What is a Hero?

In our culture hero is a construct characterized by noble traits. A hero could be a comic book character, superb athlete, humanitarian figure, actor, a race car driver or a protagonist in a novel. We can extend our definition of hero across many cultures and arrive at social consensus on the definition of heroism. A hero expresses virtues such as compassion, selflessness, courage and kindness to achieve a moral outcome. Additional traits include honesty, determination, conviction, moral integrity and self-sacrifice. The heroic act is voluntary, and one may risk their life. Their action is not motivated by material self-gain or to elevate their social status unless they are a cult figure such as David Koresh. The apocalyptic leader and prophet Koresh represented a cult figure worshipped by members who perished during the siege of their compound in 1993. No moral outcome resulted from the actions of Koresh on that fateful day of April 19, 1993 when 79 members died. Cult leaders like David Koresh intoxicate their followers with a promise of salvation because they are perceived as the ultimate knower, a supreme prophet who can restore sacred living.

A hero’s actions may be extraordinary, directed toward the good of another, a moral act. It may be performed in a dramatic way and seriously jeopardize the life of the heroic individual. Imagine someone jumping off a pier to rescue a child that accidentally fell into the ocean. This illustrates in a dramatic way how heroic acts have a moral outcome. The moral objective is to save the life of another human being while risking your life. An act like this is the greatest and noblest behavior a human being perform in our society.

A selfless, not necessarily heroic act may simply be about providing comfort to a less fortunate individual. This sort of act is one of goodness or kindness and is directed at reducing suffering which achieves a moral objective; providing food to one in need and it may preserve life. In our culture life is treated as sacred. Preserving life is 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 then we’ll honor this understanding regarding the sacredness of human life. Virtue ethics, as an ethical theory explains that traits such as courage, loyalty and selflessness are central to living an ethical life.

The other idea I want to add to our definition of hero is related to the hero’s power to influence your life. All of us are inspired by the lives of great individuals. Who are your heroes? Does someone inspire you to do good or express your virtue ethics. Is this hero selfless? Selflessness means thinking of others—doing for others. Does their humanitarian or noble work reduce homelessness, assists refugees or preserve rights of others. 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 will behave in selfless ways? Heroes performing humanitarian acts have an 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 change your life.

Undoubtedly, heroes can influence more than just one person’s life and can alter the course of history. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a wonderful example. Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez and Gandhi are great examples of how a life can influence history. Humanitarian

acts abolishing unjust laws, exploitation and social inequality resulted in positive outcomes. A true hero’s life has the potential to create major societal change. The lives of heroes leave us with a legacy to honor.