

“On the Making and Breaking of Heroes”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 25, 2010
Rev. Bruce Bode

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Though our knowledge is incomplete,
Our truth partial,
And our love imperfect,
We believe that new light is ever waiting
To break into our hearts and minds,
To enlighten our common path,
That there is mutual strength in willing cooperation,
And that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

Opening Words

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving – it does not matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times.
Come, yet again, come.

(Mawlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi)

Responsive Reading

Our Responsive Reading this morning is from Albert Schweitzer, and from a tender and wonderful wise little book titled, Memoirs of Childhood and Youth.

MINISTER: I do not believe we can put into anyone ideas which are not in him or her already.

CONGREGATION: As a rule, there are in everyone all sorts of good ideas, ready like tinder to catch fire.

MINISTER: But much of this tinder catches fire, or catches it successfully, only when it meets some flame or spark from outside, that is, from some other person.

CONGREGATION: Often, too, our own light goes out, and is rekindled into flame again by some experience we go through with a fellow human.

MINISTER: Thus, each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flames within us.

CONGREGATION: If we had before us now, those who have thus been a blessing to us, and could tell them how it came about,

MINISTER: They would be amazed to learn what had passed over from their lives into ours.

CONGREGATION: So, too, none of us knows what effect our life produces, or what we give to others.

MINISTER: That is hidden from us, and must remain so, though we are sometimes allowed to see some little fraction of it so that we may not lose courage.

CONGREGATION: The way in which power works is a mystery.

Reading

My subject this morning is about heroes – those who we look up to and admire, those who we seek to emulate, those who show us the way, those who, as Albert Schweitzer wrote, “have lighted the flames within us.”

In one of Mary Oliver’s earliest books of poetry titled, Dream Work, the poet is struggling to find her way, particularly with respect to the poets and artists who have come before her. In one poem titled, “Members of the Tribe” – her tribe, the tribe of poets and artists – she begins by saying:

Ahead of me
they were lighting their fires
in the dark forests
of death.

And, as she indicates further into the poem, many of them were making death inviting. They were turning their faces from life and “dancing for death.” And:

I was, of course, all that time
coming along
behind them, and listening
for advice.”

But the best counsel she found was not from her tribe of poets and artists, but from a common man who humbly washed the brushes of Michelangelo. Of him, she says:

And the man who merely
washed Michelangelo’s brushes, kneeling
on the damp bricks, staring
every day at the colors pouring out of them

lived to be a hundred years old.

There was, however, a poet who lived in the same town as Mary Oliver lived – Provincetown, Massachusetts on Cape Cod – who did serve her well. His name is Stanley Kunitz, who died in 2006, having lived to be a hundred years old, and who had been a poet laureate to Congress on two occasions, 1974 and 2000. He enjoyed gardening and maintained an impressive seaside garden in Provincetown.

Here's Mary Oliver's tribute to Stanley Kunitz, found in the same book of poems. It's titled simply, "Stanley Kunitz."

Stanley Kunitz

I used to imagine him
coming from his house, like Merlin
strolling with important gestures
through the garden
where everything grows so thickly,
where birds sing, little snakes lie
on the boughs, thinking of nothing
but their own good lives,
where petals float upward,
their colors exploding,
and trees open their moist
pages of thunder –
it has happened every summer for years.

But now I know more
about the great wheel of growth,
and decay, and rebirth,
and know my vision for a falsehood.
Now I see him coming from the house –
I see him on his knees,
cutting away the diseased, the superfluous,
coaxing the new,
know that the hour of fulfillment
is buried in years of patience –
yet willing to labor like that
on the mortal wheel.

Oh, what good it does the heart
to know it isn't magic!
Like the human child I am
I rush to imitate –
I watch him as he bends
among the leaves and vines

to hook some weed or other;
even when I do not see him,
I think of him there
raking and trimming, stirring up
those sheets of fire
between the smothering weights of earth,
the wild and shapeless air.

And then a second short poem by Robinson Jeffers, published after his death, and related to not pestering our heroes.

If God has been good enough to give you a poet
Then listen to him. But for God's sake let him alone until he is dead; no prizes, no ceremony,
They kill the man. A poet is one who listens
To nature and his own heart; and if the noise of the world grows up around him, and if he is tough enough,
He can shake off his enemies, but not his friends.
That is what withered Wordsworth and muffled Tennyson, and would have killed Keats; that is what makes
Hemingway play the fool and Faulkner forget his art.

