

On Greatness & Masculinity – Lara M. Brown, Ph.D.

“No great advance has ever been made in science, politics, or religion, without controversy.” –Lyman Beecher (1775-1863)

Daily, we are faced with choices. To act or not act; to engage in what may be deemed necessary or important, or as Aristotle differentiates, “merely, and simply useful;” to make a morally right decision, or to accept an expedient outcome. Ethics classes have debated these quandaries since at least the fifth century B.C.,¹ but these are not the only choices we face as we proceed through our lives. Not all of our choices can be separated into what has been commonly described, most notably and exhaustibly by Plato, as higher (or “ideal”) and lower acts or impulses. Not every choice is a choice between the morally right (e.g., being honest) and the morally wrong (e.g., lying); some choices are between two equally moral virtues, or two equally just causes. The reason for this is that the moral virtues are themselves in conflict. Kindness and honesty have difficulty coexisting simultaneously, as do loyalty and truth, patience and courage, and compassion and justice. We are torn then not simply between higher and lower acts or impulses, but also between two equally ideal behaviors. Thus, we most often find ourselves struggling not between that which is right or wrong, but between that which is “more or less” right.

GOODNESS

The solution to this paradox for Plato, Aristotle and the many philosophers, who followed in their stead has been to counsel us to lead a life of moderation, engaging temperance to strike a balance between the virtues, to employ our reason, experience, and by the eighteenth century and

¹ Socrates, who lived from 469 –399 B.C., in many ways, began the debate on ethics in Western philosophy (see: Gottlieb, Anthony, 2000. *The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 131-168)

Adam Smith,² our sympathy to guide us toward moral action. In doing so, they told us that we would become good, and it was our goodness that would lead us toward wisdom, felicity, and fortune.³

Goodness, therefore, arises from moderation. This means, as James Q. Wilson points out, that the people who are “the best balanced” are those whom we deem to have good character.⁴ Hence, those individuals who exhibit temperance and moderation, and seem most often to display the most appropriate behaviors given the circumstance, employing their faculties of sympathy, reason, and experience in equal measure, are those whom society deems “good” men. Taking this idea one step further, if goodness is defined as a balance between the moral virtues then it also relates to a society’s collective norms because each society (or group) determines the primacy (or ordering) of the moral virtues for its members. Every group (or collective) establishes the primacy for the virtues that it believes possess greater worth, and the individuals deemed “good” are those who most reflect that ordering and exhibit that society’s agreed upon balance of virtues. Some collectives may cherish and praise honesty more than kindness, while others may value activity more than passivity, and still others may value compassion more than justice—the list is quite endless.

² Though most know Smith for *The Wealth of Nations*, his philosophy book, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, argues that our ability to feel empathy (or more precisely sympathy) forms the moral basis for our behavior.

³ “It is impossible for those who do not do good actions to do well, and there is no such thing as a man’s or a state’s good action without virtue or practical wisdom” (*The Politics*, Book VII, I, p.393, 1981 edition).

⁴ “Now by character we mean two things: a distinctive combination of personal qualities by which someone is known (that is a personality), and moral strength or integrity. We judge people whole, assessing their strengths and weaknesses and reckoning up the totals into a kind of human balance sheet. People with the best balance sheets—that is the most admirable characters—are usually not people who are perfect or have every single virtue to the highest degree; since the virtues—that is, the moral senses—are partially in conflict, that would be impossible. People with the best balance sheets are those who are the best balanced. In common parlance they are “nice persons” or “good guys,” or in polite (and vanishing) discourse, “ladies” and “gentlemen” (*The Moral Sense*, 1993:240-41).

Each society chooses those virtues that will support the society itself, and the moral virtues promoted are usually those that maintain the status quo. Often, conflict arises between groups when there is a conflict in the ordering of the moral virtues supporting each collective. Whether two corporations, two political parties, two interest groups, or two countries with varying cultures, the conflict generally stems from the underlying ordering of virtues. The conflict becomes especially apparent when those groups are forced or otherwise called upon to merge, interact, or compromise (e.g., corporate takeovers, divided government, or international treaties).

Historian Edward Ayers's book about the North and the South prior to the Civil War provides just such an example, asserting that the crucial regional difference was that the North cherished the virtue of dignity, while the South cherished the virtue of honor. He explains: "Honor in the Southern United States cannot be understood without reference to dignity, its antithesis and adversary to the north."⁵ He then shows how this relative ordering of virtues put these two societies on a path toward war. America's two political parties offer another example of groups that cherish virtues in differing orders: Democrats may be said to place a higher value on process and liberty, while Republicans may be said to place a higher value on outcome and duty.⁶ As with the Ayers' example, we can see how these conflicting orderings will lead to a conflict between the parties irrespective of the public policy issue on the agenda. But what is more important for our discussion here, is noticing that being a "good" Democrat means

⁵ *Vengeance & Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century South*, 1984. New York: Oxford University Press. "Dignity might be likened to an internal skeleton, to a hard structure at the center of the self; honor, on the other hand, resembles a cumbersome and vulnerable suit of armor that once pierced, leaves the self no protection and no alternative except to strike back in desperation." (1984:20).

⁶ See for instance, the party attribute and stereotype differences literature (Rahn, 1993, 1996).

something different from being a “good” Republican, just as being a “good” Northerner meant something different from being a “good” Southerner in the 1850s.

