

7. *Inspiring Self-Transcendence*

Religions regularly expose people to models of magnificent achievement: Moses, Jesus, the Prophet, the Buddha, and all the ancient and modern saints of every religion. Over and over the believer is reminded "You *can* do better, you *can* display your Buddha-nature; you *can* attempt the Imitation of Christ." And sometimes these injunctions click with the believer, and motivate him or her to be stronger, wiser, more honest, more compassionate.

Where can we find inspirations like these outside religion? It has become fashionable punditry to say that rising secularism has cut us all off from mythic models. In this chapter we will first consider whether that's so (my answer is "no").

Then we have to ask, how do we recognize a saint or a hero, or any kind of excellence, when we see it? The answer is not at all simple; but it has deep implications for how we should go about finding role models for ourselves and our children.

Why do we need heroes at all? Because we need them as standards in order to define ourselves; but what does "self-definition" mean? After we know that, we can finally plan a program for collecting heroes.

No more mythic ideals?

For many years, writers have regularly noted that the rise of secularism, and the supposed eviction of religion from the center of

life, has left people without models. Here are two genuinely wise men who fretted about it a third of a century ago:

Every age but ours has had its model, its ideal. All of these have been given up by our culture; the saint, the hero, the gentleman, the knight, the mystic. About all we have left is the well-adjusted man without problems, a very pale and doubtful substitute.

– Abraham Maslow¹

...the democratic ideal of the self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research, have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed. In the fateful, epoch-announcing words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Dead are all the gods."

– Joseph Campbell²

But Joseph Campbell probably knew that Thomas Carlyle had said something quite similar in 1840:

I am well aware that in these days Hero-worship, the thing I call Hero-worship, professes to have gone out, and finally ceased. This... is an age that as it were denies the existence of great men; denies the desirableness of great men.³

One hundred fifty-nine years after Carlyle, the message from children's book critic Marjorie Allen was the same, with added details:

Once upon a time, role models were public figures who exhibited virtues that parents hoped their children might emulate... Today, public figures have been dissected into oblivion by the media. Sports heroes gamble and take drugs. Presidents don't always tell the truth. Entertainers have feet of clay. The pedestals have toppled, and young people are hard pressed to find anyone to meet their expectations.⁴

Do we truly suffer a dearth of Heros? Even as I revved up my best rhetoric to echo these pundits, I had to stop and wonder. For one thing, when was this golden time when everyone had untainted heroes? Carlyle's testimony pushes it back at least into the eighteenth century. Perhaps, I began to suspect, it was only the most sophisticated thinkers who had been failed by their heroes. Was the absence real for everyone?

All heroes tainted?

Certainly anyone who keeps up with the news will be tempted to agree Marjorie Allen. But step back a bit and think about her examples. "Sports heroes gamble"? Well, it was a tragedy that Pete Rose, for many years a model of dedication and high achievement, was caught being greedy. But is that late news? The greatest gambling scandal in baseball history, beside which Rose's alleged sins are peccadillos, occurred in 1919!

True, every few months a sports figure is exposed as taking drugs. But really, what's new is not the drugs; what's new is the public exposure. We are aware of it because of regular testing and greater awareness among officials, the media, and the public. And keep in mind, there are two kinds of sports drug scandals. There are players who take banned substances for competitive advantage, like the Bulgarian weight-lifters in the 2000 Olympics. In essence, this is cheating at the game, looking for an illegitimate edge. Just the accusation is enough to humiliate a player and damage the player's career.

Less often, entertainment figures or players are outed for using illegal, recreational drugs like cocaine (in the week I write, the unhappy Darryl Strawberry has failed yet another urine test). They are punished legally as well as being humiliated and kept from their game.

All these exposures serve a public purpose. They are presented to us as morality plays. The solemn press conferences and well-publicized court appearances are the modern equivalent of the Puritans' stocks and ducking stool. It's our way of displaying social offenders to the community as bad examples to be avoided. We need those negative examples; they keep our rules credible. Fallen heroes are just as useful, in their way, as saints.