(Robinson Jeffers, "Let Them Alone," the Beginning and the End, p. 35)

ON THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF HEROES

My first hero

All my life I've had heroes – heroes for different sides of my life and heroes for different times of my life.

As with so many men about my age, Mickey Mantle, the New York Yankee baseball slugger in the 1950's and '60's, was my first hero – an athletic hero. He was featured as a hero on the Wheaties breakfast cereal boxes – "Wheaties: Breakfast of Champions." And what a great marketing scheme that was – still used today! By eating Wheaties you can become like your hero. So I ate Wheaties in huge quantities.

What I also remember was saving coupons from the boxtops of the General Mills cereal boxes so that I might order a baseball glove with Mickey Mantle's signature. As I recall, if you saved enough boxtops, you could significantly reduce the cost of the glove. And what I day it was, then, when my Mickey Mantle baseball glove arrived in the mail. Not a bad glove either; I used it for many years.

And so I read everything I could find about Mickey Mantle – saved magazine articles and newspaper clippings about him. I remember saving a prayer that was published in a magazine that Mickey Mantle prayed for his deceased father, who was a hero for his son.

Mickey Mantle regarded his father as the bravest man he ever knew, and said of him, “No boy ever loved his father more.”

Mickey Mantle’s father died at an early age – 39 – just as Mickey Mantle was breaking into the major leagues with the New York Yankees. His father died from Hodgkin’s Disease, as had his father before him, Mickey’s Mantle grandfather – perhaps a genetic tendency exacerbated by working in lead and zinc mines.

But Mickey Mantle didn’t know about the effects of lead and zinc and so also believed that he was destined to die young. As a consequence, he didn’t take good care of himself, and was surprised to find himself, then, on the other side of forty. He would often quote the words of his friend and neighbor, Bobby Lane, the legendary football quarterback, who died in part due to alcohol abuse, “If I’d known I was gonna live this long, I’d have taken a lot better care of myself.”

Mickey Mantle also died of alcohol abuse, cirrhosis of the liver, though late in his life – too late – he reformed his ways, becoming a born-again Christian through the efforts of Bobby Richardson, a teammate who played second base for the Yankees.

But returning to my story with respect to my hero – because these parts of Mickey Mantle’s life were not known to me in my youth – I would read what I could about Mickey Mantle, follow his statistics in the sports section of the Bellingham Herald, and when we got TV, wait with great anticipation for Mickey Mantle to come to bat ... groaning when he struck out – which was actually quite often – but exalting when he would smash one of his towering homeruns.

Mickey Mantle as a dream figure

And so it was that Mickey Mantle got deep into my psyche. And when, in my mid-thirties, I started studying my dreams in a disciplined way, I found that Mickey Mantle played prominently in them, representing, it would seem, the athletic hero side of myself.

And at that time, in my mid-thirties, I was still playing baseball and trying to compete at a fairly high level, but was now long-in-the-tooth for a baseball player and simply hanging on to this boyhood game when it was time to let go. And so Mickey Mantle would come to me in my dreams. He would come injured, or he would be leaving the ball park ... and, finally, he died (in one of my dreams) – this was many years before his actual death – and I, a minister in that dream as in outer life, presided at the funeral and comforted Mickey’s wife and family.

Clearly, it was time to move on past aspirations of childhood and youth and fully embrace the profession I was already in, that of the ministry.

Heroes for other parts of my life

The fact that I was a minister was also something that developed in me from my youth; and, indeed, I had other childhood heroes, not to the magnitude of a Mickey Mantle, but persons I sought to emulate – heroes for different sides of my life.

Here's a little book I brought with me this morning that fired my imagination when I was a youngster. It's titled, 10 Boys Who Became Famous Missionaries. (It's one of the few books I have kept with me from my childhood.)

Actually, in early adulthood I became a missionary. When I first completed my seminary training in the early-1970's, I worked on the island of Guam in the South Pacific for three years for the Board of World Missions of the Christian Reformed Church.

Interestingly, at that time, I was able to combine my work in the ministry with my love of baseball, and, on a number of occasions following the Sunday morning religious services, I would go straight to the baseball park. There I was a pitcher on a local team made up mostly of military personnel. In 1976, I even pitched in what was a bit excessively called the "Guam World Series." Unfortunately, that year came to an abrupt end when Typhoon Pamela, packing winds up to 200 miles an hour, utterly devastated the Island, a destruction that included knocking down the baseball stadium.