Goodness, therefore, is defined by one’s society, and in this sense, goodness means, fundamentally, not bucking the system. A good person does what is expected of them, making peer pressure another side of this coin. Importantly, these themes are not confined to philosophy texts or history books, they appear in myriad form like novels, music, and films across time and they infuse our culture. One contemporary film, *The Good Girl*, starring Jennifer Aniston, centers on this inherent tension in goodness. At one critical moment, Aniston is specifically called a “good girl,” not because she is virtuous—in fact, she engages in a series of moral transgressions throughout the film, including adultery and deception—but because she does what is “expected of her” by her peers, her husband, and her boss. Her fictional story is not terribly unusual. Societies often reinforce and reward this type of goodness because it helps preserve the society. More examples can be found in as far reaching cases as employee of the month programs or the records of prisoner parolees, where the rewards are distributed to those who are most able to reflect the ordering of virtues valued by that group or society. The awards or benefits are not necessarily given to those who were empirically the “best.” Hence, goodness requires individuals to become temperate, and achieve balance and alignment with society’s ordering of virtues.

GREATNESS

Greatness, on the other hand, requires something altogether different. It asks us to be imbalanced and intemperate, and it requires an unwavering dedication to a passion, no matter the societal cost and irrespective of society’s ordering of virtues. “[Greatness],” as psychologist Dean Keith Simonton explains, “is a career. People who wish to do so [achieve greatness] must

organize their whole lives around a single enterprise. They must be monomaniacs, even megalomaniacs, about their pursuits. They must start early, labor continuously, and never give up the cause. Success is not for the lazy, procrastinating, or mercurial.”⁷

Furthermore, greatness is an individual trait. We each live and are driven by our own passion, and should we achieve greatness, it will manifest itself uniquely in our chosen fields. This is not to say that societies or other collectives cannot achieve greatness, it is just that as Sinclair Lewis explains: “That nation is proudest and noblest and most exalted, which has the greatest number of really great men.”⁸ This is true of great sports teams, academic institutions, corporations, and political administrations; the greatness achieved by those entities comes from the individual greatness of the people associated with them. Greatness does not come from the institution, though organizational structures can be designed to promote or hinder individual greatness.⁹

Greatness, therefore, assigns primacy to the individual, while goodness assigns primacy to the society. This means that greatness and goodness are itself in conflict. When we think in specifics this concept does not seem hard to grasp. A “great” artist, composer, scientist, military leader, or statesman often seems able to achieve greatness precisely because he is not “balanced.” When we reflect on luminaries from times past, like, Van Gough, Beethoven, Darwin, Queen Elizabeth, or Martin Luther King, Jr., we seem to intuitively understand that for greatness there must have been a sacrifice. That to achieve the extraordinary in their fields (to truly give something back to the society and to leave something behind), these individuals must

⁷ *Greatness: Who Makes History and Why*. Simonton, Dean Keith. 1994. New York: Guildford Press, pg. 181.

⁸ *This Week*, August 5, 1956. (check citation)

⁹ This is an important idea that will be discussed further with regard to the institution of the presidency. Institutions are critical and the constitutional constructs of the presidency were designed with such notions in mind, though it is important to recognize that greatness is impossible to ensure, we have had forty-four presidents and many would argue fewer than a handful of “great” ones.

have been willing to forgo other opportunities and enjoyments offered to them along the way.

One film, *Elizabeth* that dramatizes the rise to power of Queen Elizabeth I of England portrays

this sacrifice well. Cate Blanchett who plays Elizabeth is forced to realize that her duty as the

Queen requires her to relinquish her humanity. In one of the final scenes, Blanchett and

Geoffrey Rush, who plays her closest advisor, engage in a dialogue that is telling of the conflict:

Blanchett: “I have rid England of her enemies. What do I do now? Am I to be made of stone? Must I be touched by nothing?”

Rush: “Aye, madam, to reign supreme. All men need something greater than themselves to look up to and worship. They must be able to touch the divine—here on Earth.”

The two continue their conversation discussing the power the Virgin Mary has over men’s hearts

and the film ends with the implication that Elizabeth chose to become the “Virgin Queen,”

married only to England, so that she, too, would enjoy that divine power on Earth. Though the

film is a fictionalized account of Elizabeth’s ascent to the throne and her personal sacrifice, it is

true that Queen Elizabeth ruled for more than forty years over England, and that she provided her

people with the most stable and prosperous times that they had enjoyed for centuries. There is

no question that she was a great leader *and* it is true that she never did marry.

Great individuals from history may not have been good, in the sense that they were not

considered of moderate temperament, nor did they possess good characters according to their

society’s “balance sheet,” (Elizabeth did not marry and in her day this was close to heresy), but

they brought something more to this world through their life’s work. Often, they changed the

course of history or our understandings of the world around us. Their contributions or

achievements last long beyond their lives, and they are considered great men, though not

necessarily good men.

GOODNESS & GREATNESS

For most of history the conflict between goodness and greatness did not seem to pose a problem. Philosophers and men of their standing (i.e., priests, kings, and other nobles) exhorted men to be good, while several individuals along the way attempted greatness and achieved distinction, despite the isolation and the rejection they often felt from their society. While many were humiliated (e.g., Darwin and Columbus) and some were excommunicated, or even killed for their beliefs (e.g., Galileo, Socrates, and Joan of Arc), history judged them on their achievements. Individuals who attempted extraordinary feats were judged to be “great” based on the merit of their contributions, if not during their lifetimes, then after by those who could appreciate what had been left to them by the “giants” of the past. There was both an appreciation about the faithfulness those individuals had toward their passions, and a level of awe that went with honoring those who had left a legacy still worthy of attention.