Entertainers with feet of clay? I can't think of any modern entertainers who party as hard or sleep around as widely as those in Hollywood of the 20s, 30s, and 40s. We permit entertainers to be outrageous, and admire them for doing it well (think: Madonna); but when they step even slightly out of line, we come down on them hard (think: Hugh Grant). We didn't do that even as recently as the 60s; President Kennedy's amours were ignored, as was Eisenhower's wartime relationship with an aide that, today, would bring deadly serious treatment as sexual harassment. We are

holding public figures to higher standards than ever before, and when they betray even a little clay on their toenails we give them a good public spanking. The ones that are left are a pretty clean bunch.

As for presidents who lie: I'm sure Allen, writing in 1999, had Bill Clinton in mind, but I can remember how Richard Nixon made a whole career of lying; can even remember the now-sainted Eisenhower who, through Dulles and other aides, lied quite blatantly about U.S. interference in Latin America. The most visibly moral President of recent times, Jimmy Carter, was one of our least successful leaders.

I'm not saying it's OK for a president (or anyone) to lie. I am saying that anyone who looks to a president or other political leader for a model of moral behavior is bound to be disappointed. People with sense will look to political leaders for models of effectiveness and vision, and look elsewhere for models of morality or kindness.

Dearth of models?

Then I asked myself, is it true there are no positive, public role models? And realized that, not only is there no dearth of them, but that we have a wide and ever-shifting pantheon of modern cultural heroes who are regularly held up to display some kind of beauty or skill or courage. I had not noticed because, curmudgeon that I am, I usually dismiss them.

Think of the continued, reverent display of historical icons like Martin Luther King, Abe Lincoln, George Washington. School kids are subjected to their stories every year as their holidays roll around. Gettysburg address, yeah, yeah; "I have a dream," sure, sure; crossing the Delaware, ho-hum. Those old chestnuts don't resonate with me; they're for kids. Oh! Er, wait a minute... Just because I am a jaded old poop who finds the annual eulogizing of Reverend King overblown and irritating does not mean that he can't inspire other, younger people.

So I asked an experienced primary-school teacher what kinds of role models she was offering children these days. "Oh, lots; there's a whole new pantheon," she replied. She mentioned Ruby Bridges Hall, the 6-year-old girl who was the first African-American to integrate a segregated school, and the video on Rev. King, *Our Friend Martin*. In a school where the student body is about one-third

Asian and one-third African-American, the Disney movie *Mulan* was “a huge hit.” But when she polled her classes on who were their heroes, almost half named their parents first, ahead of any culturally-supplied icon. Another large fraction named an older sibling, aunt, uncle, or teacher⁵. At least for young children, the figures who define excellence are most often the people they live with — which suggests that the search should start at home.

The offerings of pop culture

Not only had I been blind to elementary-school role models, I’d been ignoring the crowds of faces that American popular culture thrusts at us. Think of the popularity of sports figures like Barry Bonds and Tiger Woods. I’m not interested in golf, and did not think that Tiger’s winning the U.S. Open by 15 strokes justified ranking him with the greatest sports heroes of all time; but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t a hero to many. And reasonably so: his skills are superb, his personality affable, his public behavior exemplary.

And so on: just because *I* have no interest in Ellen DeGeneris’s sexuality and wish she’d get back to being funny... just because *I* think Oprah Winfrey is a calculating panderer to the worst in human nature... just because *I* think Britney Spears, Eminem, and Christina Aguilera — to name three who have top-10 hits in the week I write — make vapid, boring music... In short, just because current media icons leave *me* bored and uninspired, does not mean that each one does not excite and inspire some group of people.

In fact, when I actually *look* without prejudging or condescending, I see that my culture presents a veritable smorgasbord of models in sports, entertainment, politics and the news. Every one of them is given a place under the spotlight because he or she displays some quality that grips the imagination of some number of people.

There is a problem of emphasis. My culture offers its greatest rewards to models of health, beauty, fashion sense, witty chat, physical skill, and physical courage. It gives small reward to exemplars of quieter virtues like charity, forgiveness, or patience.