So I had these two sides working in me from my youth: baseball and the ministry. And I had heroes in each realm.

Albert Schweitzer

In my early twenties another hero came into my life. His name was Albert Schweitzer. He was my hero from my mid-twenties to my mid-thirties and greatly affected the course of my life.

I read nearly everything I could by Schweitzer and about him. I did my Master's of Theology thesis on him, visited his birthplace and other places he had lived in Europe, went to Schweitzer conferences in both the United States and Europe, and generally adopted his religious philosophy of "Reverence for Life." I even dressed up as Schweitzer at costume parties, and often drove other people nuts talking about him.

I've had several other heroes in my life as well ... some earlier in life, some later in life ... some whom I have known only through books, others whom I have known in person.

The hero, Tiger Woods

I bring up the story of some of my personal heroes because I've been thinking lately about the meaning and value of heroes in relation to Tiger Woods, who, as I assume most of you know, has had a great public fall since last Thanksgiving Day evening when, at 2:30 a.m., he crashed his Escalade into a fire hydrant outside his home in Isleworth, Florida, then went into hiding, refusing to discuss any details of the incident.

As a well-researched article in the May issue of Vanity Fair titled, “The Temptation of Tiger Woods,” says:

His silence called forth a parade of astonishing women ... bursting with lurid sex tales that shattered the carefully cultivated image of the world’s greatest golfer and his perfect family life. (p. 161)

I wouldn’t put Tiger Woods in the category of one of my foremost heroes – after all, he’s about half my age – but clearly he taps into some of the same parts of my psyche that the other athletic heroes of my youth tapped into.

And so I’ve followed his career with interest for many years. And, like so many others, have rooted for him to win tournaments and break records. I’ve greatly enjoyed watching the golf tournaments on TV of which he is a part. And you may have heard that TV viewership for golf tournaments in which Tiger is not participating drops by about 50%, which typically also includes me ... for just as a bald fact, I simply don’t enjoy nearly as much watching those golf tournaments in which Tiger is not playing.

What are heroes?

What are heroes to us? We see in heroes something we admire and would like to emulate. We see in a hero a skill, a power, a beauty, a grace, an aptitude, an attitude, an approach to life that touches us and with which we would identify. Thus, the struggles and triumphs of the hero become our struggles and triumphs.

Jungian analyst and author, Robert A. Johnson, speaks of the hero as a “gold-carrier” for us. The hero carries our own gold ... carries a part of our own undeveloped potential, aspiration, and possibility ... so that the golden glow we see coming from our hero is our own aspiration and potential now reflected back to us from one who has already developed that aspiration and potential.

We each have our own gold, but it needs to be mined and refined. And, typically, our own gold is not known to us until we see it gleaming on another. Our own potential, aspiration, skill, power, beauty is not known to us in the beginning. We are not consciously aware of it.

And so our own gold is mined *indirectly*, not directly. It goes through an intermediary before it comes back to us ... so that we grow into our potentials and possibilities by imitating our heroes and modeling ourselves after them ... until, lo and behold, we find one day we are strong enough to carry our own gold ...

... although often, too, we refuse to accept our own gold and resist mining and developing it, preferring, instead, for our heroes to carry our gold for us ... and being disappointed and even angry and upset with them when they don’t meet our expectations.

Or, again, sometimes unsavory and fraudulent heroes are quite happy to carry our gold for us and to literally hold on to it.

Tiger Woods as a gold-carrier

So Tiger Woods has been a gold-carrier for many, a great hero world-wide. I can only imagine what a hero he is for some youngsters. And I wonder what his current troubles and stumbles mean to these children for whom he has been a gold-carrier. I wonder how his situation is understood and explained, or how confusing it might be to them.

My own childhood athletic hero, Mickey Mantle, was better protected by the press. Some of his partying habits were publicly known, but his sexual affairs were kept private (though I didn't pick up on any of this when I was a youngster).

But, for adults, the interest in this unknown and darker side of Tiger Woods has been enormous. When, after months of staying hidden, Woods made his first public appearance on Friday, February 19, trading on Wall Street noticeably slowed down as people tuned in to hear what Tiger would say.

