 his mother could not locate work and Chaplin and his half-brother Sydney were taken to a workhouse in Lambeth, London. He was the product of parents who were performers, his father a vocalist and actor and his mother an attractive actress and singer. A little later, he and his half-brother were relocated to Hanwell School for Orphans and Destitute Children. In 1900, at age 11 Chaplin's brother Sydney managed to get Charlie a role as a comic in Cinderella which was playing at the London Hippodrome. Chaplin arrived in America in 1912 after being hired by the Karno troupe. Soon, Mack Sennett saw Chaplin's acting and hired him to work in the Keystone Film Company. Chaplin was a big hit with American audiences and was offered a motion picture contract. At the tender age of 12 Chaplin's father died an alcoholic. Hannah, his mother suffered from a mental illness and was institutionalized at the Cane Hill Asylum at Coulsdon.

By 1915 Chaplin's tramp was widely known and recognized as the lonely, homeless, and resilient character in search of adventure, romance and a purposeful life. Chaplin's movies predictably contained a measure of sentimentality and pathos. The tramp was a lonely traveler on the unforgiving highway of life, without funds, a regular meal or friends. These undeniable themes derive from his early childhood memories of being homeless as a child, neglected, and living in poverty. The creation of the tramp symbolized the "little fellow" which Chaplin readily identified with. He was acutely aware of the pain and suffering caused by the depression in America. It is for this reason his tramp is depicted experiencing discrimination, poverty and unemployment. In his feature films the tramp is likeable, unassuming, good hearted and lovable. Despite being a vagrant, he expects to be treated with dignity. In "The Kid" his first full length feature film in 1921, he is heroic—rescuing an orphaned child about to be taken to the orphanage, and attempting to be a capable, surrogate father.

In "City Lights," a romantic comedy he hesitatingly falls in love with a blind woman and makes it his life mission to care for her—pay her rent to avoid being evicted and pay for an operation to restore her sight. The story is simple, yet powerful and poignant in its portrayal of the effects of stigmatization. The blind woman, selling flowers on the street, mistakes the tramp for a wealthy man because of the mutual exploitation that occurs between the tramp and the wealthy man. The eccentric, wealthy and suicidal man engages the tramp for friendship only when he is intoxicated, and when sober he realizes what a grave mistake he has made befriending a vagabond and allowing him into his home. The tramp obtains money from the wealthy, intoxicated millionaire and offers it to the blind woman to pay her rent and for the operation to restore her sight. The developing romance between the tramp and the blind woman is beautifully handled. For the tramp it was absolutely safe to pursue a romance with a beautiful woman because she was blind. As long as she couldn't see his otherness—that he was a tramp, it was safe and he discovered that once he activated his mission to love and care for her, he was capable of working and befriending others. Through a series of misadventures he is sent to jail for a few months and the blind woman has the operation to restore her sight. After his release from jail the tramp is wandering the streets, being teased by adolescents for looking destitute. The tramp then sees the woman working in a flower shop. She is, however, not blind now and the tramp knows the operation was a success. The tramp knows the woman, but she doesn't know him as she looks at him on the sidewalk from inside her shop. A moment earlier we see a handsome wealthy, young man enter the shop to order an arrangement, and the previously blind woman thinking maybe it was "him" only to be disappointed this was not the wealthy man who gave her life.

Once the woman spots the tramp admiring her in his ragged clothing, she says “I’ve made a conquest” to a co-worker, not knowing that he was the man she mistook for her handsome, wealthy prince. The tramp, embarrassed attempts to scuttle away only to be stopped by the woman who wants to give him a coin and a flower. She reaches to put the coin in his hand, and in a poignant instant, shockingly discovers through touching his familiar hand, he is the beloved, wealthy man. The tramp’s face is overcome with measured joy, expressed in his beautiful, warm smile. The woman now knows, and she painfully realizes the impossibility of a lasting romance with the tramp. This poignant ending reveals the movies irony—the contradiction exposed by a heroic tramp driven by a noble desire to give life through his selfless behavior and other sacrifices. The tramp understands he would be rejected by the beautiful woman once she realized who he was—his true identity revealed, as a tramp striving for heroic significance. Becker asserts, “.. we like to be reminded that our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic.” (Introduction: Human Nature and the Heroic” p. 1 The denial of death) Further, Becker conceptualizes culture as a theatre naturally designed for expressions of heroism:

“... it is in the way society sets up its hero system and in the people it allows to fill its roles. The urge to heroism is natural, and to admit it honest. ... The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a different hero system. What the anthropologists call “Cultural relativity” is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over. But each cultural system is a dramatization of earthly heroics; each system cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the “high” heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the “low” heroism of a coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest; the plain everyday, earthly heroism wrought by gnarled working hands guiding a family through hunger and disease.” Becker, 1973, *The denial of death*, page 4-5 in *Introduction: Human Nature and the Heroic*)

Again, from a Beckerian perspective, the tramp asks how does my society provide an honest, lonely, homeless man such as me, an opportunity to experience my primary heroism; to strive for heroic significance? For Becker, the human problem of heroism is central to humanity—deeper than any other because it originates from our organismic narcissism and it nourishes our self-esteem. Preserving and increasing self-esteem is indispensable for the tramp and society then becomes a codified hero system (Becker, 1973). Becker’s analysis of the tramp’s heroic actions would suggest that the “little fellow” was driven to individuate himself and identify his unique talents. In part, heroic individuals perpetuate themselves by defeating evil forces and this is how they make a significant contribution and difference in the world. For Becker:

“Each person wants to have his life make a difference in the life of mankind, contribute in some way toward securing and furthering that life, make it in some ways less vulnerable, more durable. To be a true hero is to triumph over disease, want, death. One knows that his life has had a vital human meaning if it has been able to bring real benefits to the life of mankind. .. Even more, by his own death the hero secures the lives of others, ...” (*Escape From Evil*, p. 149-150, 1975).

The tramp’s actions are directed toward gaining self-esteem, and at the organismic level self-esteem is life sustaining for the tramp. Without it, the tramp feels his life is not worthwhile, that he is insignificant and not vital as a human being. Further, it is the tramp’s desperate need to be valued and impress his human importance on society. He is acutely wanting to be recognized as “an object of primary value in the universe” (Becker, p. 76 *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, 1962 or 1971). For Becker, culture provides rules, norms and identifies why people act the way they do in terms of the goal of behavior. A function of culture is to provide human beings with opportunities to nourish their self-esteem—to convince others that they are objects of primary value in a society of meaningful action (Becker, p. 79 *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, 1962 or 1971).

The universal recognition and identification with the tramp was due, in part to what the “little fellow” symbolized the personal struggle for economic sustenance and the plight of the ordinary worker. This was poignantly expressed in 1936, in his last silent film, “*Modern Times*” where the tramp was retired, and he poked fun at the advent of the modern industrialized nation. Chaplin criticized the corporate owners operating factories for being overly profit driven at the expense of cultivating job alienation in workers. In contradiction to the social elites of the time, the tramp insulted them and their indulgent lifestyle. At the time, audiences identified with the unrestricted freedom of the tramp—because it symbolized an authentic, self-chosen freedom; a breakaway from the governing social institutions demanding conformity and class structure that identified one’s social status. The tramp, however was intuitive and socially astute, capable of accurately perceiving and interpreting his surroundings to satisfy his social, emotional and physical needs. He was absolutely self-directed

The tramp, by being forever courageous and manipulating police officers expressed his subconscious defiance of death. One can argue here that death defiance is a component of heroism and that the tramp was attempting to achieve a moral outcome through his heroic actions. In most of his feature films the tramp is a hero when he rescues and fathers an orphan child—or when he pays for an operation to restore sight to a blind woman. The tramp, as a hero motif, expresses selfless love and is sublime. The remarkably well conceived plots manufactured by Chaplin for the tramp reveal how intimately connected Chaplin was to the plight of the common man. Chaplin was remarkably sensitive to the capricious nature of the human condition with having work one day and on the strike line the next. Further, the social elites weren't immune from Chaplin's poking to reveal their vulnerabilities. For example, in *City Lights*, a wealthy, eccentric millionaire is a drunk contemplating suicide before the tramp convinces him to choose life over death. In the end, the wealthy have nothing on the destitute, they are just as vulnerable and given to hopelessness and despair as the well meaning and heroic striving tramp. It is this condition that united all of humanity, and what Chaplin acutely attempted to convey in his films. He juxtaposed humor and tragedy—it was irony and pathos. The Chaplinesque ending of his movies—encouraging and not becoming demoralized such as in the end of *Modern Times* when he says to the Gamin' "Buck up! Never say die! We'll get along." Chaplin was striving for heroic significance in the character of the tramp. From a Beckerian perspective, the tramp's motivation toward heroism derives from his awareness that "... our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic." (Becker, ch. 1 page 1 ch. Titled: Introduction Human Nature and the Heroic.

