

Preview

Hard to imagine we are halfway through 2021. Time flies for the elderly and not so much, it seems, for the young, who often perceive themselves as immortal. What makes it that way? Has anyone written seriously about this time warp phenomenon? Did either Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawkins write anything about this in their essays on time? Regardless, this *Tower Talk* issue pays homage to our fortunate heritage as a Republic, with an essay on Modern Heroes and quotes from historic figures about July 4, offers an essay on a great teacher in our midst, and features a return of Austin and Van Ness as they concern themselves with a potpourri of local conditions.

July 4 Patriotic Essay

James W. Guthrie

Genuine heroes exemplify and reinforce values, inspire the young, and can be invoked to motivate a people to action. An absence of heroes may possibly be damaging for the body politic.

Clearly, heroes can be both male and female. However, using both hero and heroine in sentences gets awkward. Moreover, in Greek mythology, the god that bore the name Hero was a woman. Thus, one word, hero, seems sufficient.

In 1776, the time of the nation's founding, America was fortunate in having many authentic heroes in the military, civic, scientific, literary, and diplomatic sectors. This rich and diverse set of iconic figures launched a new democracy and built a world power.

All of this had to be repeated a century later when the Civil War threatened the nation's unraveling. However, Lincoln and other heroes brought about a rewearing of America's fabric



and larger than life figures, such as Teddy Roosevelt, expanded upon the theme.

The enormous accomplishments of these historic figures stand in stark contrast to today's world. Contemporary America has few, if any, heroes, individuals, regardless of gender, who are likely to ever be listed alongside Washington, Franklin, or Lincoln.

In the absence of authentic contemporary giants, popular media cycle through short-lived celebrities from entertainment, business, and athletics. In a plaintive search for modern heroes, pundits re-evaluate, reinvent, and refresh the accomplishments of the previously unsung; e.g., Calvin Coolidge, Eleanor Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, or Harry Truman.

These efforts to mold modern heroes are likely futile. It is now almost impossible to be a hero. In oral societies it was easier to construct and sustain mythic images. Poems, stories, dramas, sagas, and songs could glorify heroes. Since few had detailed knowledge of the actual individual, weaknesses could be minimized.

In today's global society, mass communication, so-called social media, gonzo journalism, sweeping electronic surveillance, and 24-hour news cycles leave no frailty unexplored. It is hard to imagine Moses, Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed surviving 21st Century investigative scrutiny.

Death provides little solace. Historians further dissect whatever remains after a potential hero's carcass is laid bare by media jackals. George Washington was not always honest or fair; Benjamin Franklin and Martin Luther King loved women too much; Jefferson owned slaves; Churchill was an alcoholic, and on and on it goes.

Socio-biologists grant society even less hope. We are now told that individual acts of selflessness

are but genetically pre-programmed actions required for species survival. By this measure, legendary figures, such as Joan of Arc, World I hero, Alvin York, or the flag raisers at Iwo Jima are mindless worker bees robotically serving their hive's queen, and fulfilling their Darwinian duties. They could not help themselves and deserve no Congressional medals or place in history. Darwin and DNA, not heroism, predestined them.

Thus, if modern heroes are in short supply, good reasons may exist. However, there possibly is another view: the absence of heroes may reflect a healthy republic.

Living heroes are often products of massive propaganda campaigns and media manipulated popular feeling. They seldom are the result of thoughtful and sustained undercurrents. Nations with living heroes have not always prospered and seldom have their neighbors. Hitler, Stalin, Kim IL Jung, and Hugo Chavez come to mind.

Fisher Ames was an 18th century dis-affected Federalist eager to persuade his colonial brethren of the righteousness of revolution against King George. He likened monarchies to great merchantmen, the titanic ships of his day that could be boarded, borne by wind and tide, and supply passengers with safety and a sense of elation. However, inevitably, Ames asserted, such great ships hit a reef and sink.

Democracy, on the other hand, is like a log raft. It seldom sinks, but you almost always get your feet wet.

Ames could have added that merchantmen, monarchies if you will, require a captain, a strong perhaps heroic figure, able to give orders and impose discipline. The crew need only have strong backs and be compliant.

Rafts, democracies, need few or no officers, relying upon crew members who are strong willed, self-reliant, and self-disciplined.

Metaphors aside, heroism should not be forsaken altogether. A people in crisis must often be able to evoke heroes from the past and invent new ones.

Should America find itself imperiled, it might well need a hero, and there is little reason to believe that the nation could not meet the challenge. Such a hero might emerge from among those reading this essay.

However, in the hoped-for absence of a national crisis, a shortage of living heroes is not overly worrisome. The United States does not now need a strong hero in whom citizens can invest emotionally so that they themselves may feel protected. Rather, America needs strong citizens so that we can protect ourselves.

Fourth of July Comments from the Past

Daniel Webster, 1880: It becomes us, on whom the defense of our country will ere long devolve, this day, most seriously to reflect on the duties incumbent upon us. Our ancestors bravely snatched expiring liberty from the grasp of Britain, whose touch is poison.... Shall we, their descendants, now basely disgrace our lineage, and pusillanzimously disclaim the legacy bequeathed to us? Shall we pronounce the sad valediction to freedom, and immolate liberty on the altars our fathers have raised to her?