Yet this culture, so often called shallow, regularly displays and celebrates models of intelligence, for example Bill Moyers, Stephen Hawking, the late Carl Sagan. This culture, so often called grasping and materialistic, takes pains to celebrate public service. You don’t think so? What, then, is the subtext of shows like *NYPD Blue*, *ER*,

and *The West Wing*, if not the display of mythic icons of self-sacrificing public service — people who, when the chips are down, put the good of the public ahead of their personal concerns?

Indeed, my culture is so rich, and has so many specialist nooks and minority crannies, that there must be an idol to match anyone's interests. There are probably heroes of Persian cat breeding, Olympian figures of garden railway design.

And when the culture fails to thrust idols at us, we can fall back on the grade-school method, and find some real people to admire.

There are role models everywhere for everyone. The real issue is how we recognize them.

Perceiving excellence

How do we recognize something as good, as worth adoring or emulating? Let me tell two personal anecdotes; then we can get theoretical.

Vaaahh-roooooom

The time: a summer afternoon in 1956 or 1957, my 13th or 14th year. The place: a flat, straight, quiet stretch of two-lane asphalt highway south of Tacoma, Washington. The sky is overcast, the air cool and damp, the empty road lined on both sides by dark, shaggy Douglas firs. I am riding my bicycle slowly homeward, with several miles to go and a long hill yet to climb.

From around a bend half a mile behind comes a sports car. I am almost certain, now, that it was an MG-A coupe; a check of the history of the marque shows that the closed coupe was first produced in 1956. It's a stretch to suppose that one of the little British coupes reached the Puget Sound country in its first year, but it could have happened.

So: riding casually along, listening to the scrunch of the gravel shoulder under the balloon tires, I hear behind me the boom of an engine at high RPM. Stop, put a foot down, turn, and see this tiny, white, streamlined coupe, its roof barely higher than my belt-buckle, come past at high speed, *vaaahhh-roooooom!* and disappear around the bend half a mile ahead.

In only a few seconds exposure, the sight and sound of that little car defined and clarified so many things to my adolescent brain. That image became, for years, my personal icon of freedom, of speed, of self-sufficiency, of elegance. I had no particular choice in this; it simply occurred: perception and comprehension, unverballed and instant.

Now batting... Rod Carew

Fast-forward 25 years or so, to a different state, a different life, different concerns. Sometime around 1983, I became aware of Rod Carew for the first time. I had only been paying serious attention to baseball for a couple of years, mostly to the local San Francisco Giants. For some reason, I tuned into an American League game on television, and when a slight, wiry man took his stance at the plate, I was transfixed.

Carew at that time was near the end of his career⁶. His batting stance was unusual. He somehow coiled his body like a spring, in a way that suggested a rattlesnake preparing to strike. All his weight was on his back foot; his arms holding the bat framed his head; the toe of his leading shoe probed delicately for balance. He awaited each pitch in that coiled stance, rocking gently, conveying an impression of absolute concentration, of perfect readiness. When he swung, his whole body uncoiled like a whip and his bat simply flashed through the flight of the ball. Quite often, the ball rocketed precisely between or over the defenders for a base hit.

I only watched Carew bat a few times, and never in person, always on television. But his batting style gripped my imagination for months. I had never seen anything that so mingled delicacy, precision, and power. For quite a while (and occasionally still) I used a mental image of Rod Carew at the plate as a kind of visual metaphor for the right approach to any physical task: delicately balanced, perfectly focussed, moving only at the exact moment and with the exact force needed.

Pirsig's metaphysics of quality

The point of these two anecdotes is that in each case, a *single momentary exposure* was enough to create a heroic or mythic image in my mind. And I think this is typical: when we recognize quality, we do so instantly, without cogitation, usually without any

comment beyond “wow!” The process is not intentional. We do not *create* heroes and we are definitely not *taught* heroes; we *recognize* heroes, instantly. This has important implications.

The phrase “recognize quality” in the previous paragraph may have reminded you of something you’ve read. “How we recognize quality” is a summary of the theme of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*⁷, a best-seller in the 1970s and still popular. Pirsig has continued to develop his Metaphysics of Quality into a detailed philosophy of human perception⁸, a philosophy that resonates strongly with many people⁹.

Here’s how Pirsig stated his theme in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*:

Quality — you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. .. Obviously some things are better than others — but what's the “betterness”?