I raise these issues because this does not seem to be the case in today’s world, and it is of grave concern to me because I fear that we, as a society, will no longer be able to recognize greatness for what it is—a contribution or achievement that changes our world. We seem unable to distinguish between greatness and goodness, and there seems to be an inordinate amount of conflation between an individual’s achievements and his life’s behaviors. We seem to be using the wrong lens to judge those who have attained eminence. It is as though once an individual has achieved some greatness, we change the criteria on which we judge them, and we begin to ask, “Yes, but were they good?” That is not the appropriate question to ask, unless we are searching to answer the question of whether those individuals were “saints.” Only a handful of great men have also been good men throughout history, including perhaps, individuals such as Gandhi or Mother Teresa, and even they, upon reflection, were not terribly balanced—neither had much in

the way of a personal life, though both did manage to be “good” members of their societies in that they each reflected their society’s ordering of virtues. Our collective inability to separate goodness and greatness has placed us in a self-defeating position—we want individuals to achieve greatness, but then we berate them for not being good; thus, we allow ourselves very few “men of distinction.”

More troublesome, our inability to distinguish greatness from goodness has led to a devaluing of greatness, and now it seems almost as if, most individuals are not interested in attempting to achieve greatness and create a lasting legacy. We seem to have no concept of what the Greeks meant by fame—a distinction equal to immortality. Almost any kind of celebrity status conferred, even if it is ephemeral, or involves notoriety or dishonor (e.g., the type of fame awarded to participants on “reality” shows or to material witnesses in criminal investigations or scandals), seems to satisfy most individuals as worthwhile and even something to be sought out. It is as though many individuals feel that the price of greatness is simply too high, and the rewards—most often conferred posthumously—do not justify the sacrifice.

Perhaps, this decision is not as irrational as we might think. Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton explains that it takes at least ten years of faithful, unrelenting (and usually solitary) study just to begin to produce in a given field, should one even attempt greatness, and then, from that point it usually takes another ten years to accomplish what may eventually be considered a “great” work or achievement.¹⁰ Given then that achieving greatness takes at minimum twenty years of commitment, it is little wonder that people have relinquished this goal.

As telling perhaps of our predicament of not being able to distinguish between greatness and goodness, is the fact that our philosophers today seem more often to be extolling the virtues

¹⁰ “There are no shortcuts to greatness. A person who aims to achieve anything of worth must learn, study, and practice.” (Simonton, 1994:68).

of greatness and individual achievement, than in times past. Nearly all of the books analyzing greatness and heroism have appeared in the last two centuries, if we consider Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius*, published in 1869 to be one of the first books to study greatness as a subject itself. Prior to that time, most philosophers were concerned with goodness, but since that time, countless books have wrestled with greatness. This timing is not likely a coincidence; instead, it may perhaps, be thought of as one of the unintended consequences of the Enlightenment.

For over a thousand years of Western history, feudal societies were organized around royal hierarchies (or noble lineage), and those who ruled were expected to achieve some level of greatness. Nobles were taught that their duty was to lead their people, to help them gain prosperity and security, and many rulers understood that greatness was within in their grasp should they choose to pursue it (e.g., Catherine the Great, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard the Lionheart, et. al.). Nobles understood they were not only entitled to be included in history, but that they made history. Philosophers did not expound on the subject, unless it was to offer their strategic counsel to those in power, as Machiavelli did in his famous treatise, *The Prince* (his attempt to curry favor with the Medici family in Florence). No one questioned the need for individuals to seek greatness, and even more importantly, most assumed that some individuals (those of noble heritage) would. Hence, most philosophers and men of their standing spent their time illuminating the path toward goodness for those not entitled to greatness. This arrangement, or division of labor, provided the foundation for the nobility's ruling authority because only nobles were allowed to change the rules of society (possibly advancing) through their great actions, while the masses were to conform and preserve society through their goodness. It was also a convenient philosophy for the Catholic church because like nobles, the Pope, the priests, and the rest of the clergy were in favored positions—nearer to God—and therefore, imbued with

the potential for greatness, while the best the congregants could hope for would be to do good in God's eyes. Different classes had different expectations: nobles were expected to rise to greatness, while the masses were expected to rise to goodness; nobles were not expected to be good, nor were the masses expected to be great. These rigid societal expectations did not come undone until the Enlightenment upended the class structure of the Western world.

The Enlightenment's egalitarian ideal not only dismantled the feudal roles, but also brought uncertainty and ambiguity into the lives of individuals. Today, we do not seem to know whether we should strive for greatness or for goodness. We seem conflicted and unsure. We seem not to know what to tell our children, and often we are left sending them mixed messages. On the one hand, living a life that seeks to balance the virtues (choosing goodness) seems the most healthy lifestyle choice, given that those who choose greatness rarely get enough sleep and most have some psychological or addictive disorder.¹¹ But often those who choose goodness (temperance and moderation) talk of being dissatisfied and feeling as though their lives lack meaning. They seem to wonder about the passion or the talent that they neglected, left behind, or buried in favor of a more "sane" life. And those who choose greatness often wonder how it would be to have "a life." The grass is always greener.