In our final assessment of Chaplin's contribution to the understanding of heroism, through the character of the tramp we undoubtedly see moral outcomes resulting from selfless love and uncompromising social caring. Becker would explain that the tramp left an enduring symbol of his immortality in the universal recognition of the tramp. The tramp enjoyed international appeal precisely because he communicated through the universally understood medium of movement. Physical movement, physical comedy, tragedy, clever plots, romance and irony captivated audiences all around the world. The heroic tramp, as a character resonated with the heart and mind of ordinary people and heroism being a universal motif, lent itself to genuine admiration of courage and uncompromising selflessness. The tramp was searching for heroic significance, hungry for meaning. We need to rediscover Chaplin because for the right person his films can have a meaningful impact in terms of how people express their human emotions. These emotional expressions of the tramp reflect his well entrenched values that drove him to provide social care.

The character of the Tramp embodied humanity's indefatigable will to survive in a seemingly insensitive world harboring the homeless, social elites and everything in between. Although the tramp was socially marginalized, he refused to surrender his will to live and was relentless in pursuing work. Social forces and stigmatization would not defeat him and the "little fellow" snubbed his nose at high society. In its most elemental level the tramp refused to be reduced to absolute powerlessness. He understood how society worked and how he fit in. Although he was destitute at times, he was proud-- dusting himself off when he was snubbed, and showing resilience. He ultimately waddled alone down the rugged highway of life. Charlie was a comic hero in his films—inviting adventure and misadventure, running from the police and romancing women. The kind hearted tramp found himself wanting to help others and was clever and resourceful. Although the tramp found himself pitted against the social elites, he cleverly managed to manipulate them and reveal their vulnerabilities. In the end, the tramp left behind an enduring, lovable immortality symbol of heroism.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement emphasizing individual existence, choice and freedom. It was given birth to in Europe by writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. The themes that most existentialist writers subscribe to include the individual's subjective experience and freedom in the world. Essentially, existentialists assert we are what we consciously have chosen to be. The founding of modern existentialism in the late 19th century is generally attributed to a Danish philosopher named Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy was a reaction to Plato's writings on the highest ethical good being the same for everyone—that all needed to strive for moral perfection. Kierkegaard, in contrast insisted that each individual needed to define for himself the highest moral good, to pursue and define his truth leading to a liberated, meaningful life. For Kierkegaard, honoring objective, universal truths based on absolute morality was a contradiction to the major existential premise of denying a rational basis for moral decisions. Kierkegaard objected to the reigning absolute, idealistic German philosophy of the time being promoted by Hegel. Hegel proposed a total, well reasoned rational and systematic explication of humanity and history. Kierkegaard's thinking deemphasized the rational basis of understanding the human condition, and in contrast, focused on the absurdity and ambiguity of life. Kierkegaard professed it was each individual's responsibility to commit to leading a life of truth which may require one to defy the norms of society, thereby transcending what might be the good for all and honoring what is the good for me. In this situation, Kierkegaard proposes one take a "leap of faith" to avoid experiencing further despair.

The majority of existential writers stress that one must be passionate and maximize individual choice leading to individual action. It is only when one acts on their freely chosen desires that they arrive at truth—or approximate truth. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stressed that there exists no rational or logical premises which derive from a systematic analysis of nature. They and other existentialist writers explicate this existential principle in many of their parables and aphorisms. The denial of rationality is not absolute though, for they understand that under certain conditions rationality is necessary to deepen our understanding. In the final analysis, the existentialists will claim that to answer the most compelling, significant questions in life, reason and science are insufficient. The bold Nietzsche asserted that no order exists in the universe and that the assumption that it does is an illusion.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), considered the leading existentialist philosopher of the 20th century, lived and worked in France. In his classic work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) he expounded his premise that existence precedes essence, meaning that one's biological, physiological or material being exists before one's awareness of innate factors such as reason and consciousness. Sartre, an atheist further asserted that life is not sacred theologically; that human beings were not created in the image of G-d or any other supreme deity. For Sartre, human beings enter a materialistic world and are condemned to make choices which define their true nature. Thus, each individual represents the sum of their choices and actions, and all human beings are "condemned to be free."