You know from watching and from introspection that, generally speaking, people instantly agree on measures of quality: who or what is more beautiful, more elegant, more graceful, more amazing, more affecting. There are differences between cultures and between individuals within a culture; yet if you show a group of people from one culture a choice between two faces, or two natural scenes, or two poems, you’ll get a clear majority preferring one over the other. And it doesn’t take any significant time, any debate or analysis, to make these choices. What are people detecting so readily?

I remember pondering this while hiking in Yosemite valley. Walking on North Dome, looking through a mile of air at the faces of Cloud's Rest and Half Dome, I wondered, in what is the magnificence?



There's no magnificent-o-meter we can apply to the material scene. No physical measurement could describe anything but granite, trees, air. Yet nine of ten people shown this scene would agree that it is magnificent — of high quality, in Pirsig's sense. (And the tenth would probably be thinking about philosophy.)

Pirsig dives into this problem. If Quality can't be measured in an objective way, it is automatically assigned to the other side of a cruel dichotomy: things that aren't objective must be subjective, and subjective things have a doubly bad reputation. First, the tradition of scientific materialism discards the subjective:

The whole purpose of scientific method is to ... eliminate the subjective, unreal, imaginary elements from one's work ...
When he said Quality was subjective, to them he was just saying Quality is imaginary and could therefore be disregarded in any serious consideration of reality.

Also the academic tradition of classic formalism "insists that what isn't understood intellectually isn't understood at all," a doctrine that labels any instant, unthinking judgment as worthless. Yet the perception of Quality is clearly instant and unthinking, yet real and worthwhile. How can that be resolved with scientific and academic thought?

Pirsig's resolution is to short out the subjective/objective dichotomy by moving earlier in the process of perception. He declares that Quality is the instantaneous event at which the subject becomes aware of the object:

...at the cutting edge of time, before an object can be distinguished, there must be a kind of nonintellectual awareness, which he called awareness of Quality. You can't be aware that you've seen a tree until after you've seen the tree, and between the instant of vision and instant of awareness there must be a time lag. ... Reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualization takes place. There is no other reality. This preintellectual reality is what Phaedrus felt he had properly identified as Quality.

In the terms I used in Chapter 6 ("Synthesis: Awareness preceding construction" on page 88), Pirsig bases his Metaphysics of Quality on the assertion that awareness precedes construction — coincidentally, just the conclusion needed to account for the Bliss experience and other meditative phenomena.¹⁰

If Pirsig is correct, we recognize Quality in the timeless instant of seeing, before thinking happens. The perception of Yosemite valley as magnificent occurs in much less time than it takes to dredge up the word "magnificent." In the same way, I registered that MG-A coupe, or Rod Carew in his batting stance, as something unusually good, and did so in a thoughtless instant. How might the mind be organized so that instant recognitions like this can happen?

The intersection of quality with growth

Recognition of a remarkable thing is instant and precedes cogitation and analysis. Of course, the thinking does follow. We become aware that the incredibly beautiful person of the opposite sex is wearing a ring. Time reveals that the singer had only the one decent song. And so on. But we don't spend *any* time thinking about things that don't capture our imagination in the first place. We don't check for wedding rings on the hands of boring people; we don't listen for more music by a performer when we didn't like the first number we heard. So the first hurdle a hero or saint must cross in entering our mind is to make a powerful first impression.

But powerful first impressions are unpredictable and rare. When will we suddenly realize that a certain person is amazingly skillful,

or intelligent, or brave, or is heroically honest, or persevering, or self-sacrificing? Each such impression is a happy accident that occurs when the moment that we apprehend the person intersects with our changing ability to value those qualities. A month earlier in our own growth, or even a day, and we wouldn't be ready to appreciate that person. And if we encounter them in the wrong context — Rod Carew had to be seen batting, Rod Carew muffing a ground ball on defense would make no impression — then we don't even see them.

Since the process is basically random, the basic strategy for finding Heros is to seek widely, in order to increase the chances of a hit. Now we can appreciate the wisdom of the Catholic Church in developing a vast range of saints, each with distinct qualities, which makes an approved hero available to any parishioner at any stage of development. But what about the rest of us? We'll come back to that after considering what we are trying to accomplish.