Aside from the personal questions about which path to choose, is the collective dilemma facing our society of what should society promote when neither alternative is beneficial exclusively. If we all chose goodness, we would end up with a deficit of individuals willing to sacrifice themselves to their passion, doing what it takes to leave a lasting contribution that changes our world, and we, as a society, would actually stagnate. But then again, if we all chose greatness our society would fall apart because no one would be tending to its maintenance, and

¹¹ Simonton, Dean Keith. 1994. "Greatness: Who Makes History & Why," New York: Guilford Press, p. 284-311.

everyone would be selfishly pursuing his or her own aims. We might very well end up in a state that Hobbes says is the state of nature—a war of all against all. While the solution is likely that some individuals should choose greatness and some individuals should choose goodness, no one is interested in proscribing these life paths (with their very different rewards and sacrifices) when we are all “equal.” Mixed messages abound in our culture and we seem to be ever hopeful of each individual’s ability to self-select their optimal life choice.

The uncertainty of which path to choose and of whom to ask to follow which road has led many philosophers (and priests, psychologists, academics, and other intellectual leaders) to try combining aspects of goodness and greatness, as an evasion tactic. They have conflated these ideas and decided that we might be able to have it all: greatness and goodness—together. They have settled on the notion that the best prescription for society is for all of us to attempt greatness because doing so will make us all happy. These modern thinkers¹² implore each of us to follow our passion, discover our “inner child,” and faithfully pursue our unique talent, claiming that this will bring us happiness, even though Aristotle informed us long ago that only goodness leads to felicity. What we know from the ancients (great men whose philosophies have lasted for millennia) is exactly the opposite of what these moderns (celebrity psychologists whose ideas have yet to last for more than century) tell us, that following our passion will make us great, but generally miserable, which is why greatness takes so much courage and such an unwavering faithfulness. The simple message that has been lost (or obfuscated) over the past century is that greatness involves tenacity, resiliency, and sacrifice. Somehow, in combining greatness and happiness, we have forgotten that greatness is hard and exacts much.

Today’s teachings often fail to explain that greatness was linked in times past not to happiness, but to duty, which is why it was the entitlement of the nobles and revered through the

¹² For instance, Dr. Phil.

ages. As was discussed with regard to Queen Elizabeth, the noble entitlement to greatness included the responsibility that the ruler had to his people—it was his duty to attempt greatness, so as to best serve his society. Ergo, it was the ruler’s duty to be great not for oneself, but for society. A nobleman served his people by being great. Granted noblemen were awarded privileges and material benefits for this duty, but nevertheless, there was also a price (they gave up their liberty). This concept of service has been lost almost completely because now those individuals who do choose to pursue greatness, do so under the misguided belief that it will bring them happiness, not that they have some service to perform for others. There is a selfish motivation predicated on liberty and pleasure (I choose my passion), rather than on a selfless understanding of the need to serve others (I am obligated to fulfill my duty). Currently most serve no one, but themselves—they do not have a responsibility to society or a duty to others; and because they serve no one, they do not feel the need to stand steadfast against all challenges, which is why, when greatness demands too much or it gets too hard, most decide simply to settle. The absence of greatness is not goodness, but mediocrity.

MEDIOCRITY

Goodness takes work. Balancing the virtues is not a simple task, nor can it be left to those who fail to develop their reason and sympathy, or who fail to integrate their experiences, or who deride society’s wisdom. Greatness takes a different kind of work: faithfully and tenaciously pursuing one’s passion through long hours of lonely toil, sleepless nights, and society’s criticisms to create a legacy worthy of distinction. Both take work. Both goodness and greatness require individuals to engage in serious effort. Importantly, both kinds of work support society. One effort maintains (or preserves) the status quo, and the other, forces society to change and grow (or advance). The pattern is similar to Thomas Kuhn’s theory on “scientific

revolutions,” where a period of “normal” science is overtaken by a period of “revolutionary” science that only comes to rest when a new “normal” science is established that encompasses all of the previous paradigms and accounts for any recent deviations.¹³ In other words, individuals desiring to be good are sometimes forced to grow beyond their current conceptions because those individuals who desired to be great left contributions that forced society to adopt a new ordering of virtues or a new level of goodness. Therefore, both goodness and greatness are necessary for society to prosper.

Unfortunately, many people who choose greatness do not stay the course and fewer people seem to choose goodness, largely because we currently seem unwilling to make the commitment to do the work involved with both these virtues. This is not to say that we are less willing to work than in ages past, in fact, many of us do work more hours than previous generations, the trouble seems to be *what* we have become used to in our work—instant responses and comfort. Things that take a long time to realize are just not attractive in today’s incredibly fast technological world, and things that require a certain amount of discomfort or actual sacrifice are intentionally avoided. As a society then, we seem to want everything now and nothing to be painful. While it is laudable that our technology and medical sectors continue to deliver on these promises, we probably ought to be careful about generalizing those achievements to other areas of our lives. These two values—immediacy and painlessness—combined with the lack of duty or sense of shared responsibility to our common humanity are at the root of what seems to be our society’s race towards mediocrity.

Mediocrity is not the status quo: it is much worse. Mediocrity used to simply connote average or middle ground, but over the years, it has come to imply unevenness, roughness, and

¹³ Kuhn, Thomas. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

weakness. The word suggests lowered expectations and falling standards, and in my mind, entropy. We lapse into mediocrity when we as individuals are unwilling to do the work of goodness or the work of greatness for the benefit of each other. When we are unable to do things that require either patience or sacrifice, we are not likely to be able to achieve either goodness or greatness. Slowly, this abdication of responsibility becomes a weight on society and we begin to pull down our own communities. Obtaining things instantly and without discomfort becomes problematic because we are not forced to recall the virtues, and the commitments or the responsibilities underlying our choices.