One of the most prominent themes in existentialism is choice. Choice means that each unique individual can create his own nature. For Sartre, existence precedes essence and choice is inexplicably part of humanity. It defines and validates one's existence. Choice is inescapable and in every moment of existence, we make choices. Invariably, the refusal to choose represents a choice and with this choice comes responsibility. Individuals then come to accept responsibility for the consequences of their choices.

Additional themes in existential philosophy emphasized by Kierkegaard are dread and anxiety. Dread characterizes a general apprehension, a conscious knowing that G-d obligates each of us to define and lead a meaningful life. Anxiety naturally leads one to confront awareness of his nothingness and that he may discover emptiness when searching to justify the choices he makes. Sartre uses nausea to refer to the individual's awareness of how the universe is devoid of moral absolutes, and the word anguish refers to the absolute freedom of choice all of us are presented with in life and which is a burden for human beings.

Sartre's model is atheistic, suggesting that there exists in the universe no compass for moral guidance, a G-d for divine inspiration and no moral absolutes. For some individuals, this recognition creates despair, acknowledging that one lives in a meaningless world, and that it is each individual's responsibility to impose meaning in a meaningless world. It is in this condition of pure nothingness that generates anxiety and awareness of the inescapable inevitability of death.

Implications of Sartre's Secular Existential Philosophy on Heroism

Beyond Sartre's philosophical analysis of understanding the subjective elements of the human condition, his literary works inspired a fresh look at who our hero truly is in a world empty of norms and values which are traditionally embedded within the institution of religion. It is the hero who inherits the burden of total freedom and total responsibility for his actions. It is in this situation, a world free of morality, that one is at risk for becoming an anti-hero. We can identify this individual as the hero of existentialism. Our existential anti-hero experiences, like others, alienation, despair and anguish. This hero lives in a world without moral absolutes and his choices may not serve the interest of all or the common good. Compared to our conceptions of how the modern hero might act; to serve the common good, be courageous, selfless and achieve a moral outcome through his heroic act, our existential anti-hero will be criticized for acting out his convictions, for violating social and cultural standards of behavior. In the end, the anti-hero realizes he has achieved nothing short of ridicule and shame, and concludes the world is absurd.

Other existential writers of the literary genre have also written about the anti-hero. These character's lives reflect the absurdity of the human condition. Albert Camus (1913-1960) characterized absurdity as the "divorce between man and life, actor and setting" in his novels. Camus' characters are alienated, estranged and socially marginalized in society, unable to conform to social values and only able to establish a sense of being through continual social rebellion.

Worksheet for Heroism Course

1. What makes people act the way they do?
2. Why is it difficult to define heroism?
3. Is heroism culturally defined?
4. What is it about our culture that enables individuals to strive for heroic acts?
5. What forces in society foster or inhibit an individual's ability to perform heroic acts?
6. What makes individuals perform self-sacrifices such as the ultimate one of jeopardizing their lives for others?
7. Is a hero someone who is rich, famous or powerful?
8. A personal hero is someone who has influenced your life in some way. Who are your personal heroes?
9. Do you agree that our heroes fill an innate, subconscious need in our psychic life? In other words, we would strive less or not be concerned with creating a safer, more humanistic and loving world for humanity without heroes.
10. How would your life change if you had no heroes?

My Heroic Acts

Name: _____ Date: _____

Before you complete this exercise recall that heroism is culturally defined, meaning our culture bound values such as the sanctity of life, sacredness of life, honoring the 10 commandments and altruism are norms and values adhered to by members of our culture. Although most cultures have heroes, the culture bound values may vary between cultures as well as their definition of what constitutes heroic acts and heroism.

Ordinary people perform heroic acts. Ordinary people possess admired qualities like fairness, intention to be kind and good, right a wrong, be selfless (thinking of others before themselves), have an unswerving inner commitment to a worthy cause, be a role model and go above and beyond the call of duty. Ordinary people performing heroic acts may be the obscure people doing good in the world.

List the heroic acts you performed and identify the act in the appropriate category:

Your heroic act saved an individual's life (include time, setting, other details)

Your admirable qualities influenced another individual to change his/her life in a positive, favorable way (describe in detail, include time, setting)

Your heroic act achieved a moral objective what was the moral objective achieved?

Your heroic act reflected selflessness and altruistic behavior by thinking about another individual's needs before your own:

Your heroic act had a lasting legacy on others; what was the legacy?