Celebrating contingency

In Chapter 2 I urged you to accept and to celebrate having a contingent nature; that is, being an incomputably improbable accident. Being contingent means that each of us is the only representative of our personal genome that will *ever* exist. It's a position of incredible freedom because you are positioned to know and exploit every possibility of that inheritance. It's a position of responsibility because *only* you can realize the possibilities of your inheritance.

Fortunately, realizing our own best possibilities is, quite literally, the natural thing for us to do:

Man demonstrates in his own nature a pressure toward more and more perfect actualization of his humanness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be "pressing toward" being an oak tree, or a horse toward being equine ... And creativeness, spontaneity, self-hood, authenticity, caring for others, being able to love, yearning for truth are embryonic potentialities belonging to his species-membership just as much as are his arms and legs and brain and eyes.¹¹

Self-definition

The process of filling out the envelope of our humanness is often called “self-definition.” The positive message of the Existentialists was that self-definition is both possible and necessary as a direct consequence of our contingency: we are able to define ourselves precisely, and only, because nothing predefined us.

Alas, this notion that you must define yourself is usually stated in a frightening way — as if there were some Self-Definition Examining Board you must face, or an annual Self-Definer license you must have in order to avoid arrest by the Existence Police. People who have no problem with the idea that they are contingent can still frighten themselves with this idea.

But if we are contingent, then not only is there no external authority that defined our natures, there is also no external authority to judge what we do with them! There can't be; if there were a supernatural Examining Board to judge our self-definition against some standard, that would simply re-introduce the divine plan and determined nature in an ex-post-facto version that would be even less fair.

Once you accept the Existentialist's motto “existence precedes essence,” you have claimed not only the absolute freedom to define yourself, but also the absolute right to establish the standards by which that definition, and your achievement of it, will be judged. In other words, not only are we allowed to write our own entries in the great Dictionary of Human DNA, but we get to invent the language in which we write them!

One small caveat

The Existentialists emphasized the freedom and responsibility of self-definition. Maslow, the late savant of self-definition from whom I am drawing frequent quotes, cautioned that this freedom is not open-ended. Unqualified, the Existentialist message can be misread as a “denial of specieshood and of a biological human nature:”

Yes, man is in a way his own project and he does make himself. But also there are limits upon what he can make himself into. The ‘project’ is predetermined biologically for all men; it is to become a man. He cannot adopt as his project

for himself to become a chimpanzee. Or even a female. Or even a baby.¹²

This reminder from Maslow is comforting; it trims an ill-defined project of self-definition back to a much clearer, achievable job. You need not choose a goal from an infinite array of possibilities. Your goal is only to demonstrate the strength and beauty that is implicit in your very particular genome, in the context of your very particular culture and historical moment.

Be a *mensch*.

– traditional Yiddish invitation to self-actualization.

Standards of self-definition

Of course, we still need standards of comparison, and there is no source of them except the ones we receive from other people. We rely completely on other people's opinions to tell us how successful we are at being ourselves. Think it through: what is your "self," anyway?

It is not that physical carcass you inhabit, however handsome it may be just now. This truth can be argued in several ways. The Buddha focussed on the impermanence of the body, how it changes, ages, succumbs to disease. If you base your definition of yourself on the form of your body, you build on a foundation of sand. Again, you can give up almost any part of your body that the surgeon may demand: limbs, lungs, "liver and lights"; hack 'em off in the name of survival; swap in a transplant; "you" remain.

But your self can't be the present contents of your mind, either, because they also change constantly. Just as your body contains hardly a single molecule it had when you were a child, your mind also contains hardly a single opinion that is the same as when you were young.

What constitutes a "self" is memory: the internal recollection of a history, of a personal, continuous trajectory through time. It is only that trajectory — the curve of the wake you leave on the surface of time — that is at least slightly under your control, and at least semi-permanent in your memory and other peoples' memories.

We evaluate our historic selves by contrasting them to the stories we receive about other people, both real and fictional. This is natural and appropriate: we are social beings. But for best results, we need

to use good, challenging, standards for comparison. And that points up the importance of our selection of heroes.