For example, many students in today's world have a difficult time comprehending why it is that copying dialogue from a page on the Internet without citing it is plagiarism, and why downloading music without paying for the authorized duplication of it infringes on copyright law. Though if students actually had to engage in the time and discomfort usually involved in the creative process of writing original material or composing original music, they might think twice about duplicating others' work at no cost. Our incredibly advanced computer software and hardware have made it so instant and painless (even the creation of original work to a certain extent is not nearly as painful or as time consuming as it once was) that students rarely consider the virtues of "original work." For students, the virtue of sharing and experiencing these creative efforts far outweighs the virtue of preserving and protecting the work of the creator. The students seem to have accepted mediocrity in that they are not as likely to appreciate and distinguish between original works (any "average" work will do) because they are more likely to enjoy the larger volume of works that they can share. Hence, the standard for original work has

fallen because the primary virtues the students concern themselves with are easy transferability and a significant numbers of works, not creativity and originality.¹⁴

Alongside this attraction to mediocrity, we can place the tearing down of greatness and the misunderstanding of goodness, and what we find is that our society is quite possibly on a path towards its own destruction, unless we can find a key to unlock the mystery that will lead us towards our collective renewal.

A FAST WALK THROUGH HISTORY

The Middle Ages in Western Europe was a time of enormous contradiction—poverty was common, disease was rampant, wars were plentiful, yet amidst the misery, telltale signs of what we now know as modern society began taking hold. Agriculture flourished as better planting, cultivating, and irrigation techniques became more widely used; craftsmen developed new tools and skills for metalworking and building; and trade increased across the continent as traveling merchants sold goods in the burgeoning cities where the population likely doubled, and “may even have quadrupled” from 1000 to 1200.¹⁵ The demand for education increased, translations of ancient and classical texts became more widely available, and schools and universities were founded throughout Europe (e.g., the University of Paris received its charter in 1210) where philosophers such as, St. Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham sought to reconcile classical doctrines of reason with Church teachings on faith.

¹⁴ Interestingly, David Shaw in a *Los Angeles Times* article (see: “Hersh, Woodward are Still the Best in the Business,” May 16, 2004, Calendar Section) seemed to notice the phenomenon—the race towards mediocrity—in journalism. He wrote: “Unfortunately, virtually all the major media are struggling to retain their audiences as sources of information multiply and traditional news venues—newspapers and network television in particular—continue to lose market share. This leads the people who run many of these organizations to demand more, faster, not better, more carefully...they don’t just see—or are too impatient to work for—the long-term rewards that ultimately come to the most serious journalists and news organizations and, more important, to society as a whole from the kinds of persistent, hard-slogging, source-building reportage that both Hersh and Woodward have made careers of.”

¹⁵ Gottlieb, Anthony. 2000. *The Dream of Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 391.

During this time hierarchies (specifically, patriarchies) reigned supreme—the Catholic Church and the Divine Right of Kings ruled the land—yet because of the Crusades and the incessant wars, men were rarely home. This meant that women often managed the lands and engaged in the trade at the local marketplace. Women often became head-of-households, running the show, even though the men were the figureheads, and the only spiritual and legal authorities recognized. Practically speaking then, the class roles and restrictions were much more pronounced in many ways than were the gender roles. Women who were born in the lower classes stayed in the lower classes, yet they shared many of the same duties and responsibilities of the men in the lower classes; and the same was true for women born into nobility, they had lives much more in common with the men of their class, than they did with the women of the lower class.

Chivalry, a series of rituals and codes, originally crafted to ensure the Church maintained control over a Knight's brutishness during the Crusades, quickly evolved to include the rituals for winning the hearts of "fair maidens."¹⁶ Marriages, typically arranged and largely negotiated to delineate the property rights for sons, left open the door to courtly love, and extramarital relations, in part because of the absence of so many of these husbands from the home. In other words, what began as a way for the Church to ensure a knight's faithfulness (obedience) to God, gradually morphed into a display of faithfulness (duty) to an idealized beauty, eventually becoming a show performed (prowess possessed by the knight) to win a woman's heart, and gain access to her bedchambers while her husband was away. Once this transformation occurred, individuals began to desire more. As Diane Ackerman explains:

¹⁶ Ackerman, Diane. 1994. *A Natural History of Love*. New York. Random House. p.52.

As courtly love bewitched society, the grip of the Church weakened and power began to sift from the hands of the nobles. This new concept of love radically altered how people defined themselves and sought fulfillment. Most revolutionary of all, perhaps, it introduced the idea of personal choice.¹⁷

With the idea of personal choice, came the Renaissance, the time when ancient thought fused with medieval traditions, and man once again became empowered with his own destiny—no longer was his life merely in the hands of God and King. Great works were created and important knowledge was rediscovered, translated into the vernacular, and sent across the continent. The invention of the printing press and better techniques for producing paper made for more widely available broadsides and pamphlets. There was also a desire to reproduce and reprint the many of the works from ancient Rome and Greece, like Ovid's *Metaphorposes* and Aristotle's *Ethics*. Whether it was Michaelangelo's frescos, Leonardo's scientific discoveries, or Bernini's sculptures, all were contributing to a reconceptualization of man. During this time, the European countries grew wealthy from their vast explorations of the New World, and trade with Asia. All of this activity combined with the new wealth and led to more merchants desiring an education and becoming engaged in political, economic, and philosophical discussions.