Your heroic act jeopardized your life (describe in detail):

Did your heroic act get publicized in the community? How was it publicized? How did drawing attention to your heroism make you feel? Describe in detail please:

Interpreting Poetry, Aphorisms and Adages for Deeper, Metaphorical Meaning

Awakened

In advanced age, my health worsening, I woke up in the middle of the night, and experienced a feeling of happiness so intense and perfect that in all my life I had only felt its premonition. And there was no reason for it. It didn't obliterate consciousness; the past which I carried was there, together with my grief. And it was suddenly included, was a necessary part of the whole. As if a voice were repeating: "You can stop worrying now; everything happened just as it had to. You did what was assigned to you, and you are not required anymore to think of what happened long ago." The peace I felt was a closing of accounts and was connected with the thought of death. The happiness on this side was like an announcement of the other side. I realized that this was an undeserved gift and I could not grasp by what grace it was bestowed on me.

-- Czeslaw Milosz
Poet, winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature

Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that people are here for the sake of other people, for the countless souls with whose faith we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how my own inner and outer life is built upon the labors of others, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return, as much as I have received, and am still receiving.

-- Albert Einstein

The individual succumbs, but he does not die if he has left something for mankind.

-- Will Durant

The best use of a life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.

-- William James

Everyone whose deeds are more than his wisdom, his wisdom endures. And whose wisdom is more than his deeds, his wisdom does not endure.

-- The Talmud

People like you and I, though mortal of course like everyone else, do not grow old no matter how long we live... We never cease to stand like curious children before the great mystery into which we were born.

-- Albert Einstein

Trust only movement. Life happens at the level of events, not of words. Trust movement.

--Alfred Adler

Real life is to most men, a long second best, a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible.

--Bertrand Russell

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap.

--George Bernard Shaw

Too much happens.... Man performs, engenders so much more than he can or should have to bear. That's how he finds that he can bear anything.

-- William Faulkner

Cruelty can arise from the aesthetic outrage we sometimes feel in the presence of strange individuals who seem to be making out alright... Have they found some secret passage to eternal life? It can't be. If those weird individuals with beards and funny hats are acceptable, then what about my claim to superiority? Can someone like that be my equal in God's eyes? Does he, that one, dare hope to live forever too—and perhaps crowd me out? I don't like it. All I know is, if he's right I'm wrong. So different and funny looking. I think he's trying to fool the Gods with his sly ways. Let's show him up. He's not very strong. For a start, see what he'll do when I poke him.

--Alan Harrington

Ralph Sumner died the other day, full of years (eighty plus) and wisdom (dairy farmer, cabinetmaker, churchgoer, member of the local road crew, dowser). When we laid him in the ground there were some tears, but there was a lot of gratitude for the joy he had spread around the folk of Heath, MA 01346. Ralph's death made me think about my life. I believe we are placed here to be companions—a wonderful word that comes from *cum panis* (with bread). We are here to share bread with one another so that everyone has enough, no one has too much and our social order achieves this goal with maximal freedom and minimal coercion. There are many names for such sharing: utopia, the beloved community, the Kingdom of God, the communion of saints. And while the goal is too vast to be realized solely on this planet, it is still our task to create foretastes of it on this planet—living glimpses of what life is meant to be, which include art and music and poetry and shared laughter and picnics and politics and moral outrage and special privileges for children only and wonder and humor and endless love to counterbalance the otherwise immobilizing realities of tyrants, starving children, death camps and just plain greed. But I expect Ralph Sumner now sees it more clearly than I do.

--Robert McAfee, Presbyterian Minister and Educator
Professor of Theology and Ethics

Mankind's common instinct for reality...has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism.

-- William James

We like to be reminded that our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic.

-- Ernest Becker

... the truly basic things about man, the things that really drive him....man's creatureliness (his appetite) on the one hand, and his ingenuity on the other

-- Ernest Becker

The unconscious does not know death or time in man's physiochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal.

-- Sigmund Freud

A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is brave five minutes longer.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

Hero worship is strongest where there is least regard for human freedom.

--Herbert Spencer

This is mankind's age-old dilemma in the face of death: what man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance. Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning. And in order for anything once alive to have meaning, its effects must remain alive in eternity in some way.

-- Ernest Becker

Whoever wants to know the hearts and minds of America had better learn baseball.