Publishing a self-definition

One tragedy of life is that nobody else will ever comprehend your personal history as you understand it. There's no way to download your memories in full to somebody else (although, pathetically, we often try). Words are inadequate; and anyway, there's no audience with the patience to sit through the whole story.

Yet we have strong practical reasons for letting other people know how we currently understand ourselves. It is also useful to quickly learn other peoples' self-definitions. And this is why we dress our bodies and furnish our lives with material symbols: in order to summarize ourselves to others. In gesture and accent, in choice of possessions and style of facial hair, in a thousand subtle ways we advertise what we think to be our own present co-ordinates and direction in life-space. This is a communal effort using a common language: we continually read other peoples' advertisements and adjust our own to match theirs, or to compete with them.

In adolescence, the whole thing seemed impossibly difficult. Like many, I adopted a public attitude of scorn toward the "pretension" of dress, of "fitting a niche." And, of course, I dressed and wore my hair in a way that advertised how I saw myself in relation to the communal language of dress and hair, like someone chanting "English is trivial," in English. The only way to really step out of the game of self-advertisement is to step completely out of society.

But the idea of a human life lived in complete isolation, without reference to a society even for contrast, is almost as hard to conceive as the sound of one hand clapping. We have no choice but to define ourselves using the symbology that is understood in our community; and have no choice but to interact with other people on the basis of their self-descriptions given in the same language.

In short, *why* we have to define ourselves is to establish and justify our place in a community; and *how* we do it is by using the cultural symbols that are understood in that community; and *why we bother* is because other people are of critical importance to our own health and happiness (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Professional help for the project of self

The project of self-definition is automatically a project of self-improvement, because inevitably the images we form of how we ought to be are always at least slightly larger than we are at the moment. And self-improvement can be grandly called self-transcendence: we try to get beyond our present limitations, try to begin to prove there is a butterfly in this cocoon.

One way toward self-transcendence is to choose a few good models and strive to be more like them (the ostensible subject of this chapter, toward which we are slowly returning). But another is to work directly on your own psychology, trying to understand and remove its weaknesses and build up its strengths. For this, you might consider getting professional advice. There isn't a lot of it around, however.

One school of Psychology is directed toward the study and improvement of the healthy mind. This is the school of Humanistic Psychology, founded in the 1950s by the late Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and others. Humanistic psychology "emphasizes the independent dignity and worth of human beings and their conscious capacity to develop personal competence and self respect," and it aims "to enhance such distinctly human qualities as choice, creativity, the interaction of the body, mind and spirit, and the capacity to become more aware, free, responsible, life-affirming and trustworthy."¹³ The flavor of writings in Humanistic Psychology tends to be practical and people-oriented.

Transpersonal Psychology, although it was founded in the same effervescent years of the 50s and 60s, is a rather different school. Transpersonal psychologists are the only ones to give serious attention to the mystical experience (Chapter 6), and the literature of this school speaks often of self-transcendence. Unfortunately, a great deal of its literature also accepts and promotes "mysticism, occultism, supernaturalism, and religiosity."¹⁴ A cautious person should be careful when looking for help from a Transpersonal (or indeed, any) therapist.

In Europe there is a small but growing trend toward "philosophical counseling"; that is, persons schooled in philosophy who offer personal counseling on life issues¹⁵. This idea has a certain appeal. After all, classical philosophy contains as many sound answers to questions of "How should we live?" as any other body of thought.

A sensitive person who listens well and who is well-versed in philosophy ought to be able to give good advice. However, there are no professional standards for “philosophical counselors.” It would be as easy to set up shop as a philosophical counselor as it is to go into business as, say, a Feng Shui advisor, although perhaps not as lucrative.

Modesty and impermanence

There is a mistake in the notion of “defining yourself.” It lies in two unstated implications: that the definition is supposed, somehow, to be permanent; and that its function is to benefit the future. When these ideas are examined (not often) they are quickly seen as false. The only use of your self-definition is to serve you, in the moment and in your present context.