Humanist ideas continued their spread and by the time of the American and French Revolutions, the world was on fire with the concept of natural rights. Philosophers, such as Locke and Montesquieu developed the logic of the rule of law within popular governments, and they argued for systems that mediated passions, protected property, and established an egalitarian ethic. By the mid-1800s, reason dominated the landscape more and more, as both, scientific inquiry and scientific discovery grew exponentially. Literature was, for a brief time, the last bastion for romantics. Shelley, Byron, and Tennyson used their pens well; they wrote with abandon and allowed their hearts to flow into every word.

¹⁷ Ackerman, Diane. 1994. *A Natural History of Love*. New York: Random House, p.52.

“Let thy love in kisses rain.” – Shelley

“A little she strove, and much repented/And whispering ‘I will ne’er consent’ –
consented.” – Byron

“O happy kiss, that woke thy sleep!/O love, thy kiss would wake the dead!”—Tennyson

Unfortunately, though this tradition did not sustain long, and the past one hundred and fifty years of scientific progress, the search for the truth, and the unrelenting call for logic, has left the emotions and the imagination that so characterized this journey of discovery with no place in the world. In fact, the passionate curiosity and those very emotions that spurred the exploration and the industrialization are now discouraged in almost every sector.

Men (or more generally Western masculinity) have followed this transformation in our society from the Middle Ages to the modern day. As our Western culture has moved from agriculture to industry, and as we have moved from mysticism to rationalism, men have been forced to distance themselves from their hearts, and they have lost their ability to connect with the natural forces on earth (as was present in the Pagan traditions), as well as the spiritual forces in Heaven (as was present in the Catholic traditions).

Anecdotally speaking, many men today do not seem to understand the relevance, much less the importance of feelings, and for them emotions seem to serve no utilitarian purpose. They are excess baggage, if you will, left over from the days when men were not as evolved, or as informed, or as educated, as they are today. Many men, it seems are adept at sidestepping the very emotions that stir their blood and excite their passions because they are not rational, nor are they generally convenient. Accordingly, it seems that the heart is not an organ to be bothered with or wondered about, or for that matter even queried or investigated scientifically—it is no wonder so many men in our modern society have been left crippled by heart disease, as they

have spent lifetimes ignoring their heart. It does not seem coincidental that we are very good at procedures that involve bypasses and transplants, but we have little understanding of how to prevent heart disease. But before, anyone believes that this is another instance of “male bashing” by a woman, let me say that women have not helped things much either.

The feminist revolution attempted to give to women what men have, and while there is still work to be done, the movement has largely been successful in bringing down the hierarchies and upending the patriarchies in both the public and private spheres that oppressed women for centuries. The problem is that now many women suffer from the same wound that men have been suffering from since the Enlightenment. The feminist revolution’s raising of the egalitarian ideal has only helped to spread the problem more *equally* around. Women (and Western femininity) are finding it more and more difficult to connect with their hearts and their emotions. They, too, are now suffering from heart disease in extraordinary numbers. Many women have become so adept at adopting rationalism that they have neglected to acknowledge what they relinquished. Alongside this development, much of the feminist literature attacked traditional notions of chivalry and/or the knights in shining armor ideal because it: (a) generally portrayed women as weak or subservient to men, or (b) was used to justify male domination in medieval times. Unfortunately, these critiques led to a devaluing of the virtues typically assigned to men, and masculinity, such as honor, pride, ambition, and duty, because they had also been used to oppress women throughout the ages. As Walter Newell implores: “So, the first step toward a sensible debate about manly pride is to rescue the positive tradition of manliness from three decades of stereotyping that conflates masculinity with violence, hegemony, and aggression.”¹⁸ Hence, we must bring forth our compassion for both men and women to start anew, to unwrap our hearts, so that we may find our heroes in our midst.

¹⁸ Newell, Walter. 2000. *What is a Man?* New York: Regan Books, HarperCollins, p.xxiii.

HEROES

Are heroes different from great men? The short answer seems to be “yes” though they share many similarities. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, describes the function of the hero from a mythological perspective. He explains that a hero is one who battles on behalf of society (sometimes even against society) to bring forth its next level of consciousness; and that the hero’s journey involves his first overcoming his personal situation, then proceeding onto a series of trials, and then after conquering the dark forces, returning and bringing back new light to humankind:

“The hero is the man of self-achieved submission...The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one’s visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal man—he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed is therefore (as Toynbee declares and as all mythologies of mankind indicate) is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed.”¹⁹

The hero’s journey then is noble and makes a man worthy of immortal fame—not simply temporary celebrity status—because he has risked his life to help usher in the next level of human evolution. The hero’s journey is also never complete; for every new age, there is new knowledge that must be brought to light, and new paradigms that must be created to express this new knowledge. According to Campbell, the heroic process is of profound import because without the continual regeneration of life that the hero brings, without the rebirth he instigates, society is unable to survive beyond the death of its old ways.²⁰

¹⁹ Campbell, Joseph. 1949, *The Hero With the Thousand Faces*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p.16-20.

²⁰ Campbell, Joseph. 1949, *The Hero With the Thousand Faces*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p.16.