And, at his first Press Conference on April 5, as the reporters were waiting for Woods to appear, they said, "It was like waiting for the President to arrive." It had that kind of "gravitas," they said.

Tiger Woods has always carefully guarded his private life, a quality I have admired in him. But, at the same time, he has also projected the image of being a family man, a man in love with his wife, proud of his children.

And it is has been this split between his public persona and his private life that has been the hardest for his admirers to swallow and digest ... for there is more than a hint of hypocrisy here. It's the duplicity more than the cheating that is the problem ... a sense of betrayal, a breaking of trust, a deep dishonesty ... and with the feeling that it's done for personal financial gain, for the sake of maintaining his enormous advertising empire.

The issues of the hero

So now the hero is going through a trial more difficult than anything he has encountered before, a trial to see what he is made of as a human being.

The issues before Tiger Woods are those typical of the hero, for he has succumbed to its basic temptation, hubris ... losing touch with the ground of human ordinariness, with his spiritual base, and has come to believe that he is entitled ... entitled to special privilege, to special treatment.

Tiger himself, in his public apologies, has used the word "entitled." He has spoken of how he has lost touch with his Buddhist spiritual tradition and has thought and acted as if he were entitled.

And, of course, how easy it would be for a Tiger Woods to lose touch with his ordinary humanity ... or even to develop it properly in the first place. He has been a public figure from the age of two-years old when he was already on *The Mike Douglas Show* putting with Bob Hope. At age five, he appeared on the program, *That's Incredible*. And by age fourteen, he had already won five Junior World Golf Championships.

Thus, it is easy for a hero to lose touch with his or her ordinary humanity, because those who look up to heroes are not looking for ordinary human. They are looking for qualities of divinity, and they want – even demand – that the hero be a god or goddess. And so how can the hero stay human, humble, and humane when everyone is projecting divinity upon them? It's not an easy road.

And the other side of this entitlement has to do with taking what does not belong to you. Since gifts of many kinds are proffered to the hero as a deity, the hero starts to play the part, and begins believing that ordinary rules and moral standards don't apply in the same way to the hero.

Can he find his way again?

So can Tiger find his way through these temptations? Can he find his way back to his own love of the game of golf, to a sense of human ordinariness, and can he resist the temptation of believing that he is entitled just because he plays golf well?

It will not be easy ... for, especially in our time, sports heroes and wealth are badly entangled. It is now almost assumed that if one is a professional athlete one deserves – is entitled – to be wealthy.

And Tiger, from the beginning of his professional career, has played into this general ethos big time, receiving, before he even had begun playing professionally, a five-year \$40 million contract with Nike, more than twice as much as any of the other professional golfers were getting – golfers like Greg Norman who had been playing for years. So Tiger has become extremely wealthy – actually, a billionaire. Unbelievable!

The entanglement and the skewed connection between sport and wealth have escalated exponentially in many sports in the last thirty to forty years. I mean by this that sport becomes an avenue by which and through which an athlete pursues wealth ... so that the game is not played for its own sake – not played for the challenge of developing and sharpening your physical and mental skills, or for joy of comradeship, or for the pleasure of competing, or of representing your town, city, or country in a contest – but rather the sport serves another purpose, namely, that of accumulating wealth and status.

Not too many years ago – certainly in my lifetime – outstanding athletes could earn their livelihood, and even a very good living, through participating in an activity that they would otherwise participate in without pay.

I hold in my mind something I read about in my youth with respect to Babe Ruth, who, when he was first approached as a high school age youngster about the possibility of playing professional baseball, said something to the effect, “Do you mean people will pay me to play baseball?!” It seemed incredible to him that he could be paid to play this game that he loved so much.

(He later lost a bit of that approach and went on to become the first ballplayer to earn more than the president of the United States, in 1930 earning \$80,000 (about a million in today’s dollars – loose change for today’s top baseball players) while President Hoover was earning a salary of \$75,000. When asked by a reporter how he could justify that, Ruth replied that he had a better year than Hoover.

But I saw this greater entanglement of sports and wealth when I was still playing baseball. In the dugout I began to hear potential professional baseball players talk about how wealthy they might be, rather than the simple privilege of earning a decent living doing something they loved to do.