Permanence is impossible because you can never finish the project. A human life isn’t a word that can be stated, it’s a continuous process. You are not an obelisk, you are a fountain; not a fine granite spire engraved with a statement, but a spray of particles outlining a form that sways in the wind of circumstance. Everyone who survives to old age will have had several different careers and will have played several different life roles. There’s never a point when you can dust off your hands and say, “There, that’s me, finished.” Even on your deathbed, there’s still the challenge of demonstrating how well you can die.

And then, after you’ve died, the life that you sculpted so carefully will be ruthlessly condensed in the memory of your descendants. What survives of it will be reinterpreted according to the standards of days you can’t imagine. Do you suppose your great-grandfather would be flattered if he could know how you think of him? Your great-grandchild’s concept of you will be just as detailed and just as fair as that.

Finally, modesty is important. Consider for a moment what it means to be one of six billion people (the UN noted the six-billionth birth the week I wrote this). In order to bring this number home, you need 1,000 of something, or at least 124 small coins, like U.S. pennies.

On your living-room carpet, lay out a square array of 32 by 32 coins. If that isn’t convenient, lay out just the perimeter of such a grid, 124 coins defining a 32x32 array. Now you have an image of a thousand

coins, near enough. (Actually 32×32 is 1024, a computer “K.”) The U.S. penny is 3/4-inch in diameter (19mm), so a thousand-penny array is 24 inches square (0.6m).

Now, visualize 1000 such grids. In your mind’s eye, imagine that each one of the coins in your grid swells and divides into a new square of 1000 coins. There you have a solid sheet of 1024×1024 coins — if pennies, it is 64 feet on a side (19.5m). Pace off this distance in your front yard. Can you visualize that sheet of shiny coins? This is a million coins. It is a visual model of the population of a medium city, and coincidentally about the number by which the human population increases each week.

Now imagine 1000 such sheets of pennies. Picture an array of sheets, 32 on a side. As pennies, they would carpet a field 2,000 feet on a side (622m). Picture the largest parking lot you have ever seen at a business office or shopping mall, with every square inch carpeted with coins. That’s just *one* billion coins.

Got that image clear? Now recall that there are *six* billion people alive today. And they are all busily defining themselves.

The good news: if you can do it only average well, there are still three billion who aren’t doing it as well as you. And, among the three billion people doing it better, you ought to be able to find some heroes.

Finding heroes

We are surrounded by people being heroic in some way — heroically brave, heroically tolerant, heroically clever, heroically compassionate — but they are hard to notice because they look like just ordinary people. Our media parade others before us; and we have thousands of books, fiction and nonfiction, describing more. The problem is to notice them and appreciate them.

Finding your own heroes

In fiction you can find complete heroes: people who are wholly admirable, or whose failings are limited and chosen to highlight their virtues. Actual people are more mixed, but also far more numerous and accessible. In looking for real-life heroes you have to be content to look at facets of lives. You have to be willing to admire one skill or virtue contained in a very ordinary life.

This is especially true of sports, entertainment and political figures. You know very little about these people; you have no idea what they are like when they go home at night. All you know is what you see on the field or stage. And that's all right. You are able to watch them do their best, to see exactly those facets of their lives that are worth admiring. It would be silly to assume they are anything but ordinary when they are out of the spotlight, but that in no way invalidates the power or brilliance of their performance when they are in it.

And you can extrapolate in some remarkable ways. Sports really can supply metaphors for the rest of life. I don't think I was silly when I tried to drive a car the way Rod Carew batted; it worked, for me, for a while. Anyone could take the laser-like intensity of a Tiger Woods or a Mia Hamm and use it as an icon for the right way to approach *any* task.

Give up jadedness

You are unlikely to see quality if you don't concede that quality exists. You won't notice value in public figures, especially ones in popular culture, if you are jaded.

A condescending air, as any adolescent quickly learns, is a protection. It permits you to dismiss things that might otherwise upset you or make you look small or inadequate. Adolescents need protection like this to avoid being overwhelmed by life. Alas, an unconsidered habit of condescension, carried into adulthood, blocks our ability to see quality in great chunks of our culture.