Reflecting on Campbell's theory, specific examples come to mind like that of Prometheus, whom Robert Graves referred to as the "creator of mankind," risking the wrath of Zeus to steal fire from the Gods for man's use (1955:48). Of Hercules and his arduous twelve labors. Of J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*, where, Frodo Baggins bears a ring to Mount Doom in order to destroy it, so that a new age can be born in Middle Earth. Of Parsifal whose quest to find the Grail promises healing of the Fisher King. Given these examples, it is perhaps fair to say that a hero is an individual who has achieved greatness both objectively and normatively. A hero's contribution or achievement significantly changes and *positively* impacts us; whereas, a great man may be described as an individual who is unconditionally committed to achieving greatness and makes contributions that significantly change society. For example, the entertainer Madonna is someone who has achieved greatness, her contributions have changed society (few would question her impact) and she has faithfully pursued her passion, irrespective of the societal costs, though many would debate whether or not she can claim the title of hero—some might argue that her contributions have not *positively* impacted society, though admittedly, I would not be one of them. But is it just the outcome (achievements or contributions) that determines whether or not someone is a hero? Is it only because the cat was rescued from the tree that the hero is awarded the medal? Doesn't intention have something to do with it? Isn't it important that Parsifal never gave up on his quest, despite his missteps and his wanderings?

EAGER, DELIBERATE, & RELUCTANT HEROES

Heroes traditionally are defined by their eagerness and their deliberateness.²¹ They are men who desire to live a heroic (arduous and dangerous) life hoping to make society better.

They are motivated by the idea of glory and fame, even if it is posthumous. They are, like the

²¹ By deliberateness I mean to call to mind Thoreau's quote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau, 1980:66).

medieval knights, men who seek to wear the armor, learn the skills, defend the realm, and vanquish all enemies and dragons that may pose a threat. They are eager for the chance to prove their abilities; they are deliberate in their codes of conduct; and they are committed to their work—as heroes. They never let up even if it means that they engage in “friendly” competition; they joust one another for titles, riches, and fame. They are ambitious to prove their worth as individuals, though they are committed to the good of all. Even messy heroes, like Parsifal, joined King Arthur’s Round Table willingly, fought relentlessly, and stayed on his quest, despite occasional lapses in faith on his journey. In other words, traditional heroes are oriented towards heroic acts as a part of their duty, and their individual ambition for glory and fame serves to protect society.

In our modern world, this type of hero is not often celebrated. It was not until after the gruesome events of September 11, 2001, that our country began once again to appreciate the firemen and policemen who are precisely these types of heroes. We almost seemed to need reminding that true heroes are those individuals who choose the heroic life long before danger arrives on their doorstep. Hollywood especially has not helped in this respect. Most of the heroes in our films today are “reluctant” heroes—men who rise to the occasion simply because some external event requires action. They are often “regular or ordinary guys” who because of “extraordinary” circumstances step up to save the day or to right a wrong (e.g., Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* or Harrison Ford in *Clear and Present Danger*). Many films show these men engaged in heroic acts, but they are not heroes, they did not choose the heroic life, it chose them. They react; they do not act. Often, these films go to great lengths to show how “un-heroic” these men’s lives are, and they typically reveal their ordinary, but good natures prior to some transforming event (e.g., taking care of a cat for a friend or doing a favor for a colleague). Even

the recent spate of films drawn from the comic books (e.g., *Batman*, *Spiderman*, and *The Hulk*) stress the environmental factors that led to the superhero's transformation and acceptance of his powers. The fact that superheroes are even reluctant to realize their potential and do good in the world when they clearly have so many more powers, tells us that we have a society focused little on sacrifice or duty to our common humanity. The underlying message of these films seem to be that the most we can do in our lives is to meet and overcome the challenges we are faced with, and that seeking a heroic life is not particularly worthwhile because it is terribly lonely.

Over the past few decades and not coincidentally, one of the more interesting trends has been that women's roles have become more traditionally heroic, while men's roles have become more reluctant and reactionary (they need more reasons to fight, like revenge); the characters in *The X Men* and *The Matrix* films are emblematic of this phenomenon. It is not unusual these days to watch a film where it is the woman convincing the man to do something, or for the woman to step up first, to act on behalf of others or out of some sense of duty, whereas traditionally, these roles would have been reversed.

More troubling than the reactionary man as a reluctant hero (they do indeed step up when the circumstance demands it) is the reverence conferred upon the passive man. The film, *The Big Lebowski*, starring Jeff Bridges as The Dude, reflects this trend of portraying passivity as heroic. The opening scene shows Bridges walking through a grocery store in his bathrobe, while a voice over explains:

Now this here story I'm about to unfold took place in the early nineties - just about the time of our conflict with Sad'm and the eye-rackies. I only mention it because sometimes there's a man, I wont say a hero, cause, what's a hero? Sometimes, there's a man. And I'm talkin' about the Dude here - The dude from Los Angeles. Sometimes, there's a man, well, he's the man for his time and place. He fits right in there. And that's the Dude. The Dude, from Los Angeles. And even if he's a lazy man, and the Dude was most certainly that. Quite possibly the laziest in all of Los Angeles County. Which would place him high in

the runnin' for laziest worldwide. Sometimes there's a man, sometimes, there's a man. Well, I lost my train of thought here...

An additional perspective on this societal trend comes from analyst James Hillman who explains how recent incarnations of “Father” on television are quite different from the men of forty years ago: “When we watch Dad on TV sitcoms and the accompanying ads, he’s a rather foolish man...Even if he’s a good guy, Dad is a little dumb” (1996:80). Films like *Dumb and Dumber*—this film was so successful that they made a sequel, *Dumber and Dumberer*—have only helped to solidify this image of men and fathers, specifically, as passive and stupid. This is not to say that all men on television or in the movies are portrayed in this negative a light, but these roles are certainly a far cry from the time of *Father Knows Best* or *Perry Mason* or the hero and father of all times, Atticus Finch in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.²²

IMAGINATION AND HEART

A recent *New York Times* article pointed out that we (Western, modern people) are the first society (in all of human history) that no longer believes in the possibility of dragons.²³ This got me wondering: How could it be that we have completely lost the ability to envision the improbable? It wasn’t all that long ago that the maps used to read: “Beyond this point: monsters.” What happened to men being captivated by great quests, like navigating the interior of the Congo, crossing the Sahara and Gobi, or sailing across uncharted seas, in spite of the odds? Do we no longer dream?

