Why Study Heroism?

The study of heroism can be a revelatory journey investigating how morality, altruism, empathy, courage and hope drive its expression. It can illuminate the underlying motivation for why individuals act altruistically and morally. To what extent does empathy contribute to heroic motives? Empathy is one’s capacity to take the role of the other or to think and feel your way into the heart and mind of another. The virtues listed above coalesce to motivate heroism. Heroic action need not exclusively result in historic change such as with Abraham Lincoln or MLK. One can volunteer at Meals on Wheels and serve meals to homebound elderly or donate time to a foodbank preparing baskets of food for needy families. Studying heroism identifies the motives individuals possess to activate their noble, selfless behavior and how it might inspire others to volunteer and help repair a fractured world.

I wonder if there is a hero gene, a predisposition that expresses heroic behavior. Is there a gender difference with regard to heroic action? Can and should we encourage individuals to act heroically? Research is underway to identify the hero genome and how epigenetics holds promise for understanding how to activate gene expression for heroism.

We know that life carries inherent meaning and value. Life is sacred, we assign it ultimate worth and the quest for meaning and purpose is pursued to ensure one’s life counts and is used in ways that will outlast it. Assigning value to life explains why one risks their life to save the life of another. However, not everyone will risk their life to save another human being’s life. We wonder what might motivate someone to risk their life by running into a burning building to rescue trapped people. Is it instinctual or does one do a quick calculation to determine the probability he/she will die or survive in the process? One might also ask who is in the building that needs rescuing? Is there time to access 911 and will they arrive on time? Am I fit enough to carry someone out of the building? Am I willing to die?

In almost every civilization, ancient myths honored heroes with magical powers and mystical qualities that distinguished them from ordinary people. The Greeks coined the term hero to honor individuals for their nobility, courage, wisdom and strength. Heroes were defenders or protectors and they may have possessed divine qualities if they descended from G-ds. Heroes are Roman G-ds, warriors and human beings performing acts of supernatural order. The combination of virtues like the hero’s courage, actions and words adds to their veneration. Heroes are extraordinary and we are impressed with how one becomes a heroic figure in society.

Heroism is universal, most cultures of the world have heroes who stand above the common people and are admired. 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 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. In addition, heroic acts usually result in moral outcomes. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to abolishing unjust laws; giving Blacks the right to vote, ending desegregation, racial discrimination and abolishing unjust laws to establish and legislate rights for African Americans.

However, contemporary society can encourage our youth to adopt or idealize celebrities such as the Kardashian family or gangsta rap. Rap songs include violence and street gang activities, misogynistic themes, homophobia and honoring urban ghetto life. In some of the Muslim world, Osama Bin Laden is considered a hero and martyr, in addition to Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam who is a Jew hater, demonizing whites and preaching Black Separatist ideals. Neither of these heroic individuals are dedicating their life and work to serving the greater good. The greater good is defined as not using ideology in divisive ways to polarize the world. We need to create harmony and unity among all peoples of the world. Ideology creates antipathy and partisan animosity among people who disagree with each other’s lifestyles including where they live, how they live and worship.

Heroes model for humanity pure, sacred motives driven by an unyielding commitment to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The lives of Lincoln, MLK Jr and Mahatma Gandhi altered the course of history in unimaginable ways. Is there a more noble way to use your life than in a way that will outlast it?

Albert Einstein, aside from being the world’s greatest theoretical physicist was also known for being poetic. He understood existence was temporal and pursuing meaning and purpose in life was an ultimate desire. Despite how absurd and strange life is, questioning why you are here, and will you ever claim to grasp your ultimate purpose in life, one must admit that we are here for the sake of each other. Einstein was gifted as a poet, and he captures the essence of how one negotiates uncertainty and absurdity of life in this illuminating and brilliant piece of prose poetry.

# “Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of other men —above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my outer and inner life is built upon the labors of people, 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.”

In the end, we study heroism to deepen our understanding of why people act the way they do. Studying the lives of Martin Luther King, Jr. or Abraham Lincoln reminds us that our highest, most noble calling in life is to be here for the sake of others. We cannot detach morality from the heroism of MLK and Lincoln. Both deeply understood from the depths of their conscience it was unjust to deny Blacks rights and to enslave people. Heroes challenge the limits of what is possible and engage in meaningful and purposeful activities to eradicate injustice and remove laws that restrict people’s freedoms. Sigmund Freud, Ernest Becker, Friedrich Nietzsche and countless other great philosophers and psychologists theorized that the innate desire to transcend ordinary living underlies the heroic striving mechanism.

Do heroes serve as models for us to ask what is possible for me? We study the life of Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr. and how they acted out of conscience to inspire us to express our noble aspirations or virtues to repair a fractured world. Reaching for the best in us represents our authentic and true self which may express our yearning to be courageous and commit to achieving social justice, fairness to create a more holy world.