Charles Summer, 1845: Nothing resembles God more than that man among us who has arrived at the highest degree of justice. The true greatness of nations is in those qualities which constitute the greatness of the individual. It is not to be found in extent of territory, nor in vastness of population, nor in wealth; not in fortifications, or armies, or navies; not in the phosphorescent glare of fields of battle; not in Golgothas, though covered by monuments that kiss the clouds; for all these are the creatures and representatives of those qualities of our nature, which are unlike anything in God's nature.

Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852: The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence,

bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn....

Susan B. Anthony, July 4, 1876: Our faith is firm and unwavering in the broad principles of human rights proclaimed in 1776, not only as abstract truths, but as the corner stones of a republic. Yet we cannot forget, even in this glad hour, that while all men of every race, and clime, and condition, have been invested with the full rights of citizenship under our hospitable flag, all women still suffer the degradation of disfranchisement.

Teacher in Our Midst

James W. Guthrie

Every now and then, not too often, but occasionally, I learn something new. One of those occasions was Saturday afternoon, June 19, 2021. I know exactly where it happened: in the 12th floor lounge. The event was a meeting of the short story affinity group.

I know a little bit about good teaching. I won an Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award when I was a Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and I was awarded the same as a Professor at Vanderbilt University some years later. The awards were not so much about what I did in the classroom, but what I did for students outside the classroom. There were many testimonies about how I had furthered careers, changed professional outlook, motivated individuals further beyond what they had otherwise intended, and blah blah blah.

At Berkeley I taught with an outstanding instructor. That was SFT resident Geraldine Clifford. We taught a class together and I had to struggle to stay up with her expert knowledge and factual delivery. She was a tough act to engage with, and I learned a lot from it.

Fast forward to the SFT 12th floor. Twelve of us were gathered there. Four males and eight females. The usual Towers' ratio. Three of the four males were retired physicians. The fourth

was me. We had been assigned an approximate 1500-word short story about Miss Brill.

I was urged to attend by my wife. The chief competitor for my time was an NBA playoff game on television.

I read the story all too quickly, and concluded that it probably should never have been published. It was filled with mushy description, hyperbole, metaphors, seemed to drive no particular point; it was not something from which I could learn. It had virtually no empirical base to it whatsoever. Anyway, I steeled myself, went to the meeting, sat on a sofa, and defied anybody to teach me anything beyond my own narrow opinions.

The leader for the day, and for all I know, the always-instructor for the group, was Margo Fields. I do not know her well. I admire the manner in which she mourned her husband's recent death. She acknowledged to me in a passing conversation a few weeks previously she was feeling a little raw. But on this Saturday afternoon she seemed poised and very much in control of herself.

She was punctual, and was gracious in soliciting everyone's views regarding the assigned short story. One of the early reactors was a retired research physician. He led off by saying something pretty close to, This was an entire waste of time. I cannot imagine why anyone would want to read this.

I thought to myself, Oh, boy. Someone who sees the world my way. Go, bro, go!

When it was my turn to speak, I was a little more reticent than my negative predecessor. I just said I didn't quite understand it. This was a massive understatement. I was clueless.

We continued around the room and then it was a turn of another one of our retired physicians. I anticipated that he would be equally brutal in his appraisal. To my surprise, he was flattering of the short story. He was able to perceive nuances, subtle meanings, analogies, and deep references to the human condition. I thought to myself, Bro, I have I always known you were something of commotionalist, but you didn't have to go this far to provoke me. How come you abandoned your scientific training?

And so it went with everyone expressing their opinion in a polite manner. Our leader, Margo, was pleasant to all and then she dropped the bomb.

She proclaimed this to be a great short story. The hook she used with us was this question: A man went to Las Vegas, LOST \$1 million, and committed suicide.

When you hear or read that, it does not go deeply. Clearly it must be a headline acknowledging the perils of gambling. Poor devil, he was stupid, and he gambled.

However, if the headline was Man goes to Las Vegas WINS \$1 million and commits suicide, does that evoke an entirely different outlook about what is to come next? It surely did with me. I could see that a small readjustment of content made a completely different story.

We proceeded from there, Margo asking questions whose answers begin to unveil an entirely different reality and meaning in the Miss Brill story than I had initially acquired. As the hour progressed I began to admire the author for the subtlety she had injected into an otherwise straightforward set of observations. I came to see that writing an effective short story is closer to poetry than to the prose of a novel or entire book.

Margo Fields hooked me. The next time, I will struggle to read any distributed short story with far more humility and maybe I will come, eventually, to see the artistry in this particular literary form.

Thank you, Margo.