Certainly, not all things have been explored. The depths of the oceans are still a mystery. The far reaches of space are still unknown. The workings of the human body and our ecosystem

²² See also *New York Times* article by Alessandra Stanley “On TV, Men Are the New Women,” Sunday, September 28, 2003. Section 2, p.1.

²³ McNeil, Donald, Jr. 2003. “From Many Imaginations, One Fearsome Creature,” in the *New York Times*, April 29, 2003, section D, p.1-2.

are miraculous, and there are vast areas left untouched by our scientific knowledge. The question for all of us is have we lost our imaginations and our hearts in all of our probabilities, computer models, and logical protocols that help us minimize risk and maximize results. It does seem that most have lost the passion for greatness. That “big questions” are not the order of the day. That most are comfortable or even satisfied with answering or probing small or trivial matters. Like our current conception of fame as fleeting success or notoriety that is won repeatedly is preferred to true fame, which is often only experienced posthumously and awarded for achieving greatness. We do not seem to be prepared for the pound of flesh true fame often exacts, nor do we seem to think it rational to offer such a sacrifice. The masculine, heroic battle has even shown itself onscreen. In *Master and Commander: Far Side of the World*, Russell Crowe (Captain Jack Aubrey) and Paul Bettany (Dr. Stephen Maturin) portray archetypal characters representing chivalric “medieval” masculinity and rational “enlightenment” masculinity, respectively. Crowe has decided to set the course for their ship to continue following a French ship. Bettany, who is not only the ship’s surgeon, but also a learned man who appears to be interested in Darwin and is shown to be a naturalist, questions Crowe:

Bettany: “As a friend, I would say that I have never once doubted your abilities as a captain-”

Crowe: “Speak plainly, Stephen.”

Bettany: “Perhaps, we should have turned back weeks ago. The men, of course, they would follow ‘lucky Jack’ anywhere. Rightfully confident of victory, but therein lies the problem. You’re not accustomed to defeat. And chasing this larger, faster ship with its long guns is beginning to smack of pride-”

Crowe: “Not a question of pride or anything like it. It’s a question of duty.”

Bettany: “Duty. Right. Yes. I believe I’ve once heard it spoken of.

Crowe: “Well, you can be as superior as you like. Viewing the world through the microscope is your prerogative. This is a ship of war and I will grind whatever grist the mill requires to fulfill my duty.”

Bettany: “Whatever the cost?”

Crowe: “Whatever the cost.”

What makes this dialogue so compelling isn't simply that these two men have a difference of opinion. They are fighting about different values—completely different masculine virtues. Crowe is moved by duty, honor, and yes, his pride and the possibility for fame that may be associated with his chivalric action. It is “Lucky Jack's” reputation that is on the line. He must take the French ship, “whatever the cost.” It is not rational. It is emotional and there is a great deal of imagination that is wrapped up in his belief that he can overcome a ship that is faster and larger and possesses guns that can reach further. To a “scientist,” none of these behaviors are rational, nor do they necessarily promote the “greatest good for the greatest number.” As a result, the argument that they have is emblematic of all of the fights that have taken place over the past quarter of a century within Western masculinity. Sadly, over time, Bettany has won, not Crowe. Brains have not only beaten out brawn, but they also beat out the heart, and the imagination from modern man.

Something tells me that only by reclaiming our hearts and engaging again on great quests will we be able to heal the gaping wounds that currently harm our society. We must learn to not only think critically, but to again think fancifully. If we are going to make whole our society, then it seems we need, as J. K. Rowling, the brilliant author of the Harry Potter books, might put it to all stop being such “Muggles.”

And let me end by saying that this is where I think women are helping make a difference. If you noticed above, many of the examples I used to describe great men were in fact great

women (e.g., Elizabeth I). This is not to say that women are better than men, or that women are always great. I did this simply to point out that (a) some women have shown great character at different points in history and (b) greatness of character is in fact gender neutral. I also believe that one of the benefits of “the mama grizzlies” is that they are forcing a redefinition of women in the public sphere. Political women can no longer be assumed to be – stereotyped as – pro-choice, liberals. Governor Palin (and her conservative allies from Governor Nikki Haley to Governor Susana Martinez to Representative Kristi Noem) are demanding to be recognized as not only equal participants in politics, but also as feminine individuals, wives, and mothers. This is good. No one assumes that Keith Olbermann and Rush Limbaugh hold the same views merely because they are both white men. In short, having both liberal and conservative women in the public arena is helping transform women into three-dimensional human beings and taking them out of the two-dimensional “Madonna-Whore” social construction, which has been with western civilization for centuries. I also believe that by bringing a more robust femininity (that includes a pride in the role of mother and a belief in the pro-life position) into the public sphere, our society will likely be allowed more space for our human hearts, imagination, and creativity. We will no longer be bound to only the scientific (read: masculine) rationalism of the last few centuries. Thus, when women and men are joined in the public space in pursuit of greatness – when we truly are able to bring the best of both masculinity and femininity together, and neither is expected to relinquish his or her strengths – then and only then, will all of us know what it means to be equal – and free.