-- Jacques Barzan

There is nothing sacred about convention; there is nothing sacred about primitive passions or whims; but the fact that a convention exists indicates that a way of living has been devised capable of maintaining itself.

-- George Santayana

All religions must be tolerated, for every man must get to heaven in his own way.

--Frederick the Great

Religion is a great force—the only real motive force in the world, but you must get at a man through his own religion, not through yours.

--George Bernard Shaw

When a man is freed of religion, he has a better chance to live a normal and wholesome life.

--Sigmund Freud

Few people can be happy unless they hate some other person, nation or creed.

-- Bertrand Russell

We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally and intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves.

-- C.S. Lewis

The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don't want, drink what you don't like, and do what you'd rather not.

-- Mark Twain

Life is a tragedy for those who feel, and a comedy for those who think.

-- Jean De La Bruyer

Men are wise in proportion, not to their experience, but to their capacity for experience.

-- George Bernard Shaw

Honesty is the policy when there is money in it.

-- Mark Twain

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

-- Mark Twain

Education is the progressive discovery of our ignorance.

-- Will Durant

I am always ready to learn, but I do not always like being taught.

-- Winston Churchill

I am the inferior of any man whose rights I trample under foot. Men are not superior by reasons of the accidents of race and color. They are superior who have the best heart—the best brain. The superior man....stands erect by bending over the fallen. He rises by lifting others.

-- Robert Green Ingersoll

Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate... but with his other hand he can note down what he sees among the ruins.

-- Franz Kafka

Life is a tragedy for those who feel and a comedy for those who think.

-- Jean De La Bruyere

When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

-- Mark Twain

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.

-- Albert Einstein

Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old.

-- Franz Kafka

By believing passionately in something that still does not exist, we create it. The nonexistent is whatever we have not sufficiently desired.

-- Franz Kafka

A thousand words will not leave so deep an impression as one deed.

-- Henrik Ibsen

In the fight between you and the world, back the world.

-- Franz Kafka

In theory there is a possibility of perfect happiness: To believe in the indestructible element within one, and not to strive towards it.

-- Franz Kafka

Life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come.

-- Franz Kafka

...the fact that the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition.

-- Ernest Becker

My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted.

-- Franz Kafka

Society almost everywhere provides codes for such self-aggrandizement, for the ability to boast, to humiliate, or just simply to outshine in quiet ways—like displaying one's superior achievements. If Hocart says that man cannot impart life to himself but must get it via ritual from his fellow man, then we can say even further that man cannot impart importance to himself; and importance, we now see, is just as deep a problem in securing life; importance equals durability equals life.

-- Ernest Becker

Start with what is right rather than what is acceptable.

-- Franz Kafka

Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

-- Leo Tolstoy

All our knowledge merely helps us to die a more painful death than the animals who know nothing.

-- Maurice Maeterlinck

History is what man does with death.

-- Georg Hegel

Man cannot live without a continuous confidence in something indestructible within himself.

■ Franz Kafka

Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience. But nothing is a greater cause of suffering.

-- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

We are sinful not merely because we have eaten of the tree of knowledge, but also because we have not eaten of the tree of life.

-- Franz Kafka

You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid.

-- Franz Kafka

The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.

-- Roy Waldman

Keynote Address Delivered by Dr. Elijah Levy at
Riverside YWCA “Everyday Hero” Awards Banquet

April 28, 2000

Good evening everyone. I am very honored to be invited to speak to all of you tonight. I would never pass up the opportunity to acknowledge a group of individuals we admire for being leaders dedicated to practicing social justice, peace and all forms of humanitarian acts in the community.

I have been reflecting on the moral significance of encouraging others to practice admirable, and noble activity of heroism. The first step to performing a heroic act is having noble aspiration, the desire to simply be kind and do good for others. I’ve known individuals who simply explained they felt compelled to habitually perform acts of bravery, courage and kindness to others. It did not matter to them where the commandment to perform a heroic act derived from. A parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle or friend may have suggested they think about the opportunity to be heroic or the compulsion came from deep, inside them. It was simply a matter of performing kindness to bring happiness, relieve loneliness or show positive regard to someone who would otherwise feel neglected or less important to the world; someone who desperately needed to feel like they mattered to others.

My everyday hero lifts my spirit, gives me hope and perhaps a new vision or look on what is truly important in life, and my “Everyday Hero” inspires me to lead a life devoted to performing acts of kindness and care.