New Novel at Printer (Self-Aggrandizement)

James Guthrie

The deceased was found on the floor of an ocean view hotel room. The body was discovered by a maid who reported an inappropriately hung Do Not Disturb card on the door and unpleasant odors emanating from the room into the hall. Security officers removed all door hinges to gain entry. The coroner reported the deceased most likely had drowned, her lungs filled with saltwater. Was she murdered? If so, how did she

return to the hotel, and how did her killer, or killers, escape the hotel room when the victim's doors and windows were locked from inside. Two hotel guests, Detectives, Richard and Patricia Doyle, solved the locked room mystery, identified the murderer, queried accomplices, found hidden illegal drugs, and possibly discovered leads to a likely location for a long-lost, century-old possibly valuable, Spanish treasure chest. Then, unfortunately, tragedy struck.

Entrez Nous

Sugar Caen

Austin and Van Ness reside in SFT 1501. They have returned from a leisurely couple's therapy luxury cruise which was intended to resolve their many interpersonal issues. By listening in we can see how successful their counseling curative turned out to be.

Aus: Now that we are back from our vacation, I can see the Towers is opening up. That's good, isn't it?

Van: Yes, it is starting to feel closer to what we knew before.

Aus: However, there are sure some disturbing signs around here.

Van: To what?

Aus: It looks to me like we've got a terrible personnel morale problem here. We've got so many vacant positions it worries me.

Van: Yes, we do have open positions, but how is that affecting you? Judging from your waistline, you certainly aren't missing many meals.

Aus: Now, don't be nasty. That's what we went away to remove, remember?

Van: I apologize. But I don't think things are going to hell in a handbasket right now. The Marketplace is a useful innovation in our food service. The menu options have actually been improved and they offer more variety, even more vegetables, and fewer carbohydrates. That's good.

Aus: But what about all the leadership vacancies? We do not have a chef, we are losing our Dining

Director, we have no Maintenance Director or Safety & Transportation Director. And we haven't replaced our Health Administrator. All these positions seem to be in limbo at the moment.

Van: Well, let's come back and talk about that later. Meanwhile, the building is clean, the food is good, outpatient and skilled nursing are working, and progress is taking place, however slowly, on memory care.

Aus: But what about neighborhood crime? That really is a problem. I'm quite upset about the Franklin Market proprietor.

Van: You are right to be upset. Our neighborhood is very unstable at the moment. The upside is that the GoFundMe account for Peter Yohannes is now in excess of \$112,000. The community and our building have done the usual by contributing literally thousands of dollars to that fund. More important, SFT administration has taken steps to strengthen our own security. Using only the Pine Street entrance is inconvenient; maybe someday we can reopen the Franklin and Van Ness entrances. But having the Off-Duty Officer program and a greater attention to our entrances and exits has been a good.

Aus: I've seldom seen you so nonchalant. Are you chilled out on drugs?

Van: I'm really not nonchalant. I just realize that the biggest issue we have faced possibly in the history of San Francisco Towers was the Covid epidemic. And thanks to the efforts of our directors and others we did not suffer unduly; we were protected better than almost any other place. Moreover, we are coming out of the quarantine as fast as all of our people can negotiate with the city health department. Our own actions, plus the stunning response of the pharmaceutical industry in coming up with vaccines is taking care of us. That's all a good thing.

Aus: Then what does bother you, grumpy bear? It is not like you not to be upset about something.

Van: I am worried about several dynamics that I think bode ill for the longer run. The turnover of leadership personnel you referred to is perhaps symptomatic of longer run problems. Also, morale

is low among many of our dining room staff and transportation staff. Some of these morale and recruitment problems are because of uncertainty about the Front Porch affiliation. We really are in the dark about the consequences of this. It would be nice to know if these problems are uniform across all of what used to be Covia and uniform across Front Porch or are these turnover problems peculiar to us. That would make a big difference.

Aus: So organizational uncertainty and instability could be a problem in the long run; that's what you are thinking. Correct? What if you are right on these dimensions what can we do about it?

Van: These are conditions to which our Resident Council should be particularly attentive. There are three ways to protest: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Exit is usually not much of an option for our people. Some SFT residents did move out, including some unusually able individuals that we still miss. On balance, however, we're getting in new people, and we probably can enlist them in our causes. I hate to sound like Dr. Pangloss, and I don't really think this is the best of all possible worlds, but it is a pretty good world.

Aus: Is there anything really good out there that you're happy about?

Van: I think the U.S. Olympics teams for men's and women's gymnastics and men's and women's track are about as good as we've ever had. I look forward to a number of gold medals for the U.S.

Tower Talk is published solely by San Francisco Towers' resident, James W Guthrie. It is distributed electronically. Printed copies are provided upon request. Its purpose is to enhance a sense of community via provision of accurate information, airing of responsible opinion, and now and then an effort at humor. It is not aligned with any partisan organization and, if at all predisposed, it favors "The Underdog." It neither seeks nor bears managerial endorsement and does not rely for production or distribution upon San Francisco Towers' resources. The publisher is individually responsible for content, welcomes dissenting views, and eagerly accepts submissions of original literary works and opinion. Production depends crucially upon Jennifer Hamilton and Peter Hertzmann. Anne M. Turner is a Contributing Editor. Print archives are maintained by John Darby. All past issues, beginning with Volume I, No.1 are available free of charge by visiting jameswguthrie.com.