This is why I am suspicious of people who mention smugly how little TV they watch. I don't watch a lot of TV either, but that is only because I don't know of shows that are more interesting than other things I want to do. Two considerations keep me from feeling smug about this. First, I know that there are thousands of talented people working in the TV industry. They can't all be failing all the time. Somewhere on the 70-odd channels on my cable system, sometime during every day, something is shown that would interest me, perhaps even dazzle me, if I watched it. Further, every minute of air time on those channels contains content that interests somebody, that is, some human being who is not so very different from me. I don't have the time to look, but I have no basis for assuming it's all uninteresting.

I and my wife have a private expression for this: “the Niagara Effect.” Planning a trip through the Northeast, we debated whether to stop at Niagara Falls. We had a world-weary impression that it was just some tourist thing, a place for honeymooners who had no imagination. But finally we did include a stop at Niagara Falls and, guess what? The falls are spectacular! We looked at them from every vantage point; we took the boat ride; we even had to confess that we were impressed when they were lit up at night with colored searchlights. We decided it was a pretty good rule of thumb that, if a whole lot of people go to a place over a long period of time, it is not because the people are sheep. It’s because there is something genuinely worth seeing there.

Apply the Niagara Rule to celebrities of the culture. There are almost no wholly manufactured celebrities¹⁶. It’s a pretty sure bet that every celebrity has some genuinely admirable facet. Perhaps that isn’t a facet that excites you; that’s fine, just be willing to concede that it excites some people. And keep looking; there are thousands of celebrities and new ones every minute.

Give up cynicism

Jadedness is the feeling that you’ve seen everything good and everything to come is just repetition. Condescension is the feeling that there’s nothing happening that rises to your standards, your level of sophistication. Cynicism is worse yet; it’s the feeling that there simply is nothing good, everyone is venal and everything they make is intentional trash.

Clearly, a habit of cynicism is a highly effective filter against recognizing any sort of hero. Try to give up such a habit. Persuade yourself that there might really be admirable people around you. Be prepared to encounter examples of goodness, virtue, genuine Quality. One of the commonest virtues is courage, the simple guts it takes to go on living and not collapse in despair. You meet people who display that courage every day, if you will deign to notice them.

Because people are such mixtures, it is necessary to notice and admire tiny facets. You never know when a person you meet will display one momentary instance of courage, of grace, of gallantry, of forbearance, of wit, and in that instant become a lasting icon in your private collection of mythic images.

Inventing a hero

Your icons of excellence do not have to be drawn from the real world. After all, icons are flashes, striking moments, powerful impressions in your mind — which means that they have only a tenuous link to the reality of the people that inspired them. There is nothing wrong with finding such an image in a book. There is no telling when a powerful idea from a page will intersect with your own development to spark an explosion in your mind.

Finding heroes for children

Children aren't troubled by cynicism or ennui; they are wide open to perceiving Quality and storing it. But they also make radical adjustments in the contents of their minds every hour, so you can never guess what will impress them. And because they spend the greatest amount of time among their peers, the greatest number of things that catch their imaginations will be drawn from the behavior and attitudes of their friends. (Wasn't that how it was with you?)

You probably can't hope to be more influential than your children's peer group, but you could try to come in second by adopting a strategy like that of the Catholic Church: make sure there are lots of potential heroes and saints around at all times. The most convenient way to do that is through books.

There are a number of books specifically designed to present historical figures as heroes. These days, girls are better served than boys, with many books on admirable females. Marjorie Allen discusses more than 100 books that contain characters, male and female, who are admirable in some way¹⁷.

Beyond that, be alert to the process of hero-acquisition as it happens. What makes your child gasp "wow!?" What rivets his usually wandering attention? Who does she suddenly begin to imitate? You can't control a process as instantaneous as the perception of Quality, but you can pick up clues as to what other icons might work at this momentary stage of growth.

Summary

We don't intentionally select our heroes, our mythic icons of goodness; we discover them, in a rare and near-instantaneous process of recognizing Quality. We use these heroes and icons to guide us in a necessary and never-ending process of self-definition. We can always use more examples of Quality. Fortunately, and contrary to conventional wisdom, we are surrounded by potential heroes, and if we shed our habits of condescension and cynicism we can recognize them anywhere.