Any human being, regardless of their age, gender, race or ethnic affiliation can perform a noble deed. I want to explain the meaning of “Unconditional Positive Regard” which was coined by Carl Rogers, a famous Humanistic psychologist who asserted that if we accepted others for what they represented without strings attached, like identifying conditions to be met before we fully accepted them then our society would be much more pleasant to live in. Everyone would feel like they belonged here, no one socially marginalized and everyone would feel valued, loved and treated with dignity.

Unconditional Positive Regard means not taking a hard, critical or unfavorable look at you—and not creating convenient stereotypes of “us” and “them” based on our unfavorable evaluations of you. You see, unconditionally accepting others who look, act and think differently means suspending judgment and risk being vulnerable. Why would

anyone elect to be vulnerable? Being vulnerable means admitting you may be fearful or anxious to learn about the “otherness” present in that individual who looks, acts and thinks differently than you.

I want to share my definition of an “Everyday Hero” with you. I also want to be careful and not trivialize this definition because doing so will only discount the meaning and lessen its impact. See, I think that the title “Everyday Hero” itself carries the potential for it to be trivialized because it suggests that on any given day anyone can be an everyday hero by not performing a noble deed. Don’t misunderstand me—anyone can, and they do perform heroic acts and become an everyday hero. However, we need to morally weigh the significance of the heroic act to determine if it truly satisfies the criteria of heroism. I believe that heroism is a heroic act that achieves a moral outcome.

My “Everyday Hero” performs virtuous. Noble or charitable acts all of us can admire. It is that unique individual who may not possess a special skill, but a very special heart to exude concern for others, compassion and love. My hero is a truly good person worthy of lots of admiration and applause. One of my definitions of an “everyday Hero” is someone harboring our highest and noblest aspirations of assisting older adults, the needy and the lonely.

An everyday hero can be a child, adolescent, or older adult who exemplifies courage, selflessness, exuberance for life and amazing grace and maturity. We all carry the potential to be everyday heroes by simply acknowledging that we need to treat each other respectfully, with dignity and unconditional positive regard. Sadly, a small but vocal percentage of the human race refuses to accept our desire to treat everyone with respect and dignity. I challenge these individuals to examine their isolated lives charged by ignorant, racist attitudes motivated by self-interest and need to hate. Unfortunately we hear everyday about how social injustice is committed to preserve hate.

Tonight however, we celebrate and honor heroes we want to hear about more. We will undoubtedly be inspired and draw strength hearing our heroes stories of goodness. We will draw moral and spiritual strength, get filled with faith that we can impact positive change and leave this auditorium tonight compelled to be our own hero—as well as my hero—and everyone's hero. An everyday hero

acts on his/her convictions. Acting on a conviction means converting it into action, like treating others kindly—making you eligible for this cherished award. Acts such as seizing an opportunity to correct one child's biased or prejudiced view of a minority child represents an act of heroism. You see, I have faith that correcting that child's prejudicial view will enable that same child to not repeat that prejudicial behavior. Imagine that child never behaving prejudicially again because an adult saw an opportunity to have a child challenge his/her unfavorable cultural assumption. This adult's intervention is worthy of receiving an everyday hero award. For me, the result carries incredible utility in our society and in that child's life. It means our world has one less prejudiced child. Remember, children are born into the world with the capacity for tolerance. Something happened in that child's life to create an attitude of intolerance. That child learned intolerance from someone. Biased or prejudicial behavior is learned behavior—and the potential for conflict is high when prejudice goes unchallenged. If you do not capture the opportunity to correct that child's intolerant attitude then he /she will develop into an intolerant adult.

Our everyday hero recognizes where bias and bigotry lives and the harm it inflicts on individuals and our society. Our everyday hero values diversity and through his/her commitment to help create a more harmonious world, he/she improves intergroup race relations and combats racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry and hate.

Tonight we are here to celebrate our everyday heroes. Let these heroes serve as role models for all of us. Our everyday heroes embody what a truly righteous human being is all about, and who wouldn't want to identify with a righteous human being and allow them to represent your idealized mentor?

“What is Heroism?”