And there are other life-style aspects that go with all of this, as typified by Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, both of whom enjoy big-stakes gambling in Las Vegas. And Tiger has been right in there with them. The Vanity Fair article to which I referred indicates that these older superstars have not served Tiger well, have not provided good modeling for their younger superstar.

Two basic rules of good exchange

Robert Johnson says there are two basic rules in the exchange of gold between hero and admirer, between hero and disciple.

First, if someone is a gold-carrier for you, if someone shines for you, you must not pester that person or ask anything of that person with respect to that gold. Such persons cannot give you their gold. That is your task. Nor does it work for you to try to take their gold from them. That is spiritual theft.

There can be mentoring, tutoring, teaching, counseling, modeling, parenting; but the gold-carriers must be allowed to be free – free for the sake of both parties. (That was the import of my reading from Robinson Jeffers.)

And rule number two is this: If you are a carrier of someone else's gold, you are not to exploit that person. If you are someone another looks up to as a hero – whether it be as an athlete, a counselor, a teacher, a physician, a boss of some kind, an older student, a parent, whatever – if you are a level up in development in a given area, if you're in a place where others might look up at you or to you; then you're in a position where gold could come your way; you're in a position where you may be asked to carry the gold of another.

And the rule here is this: You are to respect and honor those who have been drawn to you

as a carrier of their gold, and you are to stay within the boundaries and forms of your position and relationship, and not use your position of strength for personal gain or power.

Blessed are those who carry the gold of others, who, on the one hand, are not puffed up by the amount of gold that they carry; and, on the other hand, are able to continue with their own process of discovering and refining more of their own gold.

What now?

And so a hero has fallen. A hero has badly failed his responsibility as a hero, has broken trust. And great has been the interest in the fall.

For some, that will be the end. Their scorn of their former hero will match their prior praise. And never again will the hero be allowed to rise.

But for others there remains the possibility of redemption, and an interest, willingness, and desire to see the hero find his way and stand again.

But this time it will be a different kind of hero – not a hero of sport only, but a re-born hero, a chastened hero, a less perfect and more humble hero. It will be a hero of the spirit, who has tasted a far deeper defeat than any athletic contest could possibly provide. It will be a hero who has discovered his own weakness and arrogance. It will be a hero who has been willing to examine himself and to weep for forgiveness.

Personally, I'm still rooting for Tiger as he undergoes this immense trial in his life. I'm rooting for him as tries to find his way. I still feel in him the love of the game, and I hope he comes out the other side of this more clear about that love, and less in love with the wealth the game has brought him.

I'm encouraged that he has sought treatment, and that he has spoken of re-discovering the Buddhist spiritual tradition that he inherited from his mother, and that he has returned to his former practice of meditation. The Buddha is not a bad hero to emulate to help one find one's inner balance.

Stepping under the ropes

I'll close with a humorous incident about heroes and admirers, gods and ordinary humans.

About seven or eight years ago when I was an interim minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, I had the opportunity one day to attend the Houston Open Golf Tournament, in which Tiger Woods was participating.

As with so many other spectators, I spent a good bit of the day following the group of golfers of which Tiger was a part. And, as you may know, in these tournaments, there

are ropes keeping the fans away from the golfers, so that the golfers stay inside the ropes at all times.

However, on one of the early holes, after Tiger had teed off, and before going down the fairway after the ball, he lifted up the rope and came underneath it to where we, the fans, were standing. And why? Because he had to go to the bathroom and there was a porta-potty right there. So Tiger went over the porta-potty, but found that it was occupied.

Well, what was he to do? He did what any mortal would do: he waited outside the porta-potty until the person came out. Finally, the door opened, and out steps a man probably not much older than Tiger. He looks up and there to his surprise is Tiger Woods waiting to use the porta-potty. His eyes go wide – as when a human meets a deity.

So I followed this man and listened to him as he hurried down the sidelines to rejoin his friends, telling them all about how he had just come face to face with Tiger Woods at the porta-potty.

My comment is this: For Tiger to find his way with his fans and for his fans to find their way with him, he will have to be willing to step under the ropes and become an ordinary mortal. And we, his fans, will have to allow him to do the same.

Spoken Benediction

Go in peace, speak the truth, give thanks each day.
Respect the earth and her creatures,
for they are alive like you.
Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.
Live simply.
Be of service.
Be guided by your faith and not your fear.
Go lightly on your path.
Walk in a sacred manner.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on April 25, 2010. The spoken service, available on CD at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)