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Minnesota Character Council

Matt Bostrom
 Bob Driver
 David E. Foster
 Hector E. Garcia
 Michael Hartoonian
 Todd Lefko
 Bill Mittlefehldt
 Todd Otis
 Ambrose R. Russell
 Don Salverda
 Jack Serier
 Barbara Shin
 Stephen B. Young*
 Deborah Yungner

*Chair

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Contact: bbergseth@synergyexchange.org

Introduction

Many were shocked at Will Smith's defiant and angry smack across the face of Chris Rock at the recent Academy Awards ceremony honoring movie celebrities. Smith later won a prestigious award for bringing to screen a story about the father of two tennis stars.

What are the takeaways for our students: Will Smith's movie character, Smith himself as a celebrity to be given status and approbation whatever he does that makes news, or Chris Rock for his grace? Who gives the narrative of character to our future leaders? Who are better role models for good character—celebrities or heroes? Read on for more perspective on the topic.

—Stephen B. Young, Chair, Minnesota Character Council and Global Executive Director, Caux Round Table

We Should be Inspired by Real Heroes, Not Celebrities

By Hal Urban, "20 Gifts of Life," chapter 17, excerpted with permission

"When it comes to knowing the difference between a hero and a celebrity, our society is confused. Massively, profoundly confused."

—T.A. Barron, Family Circle Magazine

Who are your heroes? I've been asking that question to both kids and adults for more than 40 years. Their answers have fallen into one of four categories:

1. Celebrities — those who are famous because they're movie and/or TV stars, great athletes, popular musicians, or extremely wealthy.
2. World or national leaders — those who have brought about change because of their sacrifice, courage and hard work.
3. People who risk their lives for others — those in the military, police officers, and fire department workers.
4. Personal heroes — those who are, or have been, part of our personal lives. They serve as wonderful role models who consistently demonstrate outstanding character traits, influence us in positive ways, and inspire us and others to be at our best.

Among students ages 9–18, celebrities were named more than 90 percent of the time. Among adults of all ages only 11 percent name celebrities. The rest named world or national leaders (22 percent)

and personal role models (67 percent). What person pops into your mind as your number one hero? Is it a celebrity or a role model?

T.A. Barron goes on to address the confusion between hero and celebrity, "While celebrity just means fame — someone whose name, face or singing voice is widely recognized — heroism means something more. Something that represents the best of who we are as a people. A hero is not about fame, money or awards. A hero is about just one thing, and that's character. Qualities such as courage, compassion, hope, perseverance, humility and faith. Qualities with deep value and lasting importance." Celebrities play a vital role in our society, but do we need to put them on pedestals and worship them?

One of the definitions of hero is "a person who is admired." That's pretty broad, so it could include celebrities, great leaders of the past and present, and those who serve their country or their community. We admire a lot of people for a lot of different reasons.

But this reflection is about a different type of hero—one who is in our personal circle of family and friends, one who touches our lives in the best way possible: parent, sibling, teacher, coach, friend, colleague—these people are all around us, and a select few of them become our heroes. We respect and admire them so much they inspire us to be like them.

If a hero is about good character, the best examples of it are in our midst. They teach what it is, not by telling us, but by living it. They understand the three aspects of good character: Know the good, love the good and do the good.



"A hero is someone who makes a difference in your life, someone who brings out the best in you, someone who inspires you to do the same for others."
—Dana Lavinsky

If you took a quiz about celebrities and heroes, you may not be able to name the last half dozen Academy Award winners or the last five Heisman trophy winners. These are no second-rate achievers; they are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners. But if you had to name a few teachers who aided your journey through school or five people who have taught you something worthwhile, it may be a lot easier to name them. The lesson: The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones that care. And the best news of all is that you have some people like this in your own life. Make them your heroes. Make them your role models. Learn from them. Be like them.

The Hero and the Celebrity

By Michael Hartoonian, Professor (retired), Universities of Minnesota and Wisconsin, MCC member

What is a hero? What's the difference between a hero and a celebrity?

The concept of hero includes the attributes of courage, trust, duty, and friendship. This is much like Plato's definition of justice, suggesting that justice included courage and temperance. And courage as justice and temperance, while temperance is defined as justice and courage. One value is defined by attributes of other values. The whole is larger than the sum of the parts.

Perhaps, the Greek myth of Prometheus will help us better understand the attributes of hero as expressed by most people throughout history.

The story goes that, while Prometheus was not a soldier, so Zeus gave him a mission – to create a human from water and clay. Prometheus accomplished the task, but while working on his creation, he grew fond of humans. He didn't care much for the gods and was more comfortable being around people. Zeus did not want people to have any unusual power. But Prometheus thought differently and decided to steal one of the powers Zeus was particularly touchy about, namely, fire. Prometheus knew that his gift to humans would anger Zeus. But, he went ahead!



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Prometheus believed he was doing something good for others he loved, all the while knowing that his actions would incur a high cost – even the loss of life as he knew it. He did it anyway, thereafter, defining hero and character for us.

Zeus was tired of being defied by Prometheus, so decided to chain Prometheus on Mount Caucasus where an eagle would eat his liver every day – forever.

But, time passed and Zeus offered to free Prometheus in exchange for a revelation of the prophecy that predicted the dethroning of Zeus. Prometheus refused. But, later, Zeus's son Hercules, passing by Mount Caucasus, saw Prometheus and decided to kill the eagle and free the chained Titan. It was, however, freedom of a limited kind. Zeus wanted Prometheus to carry a reminder of his punishment forever, so he ordered Prometheus to make a steel ring from the chains he was in, and wear that ring forever. Since then, humans started creating rings in order to celebrate Prometheus, heroic behavior, and the power of loving others, in all love's complexities of joy and labor.

What is a celebrity? A celebrity is a person made famous by the vagaries of taste, transitory cultural norms, and intentional creative publicity.

The issue with celebrity is one of identity – that identity is constructed by someone else. The celebrity is a composite of more than one identity. It is a made persona. An interrupted sense of "reality" made real through ambiguity of purpose. Some even call it a brand. Advertising and social media have created celebrity that we now believe are our realities. For example, the Marlboro Man, was a brand personified by the rugged individual, becoming a celebrity without identity. Who is the celebrity? No one, and everyone. Who do you want it to be? Do you want your identity lost within the brand of someone you see on social media? Eventually, we can get lost in the confusion of who we are, or want to be, simply by association.

But celebrity is deeper than that. "Living-on-line," as it were, leads to unsatisfying real lives; lives that are fake. Within these fabricated "realities," identity becomes fluid and ethics have no hold on behavior because we no longer know who we are – Avatars all.

The celebrity can never be heroic, because the heroic are in service to others; the celebrity, not so much. In becoming a teacher, soldier, nurse, police officer, or parent, one enters the heroic landscape; and can become a hero – not unlike Prometheus. On the other hand, the persona of celebrity is without this opportunity, they have given over to narcissism – vanity and self-love. Celebrity, in essence, is "self-esteem" run amuck.