Alright, so let's talk some about what a hero is. In our modern culture hero means lots of things. We use hero to refer to our favorite characters in comic books, sports heroes or race car drivers. How about heroes in movies and in novels? In movies I suppose it would depend on what heroic acts they performed that made them heroes. See what I mean? I think what we need to do is construct a working definition of hero—one that we can refine as much as we want along the way. I need you to know though that as we do this together, the objective is to get you to really think so you can arrive at a very customized and sophisticated, personal definition of hero. At the end of this intellectual exercise your definition of a hero may not have changed. It's at that time you'll admit to yourself that you do have an attention and comprehension problem.

Now, you know that heroes are everywhere in our culture. Personally, I think it's become all too common to call lots of people heroes. What do you think? The New World Dictionary defines hero as “any man admired for his courage, nobility, exploits, achievements, honored for outstanding qualities.” You like that? I do. So this definition represents a good start by providing us with a working definition. Think about someone admired for his/her accomplishments and qualities. I suppose it would be nice knowing what accomplishments we're talking about. Outstanding athletes in professional sports, like Michael Jordan and Shaq come to mind right now. These individuals do need to be acknowledged for their remarkable achievements in professional basketball. Noproblems here. What about the admired qualities part of the definition of hero? What personal qualities do you admire in these athletes? Admired qualities could be their great physical talents that enabled their teams to win the world championship or being chosen the MVP of the world championship series. Their talents are revealed as remarkable physical feats—scoring lots of points or Jordan's dazzling moves on the court. How about the other admired values like a great work ethic, integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness? At this point you might stop and think more about whether these two athletes are admired for being trustworthy, moral or honest. I'll let you decide. It's alright for them to be heroes to some people. I can accept that some individuals in our culture admire them for their extraordinary athletic feats on the court. However, after enlarging our definition of hero by adding values like honesty, it influences our perceptions and feelings about the individual. Know what I mean? How about we add another element to our definition of hero by including that a hero is someone who goes above and beyond the call of duty? Such an act may manifest as the individual doing something extraordinary for the good of another person. It will most likely be a moral act. The act may be performed in a dramatic way and it may

compromise the safety or more seriously jeopardize the life of the heroic individual. Imagine someone jumping off a pier to rescue a child that accidentally fell into the ocean. As you can see, this vignette illustrates in a dramatic way how heroic acts have a moral outcome or objective. The moral objective is to save the life of another human being while risking your life in the process. Yes, jeopardizing your life to save another. For me, an act like this is the greatest and noblest behavior a human being can do in our society.

So let's continue working with our definition of hero. We've added that a hero may perform a heroic act that meets a moral objective. However a moral objective does not always have to be the outcome. If it is then the heroic act may have manifested as an incredibly brave act that resulted in saving a life. The heroic act may have simply been about providing aid or comfort to a less fortunate individual. This sort of act is one of goodness or kindness and it represents a behavior directed at achieving a moral objective. The moral objective was providing food or shelter to one in need. You see, a moral act is any behavior that functions to preserve the life of an individual. In our culture life is treated as sacred. Preserving life is usually considered a moral absolute. So, at any expense we should try to help keep each other alive so our civilization can survive and prosper. As long as all of us share this cultural value or moral then we'll honor this understanding regarding the sacredness of human life. Sadly enough though not everyone honors this culture bound value.

Alright—so now we understand the moral objective element. The other element I want to add to our definition of hero is related to the hero's power to influence your life. Look, all of us are inspired by the lives of great heroic individuals. Just think about who your heroes are. Alright, do it now. Ask yourself if this individual inspires you to do good? Is one of this hero's values selflessness? Selflessness means thinking of others—doing for others. Does their humanitarian or noble work preserve or save human life? Are they unwavering in their work to assist the needy? So if you admire a noble quality in your hero does it mean that you behave in selfless ways? See what I mean? Heroes performing humanitarian acts have unwavering commitment to bring relief to the poorest in the world—like Mother Theresa. If you truly admire someone for their selflessness, courage and for everything their life symbolizes then this admiration should function to change your life in a major way. The common expression is “I want to be like her.” Now wouldn't that be something!

You would make these great, wonderful changes and become your own hero.

Now, the last thing I need to mention is that heroes have the potential to influence more than just one person's life. For example a hero can alter the course of civilization in some cases. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a wonderful example. Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez and Gandhi are great examples of how a life can influence the development of a society. Humanitarian

acts abolishing exploitation and social inequality resulted in positive outcomes. A true hero's life has the potential to create sweeping and major societal change. The lives of heroes leave us with a legacy to honor. Well what do you think? Now you've got some new criteria to think about when trying to determine which individuals could be your heroes.

